

Educating for Democracy: What Is Civic Literacy?

Remarks by Rep. Lee H. Hamilton

I. Concerns About Civic Literacy

There is good reason for us to be concerned – deeply concerned – about civic literacy.

Too many Americans lack a basic understanding of:

- the core institutions in our representative democracy;
- our debt to our ancestors who established those institutions;
- and our responsibilities to teach our descendants about those institutions.

There is a sense, particularly among many younger folks, that being an American citizen is no big deal; no obligation attaches to it; it's an endeavor not particularly worthy of their time and talent.

Too many Americans think that citizenship is hollow.

An apathetic, passive, and cynical view about our democracy will invite leaders who abuse power.

There is an old observation: "A society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves."

If Americans increasingly disengage — if more and more Americans are less and less interested in civic responsibility — then the entire American democratic enterprise is at risk, and the country simply will not work.

II. Strengthening Our Civic Skills

So, we must strengthen our civic skills.

There is much concern in the country today about the need to strengthen education in science, technology, engineering and math. I'm all for that.

But we need more than technical skills.

The future of this nation depends on citizens who know and practice the civic virtues and who understand the core features of representative democracy:

- We need to know the robust American story: the full, truthful, unvarnished account of our successes, our failures, our ideals, our flaws, our progress, and our heroes.
- We need to be aware of the incredible diversity of views in this great nation of more than 300 million people, and how hard it is to make it work.
- We need to understand the responsibilities of citizenship:
 - o staying informed,
 - o volunteering,
 - o speaking out,
 - o asking questions,
 - o contacting elected officials,
 - o signing petitions,
 - o joining organizations,
 - o working in ways small and large to improve our neighborhoods and communities and to enrich the quality of life for all citizens.

That includes showing this younger digital generation how their favorite methods of communication — like social media and cell phones — can be used to make their voice heard and get others involved.

- And we need to develop and practice the basic civic skills. To be civically literate, we must display:
 - o mutual respect and tolerance, so that differences are valued instead of feared;
 - o empathy, so that we can put ourselves in the place of others;
 - o civility, so that we can disagree and still find common ground;

- humility, so that we can always keep in mind that we might be wrong about something;
- honesty, so that our common deliberations are open and straightforward;
- and resolve, so that setbacks can be overcome, and challenges surmounted.

Now, I understand we all have plenty of important things to worry about: our families and their welfare, our jobs, paying our bills. No doubt, these private interests are, in their own right, civic virtues.

We are good in this country at protecting and speaking out for our individual interests. But at least some of our attention should be on advancing the public interest, or as the founding fathers called it, the common good.

Look around you. Many things need to be done in your community and country. Perhaps you are upset by: the quality of health care, the bump in the road on your way to work, the treatment of a person or a group in your town, or even our nation's foreign policy.

Tending to your own business and your own family are activities of enormous importance to the welfare of this country. But civic engagement is our way of influencing for the better our neighborhood, community, state and nation.

I am impressed with the obligations that representative democracy places on citizens. In developing and promoting civic skills we must be tenacious – because our problems are formidable — and modest, because of the magnitude of the challenge.

Solutions come step by step, not mile by mile.

III. Effective Engagement

No one ever said self-government is easy. We have to engage.

You and I may not have the opportunity to engage to resolve the really big problems: Fixing health care.

Saving social security. Changing the tax code. Defending our nation against its enemies.

We engage by looking around us, identifying something that needs fixing, and doing something about it.

We can engage effectively through small, incremental changes:

- A school is built or refurbished.
- A safety signal goes up at a dangerous intersection.
- A worthy, young disadvantaged student enters medical school.
- A local polluted stream gets cleaned up.
- A student lights up as he or she begins to experience the joys of learning.

These are not insignificant examples. They save and improve lives and communities.

Countless small actions that improve the quality of the lives of our people are the wellspring of democracy.

If you ask them, most Americans want to be better people, living in better communities, in a better state, and in a better nation. Often, they want to become involved but don't know where to go, whom to talk to, what to do.

The job of civic education is to show people how to engage, how to get involved, how to participate, how to get off the sidelines and into the action.

IV. Benefits of Civic Literacy and Engagement

Civic engagement benefits us as a society, and helps good citizens to reach their full potential.

- It can make a person feel a part of something larger than themselves.
- It can challenge them to take a stand, speak in public, ask a question, develop an idea, learn about what they believe, and become the best they can be.
- It is the surest antidote to cynicism and apathy because it shows people that they can, indeed, make a difference.

- It is the hallmark of our democracy.

When we engage in our community, we no longer feel distant from the centers of power in that community and we come to appreciate how we can influence change for the better.

We gain a basic appreciation for the hard work of democracy – how to understand many different points of view and forge a consensus behind a course of action towards a solution.

When we engage, we gain a better understanding and appreciation for our country that can make it and the ongoing experiment of American democracy stronger.

V. Public Service

The question I ask myself is whether our civic condition is strong enough to meet the challenges of this day.

Lincoln asked whether this nation so dedicated and so conceived can long endure. That was the operational question at Gettysburg. It is the operational question today.

May I suggest that we encourage civic engagement even to the point of encouraging the path of Public Service.

Generations have been stirred by President Kennedy's famous challenge — “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

He said that public service is a stimulating, proud and lively enterprise. It is not just a way to live, it is a way to live fully. And it can fulfill our highest aspirations.

My experience echoes that of Elliot Richardson, who noted that he had known many persons who held responsible jobs in public service, then left for good jobs in the private sector. Not one of them found their present occupation as challenging or satisfying as public service. Without exception, they looked back on their public service as the most rewarding of their careers. As Dean Acheson said, “To leave

public life is to die a little.”

We should remember that our days are for something more than making money or having a good time — although there's nothing wrong with either of those. We have obligations that extend beyond ourselves. Today, the measure of those obligations is extraordinary, and the challenges exciting.

But we need not have grand schemes of social change to make a difference.

As Edmund Burke said: “Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who does nothing because he could do only a little.”

It is up to us to get off the sidelines and into the arena, so that this country can have a new birth of freedom.

VI. Conclusion

Democracy is the most worthy form of government because it releases the energy of the people for worthy ends and brings out the best in us.

Self-government is a monumental achievement — one of the greatest achievements in all the world's history — but it does not perpetuate itself automatically. There is no invisible hand that guides and preserves our institutions and our destiny.

So, I plead for the old civic and personal values to renew America:

- a sense of moral and mutual obligation and personal responsibility;
- a sense of personal sacrifice, a sense that we do not live by bread or wealth alone;
- a sense of observing the rules of life, and not just the rules of law;
- a sense that we must not just preach the civic virtues, but practice them by undertaking concrete projects to improve the lives of our fellow citizens;
- and a sense that citizens working together in a common endeavor and for a common good is at

the very heart of what this country is all about.

It is, after all, our democracy — the work of many hands, including our own.

I do not have a sure-fire formula for civic success. I do have a sure-fire formula for civic failure: It's to back away, to disengage from our civic responsibilities.

If we become a nation of spectators, we will surely fail.

“Democracy,” said Thomas Jefferson, “is never a final achievement. It is a call to an untiring effort.”