

Learning to Be a Citizen

By Lee H. Hamilton

The question usually comes toward the end of a public meeting. Some knotty problem is being discussed, and someone in the audience will raise his or her hand and ask, "Okay, so what can I do about it?"

I love that question. Not because I've ever answered it to my satisfaction, but because it bespeaks such a constructive outlook. Democracy is no spectator sport and citizens are not passive consumers. I'm always invigorated by running into people who understand this. But that doesn't make answering the question any easier.

The usual advice that politicians give is to vote, work for a candidate, let your elected officials know what you think, join an organization of like-minded citizens, and participate in community life. This is good counsel — but only as far as it goes. With a little more time now to answer the ques-

tion, I'd add a few points.

First, it's important that citizens appreciate how hard it is to solve problems in a representative democracy. Every issue — even a stop sign at a corner — is more complex than it appears. The best way to learn this is to become an expert on a single topic. You can't study every issue, but you can pick one and dig in, whether it's a big problem like climate change or a smaller one, such as how to get food delivered to shut-ins in your community.

Understanding and appreciating all aspects of the issue is the best way to see how and where you can make progress. It also makes you more patient with others — including elected officials — who are trying to resolve other thorny challenges.

It's also vital to learn that solving problems means working together with all kinds of people. It requires bringing different points of view together,

developing connections to key players in your community, talking face-to-face with others who may not agree with you, and communicating your ideas effectively — including to the media. This is the surest way I know to understand differences, and to learn that these differences can exist without personal animosity. That, in turn, is a key step toward recognizing the common ground on which you can build agreement.

Many of the people I know who answered the call of citizenship did so to resolve a specific issue: getting the railroad signal at a crossing to work; improving food labeling so diabetics could know how much sugar packaged food contains; improving a watershed to help a community manage its water supply. Sometimes, people want to address a situation they don't like — what they consider to be over-spending, or a politician whose priorities they

disagree with. Sometimes they just want to contribute to the direction and success of their community.

There is a key lesson that comes from trying to solve a particular problem: it tends to make you less ideological and more pragmatic. It forces you to examine the options in front of you and the resources at hand to help you pursue them. You have to judge whether a given option can gather sufficient support in the community to go forward, and realize that you can't solve everything; sometimes you have to put particular problems aside and come back to them another day, when circumstances have shifted.

There are plenty of people who find all this frustrating and give up. Many others devote their lives to it, whether as community participants, engaged activists, or public servants. Politics is not a game for everyone, and there are many

other ways to be involved in community life. Regardless of the avenue they choose, it's the people who step forward who refresh this country and make it stronger.

Our Constitution's preamble begins, "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union...." At heart, that's what getting involved means: shouldering the challenges, sharing responsibilities and opportunities that democracy thrusts upon us as we pursue a more perfect union. That's what I want to say to the people who ask, "What can I do about it?" The journey is hard and complicated, but it's immensely satisfying. Few rewards can match your satisfaction when your fellow citizens thank you for a job well done.

Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

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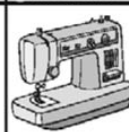
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