In recent years, the concept of U.S. citizenship has figured in public debate largely in connection with immigration reform. Should immigrants who are in the country illegally be given a “path to citizenship”? Should children born to parents who are not here
legally be entitled to “birthright citizenship”? Should young people who are here illegally be allowed to stay indefinitely as non-naturalized residents or would that constitute “second-class citizenship”?

But citizenship has meanings that are deeper and more subtle than legal permission to live in this country. It defines an individual’s relationship to his country and thus strikes chords of nationalism and personal responsibility, duty and rights. America, it is often said, is a nation of immigrants. Is it also a nation of citizens? In this series, we will explore that question and examine the changing nature of citizenship today.

As with so many foundational questions in American life, this one has its roots in the language of the Constitution. And as with so many constitutional questions, that language embraces large and sometimes competing values. The Constitution refers to the “privileges and immunities” of citizenship, for example, but it also offers important protection for “persons” living here regardless of nationality, including the right to equal protection of the laws and due process of law. “Persons” may attend schools, hold jobs, pay taxes and receive benefits.

Holders of permanent resident cards — better known as green cards — may apply for citizenship after five years of living in this country. But even if they never apply for citizenship, permanent residents are participants in the economy and their local communities, and often have spouses and children who are U.S. citizens. Some would argue that they should also be allowed to vote (if only in local elections) or serve on juries. If permanent residents were to be given a role in the political process and the judicial system, should they be required to meet the same conditions imposed on naturalized citizens, such as proficiency in English?

Complicating the picture further is the fact that many U.S. citizens — native-born and naturalized — hold citizenship in another country, and sometimes vote in foreign elections and even serve in foreign armies. Although the State Department discourages dual nationality, the Supreme Court has ruled that a U.S. citizen must affirmatively intend to renounce his citizenship before it can be taken away. In an increasingly globalized world, dual citizenship is, for some, an attractive option. Is it also good for the American political process, or does the existence of multiple allegiances undermine social cohesion?

The notion of “good citizenship,” meanwhile, has been redefined by political, legal and technological developments. The advent of the Internet has altered the way citizens express their opinions to, and about, their elected representatives and potentially could transform voting as well. Supreme Court decisions recognizing a right of corporations to engage in political speech have been so controversial that some would overturn them by amending the Constitution.
In “The 21st Century Citizen,” The Times will take up these and other issues:

**Immigration and citizenship.** Is a path to citizenship the only acceptable way of legalizing 11 million immigrants? If so, should the criteria for naturalization be more rigorous? Does the current immigration system place too much emphasis on family unification and not enough on attracting potential citizens with valuable skills or financial resources? Should foreign temporary workers in agriculture and other industries receive special consideration for permanent residence and ultimately citizenship? Should the U.S. desist in efforts to persuade permanent legal residents to acquire citizenship?

“Birthright” citizenship. Although the Supreme Court has held that the Constitution ordinarily confers citizenship on children born in the U.S. — so-called jus soli citizenship — some legal scholars note that the 14th Amendment defines a U.S. citizen as anyone “born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof,” a phrase they interpret as a license for Congress to exclude from citizenship persons born of foreigners in the country temporarily or illegally. The campaign to abolish birthright citizenship has been led by opponents of illegal immigration who claim that it induces women to come to this country to give birth to “anchor babies.” That’s largely a canard, but the idea that place of birth guarantees citizenship is not universally accepted, even among modern nations.

**Citizenship and culture.** In California, campaigns for English-only education or public services often have been veiled efforts to marginalize immigrants. But there are serious, nonpunitive arguments for the unifying effects of a common language. Many Americans agree with the late Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington that immigration from Spanish-speaking countries threatens “to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures and two languages.” Does this concern justify a more exacting requirement for proficiency in English as a condition of citizenship? Should mastery of English also be a requirement for holding public office over and above the requirement of U.S. citizenship?

**Dual citizenship.** U.S. citizens who hold citizenship in another country in some cases are able to participate in the political life of that country and to serve in its armed forces. Does this create an undesirable dual loyalty and undermine the bond between citizens and the United States? Or is it a natural and even advantageous reflection of the interconnectedness that comes with globalization?

**Qualifications for citizenship.** Currently, naturalized citizens must demonstrate a familiarity with U.S. history and government. But some critics suggest that the requirements should be strengthened to ensure that new citizens are better prepared to participate in the democratic process, and that it’s legitimate to impose higher standards of political knowledge on would-be citizens than are required of native-born citizens.

**Political participation by noncitizens.** Should long-term noncitizen residents of the U.S. be permitted to vote in elections or serve on juries (as a bill vetoed by Gov. Jerry Brown would have allowed)? Such openness could make the U.S. an attractive place for citizens of other countries who might be more willing to live (and invest) in communities where they would have a say over how they were governed, though it also would remove an incentive to pursuing full citizenship.

**Education in citizenship.** Proposed Common Core academic standards have been criticized for treating the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as “sources of information” and not as blueprints for political engagement. Should public schools do more to inculcate values of patriotism and civic participation?

**Corporate citizenship.** Have Supreme Court decisions allowing corporations and unions to spend money on political campaigns undermined the role of individual citizens in American democracy? Should the Constitution be amended to decrease the role of
corporations and wealthy individuals in the political process? Is there a positive notion of “corporate citizenship” to which profit-making businesses should subscribe?

**Citizens’ influence in government.** Although some states, including California, allow citizens to enact laws directly through initiatives and referendums, in general American democracy is of the representative or indirect variety. Advances in technology make it possible for a dramatic increase not only in the expression of political opinions but also, potentially, in public access to the ballot box. Should officials seize on that opportunity to encourage more citizens to exercise their right to self-government?

**The future.** Immigration, globalization and technology all have taxed traditional notions of citizenship, but are there ways to reinvigorate participation in civic life that would give modern meaning to the idea? In short, yes.

This is part of an ongoing conversation exploring the meaning of citizenship in America today. For more, join us at latimes.com/citizenship and #21stCenturyCitizen. We’d love to hear from you. Share your thoughts, rebuttals and experiences with us at letters@latimes.com.

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