COLLECTION I — THE 12 POINTS OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

Rule of Law — Citizen's Guide

What the rule of law means, why it matters, and how citizens can recognize when it's under threat.

By Daniel P. Devine · Civest Sphere · November 2026



WATCH THE VIDEO

Rule of Law in 60 Seconds · 1:01

Watch it on American Civic Power or YouTube.

https://www.americancivicpower.com/goodgovernance#rule-of-law

What it means

Under the rule of law, laws are public, clear and applied equally, and no one is above them: not elected officials, not donors, not agencies. Disputes are settled by independent courts using known rules, not by whoever holds power.

Why it matters

Without it, rights depend on who you know. People and businesses can't plan, invest or speak freely if the rules change depending on the person. Equal treatment under law is the foundation the other eleven points stand on.

Signs it's working

- Laws and local codes are published and easy to find.
- Rules are enforced the same way for everyone, including officials and their allies.

- Courts and hearing officers can rule against the government, and their rulings are followed.
- Officials follow required procedures, like public notice before votes.

Warning signs

- Code enforcement or permits that seem to depend on political connections.
- Officials ignoring court orders, audits or legal deadlines.
- Rules changed in the middle of a process to help one party.
- Retaliation against residents, employees or reporters who complain.

What you can do

1. Learn where your local laws live. Most towns and counties publish their code online.
2. When something looks unequal, ask in writing which rule was applied and why.
3. Use FOIL to get the records behind a decision. See *How to File a FOIL Request in New York*.
4. Report suspected wrongdoing to the right body: an inspector general, the state comptroller or the attorney general.

Related points

Accountability, Ethical Leadership, Separation of Powers.

Last reviewed November 2026. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Laws, deadlines and procedures change, so confirm details with the official source before you act.

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