



Your Turn
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Guest columnist

We can build the road to better civic literacy

While you may understand how our government really works, too many Americans do not. Numerous reputable studies show a steady decline in American civic literacy. Unfortunately, we know less about our government than Canadians or most Europeans, and we're only ninth in voter turnout among our allies.

This is alarming because the less we know about how our government works and how to be heard effectively, the more susceptible we are to demagogues feeding us false information and pushing our hot buttons – while also ignoring the real issues and using our political system to their advantage.

Reacting emotionally to government – instead of carefully analyzing it – puts us in danger of losing our freedoms and rights, even as some unscrupulous politicians tell us the contrary.

Civic literacy is key

Civic literacy is simply the ability to understand government and our rights and responsibilities as citizens. We acquire it through studying civics or political science, and also through peer and media influence. It encompasses formal activities like voting but also informal activities, which can include volunteering, participating in group activities or simply advocating for a bike path or a community garden.

While there are many reasons for our national decline in civic literacy, important factors include:

- A reduction in formal civic education.
- A decrease in local journalism.
- The fragmentation and polarization of the media.
- Politicians who discourage public participation and voting.

Without a critical mass of public-minded citizens with the skills and knowledge to make informed votes and influence public policy, democracy withers away. Without it, we can't hold politicians' feet to the fire with the threat of losing their jobs if they don't truly represent us. Without it, we are easier targets for demagogues and dictators to lie to us, seize our government and mismanage our economy.

Ultimately the more we know about our political system, the more we can and do take part in the civic activities that shape our society and gives us agency as citizens. At the grassroots, civic literacy creates local government that builds trust and allows community stakeholders to work together for the common benefit. Without it, we lack a steady supply of volunteers for boards, commissions and local offices.

What we can do

So what can we do about this problem? The road to better civic literacy starts with us.

It is paved by possessing an objective understanding of how our institutions and citizen roles have evolved – and how political values like liberty, equality and justice interact. It is paved by understanding both the nature and the consequences of political change – and by knowing our rights and responsibilities as citizens in a democracy.

We can start to fix the problem by:

- Promoting quality civics courses in schools, accompanied by academic freedom and objective history.
- Recognizing and calling out fake news, propaganda and censorship from any source.
- Pursuing lifelong civic education, formal or not.
- Demanding better and more avenues for public participation.
- Making it easier to vote, not harder.
- Recognizing the motives of politicians who push cultural wars and shortsighted policies.

Whether you are a victim or a beneficiary of good government depends a lot on your civic literacy.

Which do you choose?

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