

NICK HALARIS CIVIC DAWN



A Beginner's Guide to Citizenship

A Beginner's Guide to **CITIZENSHIP**



Dear Americans,

You have a responsibility to engage faithfully with your community. Don't forget the other side of your freedom. Remember the price.

You actually have to be a citizen. Citizenship is not just some status; it is a way of being.

While the murder of George Floyd has sparked a reawakening in our civic consciousness, it has also revealed the stark truth of the consequences of civic apathy. In a democracy you cannot ignore injustice, corruption and inequity. These problems don't just go away. You must engage in democratic processes as-if your life depends on it because someday it might. Did we really think we could all just live like this forever, without caring for our communities? Without standing up in the face of clear wrong?

The abdication of the responsibility of citizenship in America is the most important threat to freedom and prosperity in the entire world, and possibly in the entire course of world history. Freedom is something that is incredibly hard to win and very easy to lose and given the vast technological capabilities of our age, despotism can take on forms even more sinister and protracted than those dreamed up by 20th Century tyrants or the most twisted of the Caesars. For the last few hundred golden years, even with all its faults, America has served as that last bastion of hope, that one place where freedom is possible. There have been dark times in our history where there was no America, no place on Earth where a man or woman could be free. Imagine life like that.

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“What difference can I really make?” If you need proof of the power of your freedom, look no further than to what is happening today. Look how quickly protestors have been able to induce change by exercising their right to assembly. Governments across the country are changing policies and reallocating resources, in some cases by hundreds of millions of dollars. Your power is real.

“But,” you say, “politics is corrupt.” “It’s all about money and greed and power.” Has it ever not been?

“The people who care about politics are crazy.” All the more reason for you to be engaged!

Now is the time to honor the memory of lives lost tragically. Now is the time to honor the courage of citizens across the country standing up against racially motivated police brutality. Now is the time to get serious about our collective responsibilities.

Let’s discuss first how we arrived at this moment. The profound level of political ignorance in America has been well documented. There are a few who can name just one of their

local elected officials and almost none who can name them all. Voter turnout in local elections in particular is astonishingly low. And the laws, regulations, and ordinances up for debate in our legislatures are unintelligible to almost everybody.

Even to begin to address this problem feels like a Herculean task. How in the world can we get ordinary Americans to start thinking seriously about the responsibility of citizenship? It’s rather difficult, it seems, to get people to stop pursuing their self-interest, even just a little.

A lot of people feel the need to be engaged today but don’t know how. Part of it is due to the nature of economy and our modes of production (too out of scale). Part of it is due to government itself (too inefficient). And part of it is a result of our moral failure.

Democratic process, to function properly, demand civic engagement. Our Founders were more concerned, interestingly, with corruption from the over-exercise of democratic power than the alternative. A large part of the debate at the Constitutional Convention was about how to structure the government to avoid falling victim to the tyranny of

the majority. Though they had both Athens and Rome in mind when considering the possible fate of our democratic experiment, they were far more concerned with the Athenian example than the Roman. They lived in an era where the idea of civic apathy seemed remote if not unthinkable. How could a people ever not care enough about their freedom to be involved?

The Founders would be absolutely shocked more by our profound civic apathy than by our immense wealth and power or our magnificent technology. It's important that we be precise about the problem. It's not true that Americans today don't vote or that they vote in markedly lower percentages than in the past, at least in the big, national Presidential elections. Our problem is that, while we may show-up to vote for the President every four years, in the intervening time we hardly do anything else. For striking evidence of this there's no better place to look than the voter turnout records in local and municipal elections. Outside of recent events, there's just no engagement. There is no other way to put it.

Television personalities like to make a joke of this reality. In their interviews of random citizens on the streets of some of America's most powerful places, we see time and again the most shocking levels of ignorance about our country, our government, our system and the issues of the day. It is funny and then it is not. When you realize that these very people hold in their hands that same sacred implement of freedom, the right and the power to vote, to make choices that ultimately can influence even the course of history, the humor is lost.

Part of the problem is that we've forgotten an important part of our sacred rights. We've gotten so used to freedom that all we can remember is the inalienable part of our rights, the part that is God-given, that no one should be able to take away. We've forgotten completely about the other side, the side where the price is paid, the side of responsibility. In reality a great responsibility accompanies every right.

Another part of the problem with the structure of our society—as it pertains to democratic functioning at least—is that there is almost no discernible relation or connection between our modes of production and our communities. It's fundamentally a problem of scale and specialization. Everything we consume comes from some far away “there” rather than from our own communities. And what we produce in our work is, for most of us, not something that ends up in our communities either. It's all just so anonymous.

Things are so complex, so spread out and specialized that we just cannot even begin to understand the implications of our work and consumer choices on our community. Technology

and globalization have obscured our ability to perceive, blinding a rather important aspect of citizenship: the power of choice in work and consumption.

Removed by space, time and technological complexity from any real or practical understanding of what we're doing, where things really come from and how they actually work, we engage in all manner of complex commercial processes without a thought. What do we know really about the labor that brings the food to our tables? What do we know about the products and services we rely on so much in our everyday lives? Even the most casual examination will reveal a rather shocking level of ignorance and dependency. We've strayed far indeed from the Founders precious ideal of self-reliance.

This presents a problem for citizenship in that it encourages a sort of willful blindness. Perhaps we should be forgiven and not criticized for not being capable to see through all this complexity. The problem though is that these forces are beyond the scale with which we can identify politically and civically. There is a contradiction in the popular notion of “global citizenship.” The ideal there is perhaps a good one but it loses all meaning in its practical implementation. We can really only engage and identify with small groups over small spaces. Simply for the fact that we're all just too busy trying to stay alive to understand how to promote the public good in such a complex world.

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis and the murder of George Floyd there was this sentiment out there that it's a good thing that so few people are engaged in local democracy. “The fewer ignorant people in the way, the better.” “Best to leave things to experts and people that really care.” But there is a terrible problem with this argument. It makes too large of an assumption about the individuals who are, in fact, engaged: that they are competent, that their motives are right, that they are good.... But how can we be sure of this? Can we just take this on blind faith?

We absolutely cannot.

The magnitude and seriousness of the problem, while readily apparent on Twitter and TV, is most frighteningly manifested by what goes on in local politics. If you want to awaken fully to the reality of the situation on the ground, look here. The attention of our democracy is being captured, eaten-alive almost, by the worst kind of forces. You'll see at your very first public meeting what I'm talking about.

A very large percentage of the engagement—I would say at least 50% in my own experience in and around Los Angeles—is of a fundamentally non-constructive nature.

People show up either completely unprepared to discuss the issues of the day or, worse, come with an intent to discuss totally unrelated political matters. Sadly, there's often even a loud contingent of individuals engaged in local politics that are basically suffering from some kind of mental health issue. Our system is literally being captured by this voice. I heard from a senior official in the Mayor's office of one of America's largest cities that over 50% of all inbound communication is of this non-constructive nature. The implications of this are staggering. Just think about it in terms of all the time that is wasted.

Another large percentage—maybe 40%—comprises individuals of either an extremely partisan viewpoint or an incredibly narrow, self-interested viewpoint. In either case, what you don't find are people who are thinking about the public good, who are weighing carefully the pros and cons of policy decisions. In my experience, in this group almost no one has any idea what they are talking about, even at the most basic level.

That leaves us with only 10% left. This, sadly, is the group of people who are taking their civic responsibility seriously. And their voices are being drowned out by the cacophony of ignorance, narrowness and self-interest. They are being overwhelmed by this majority.

What we need desperately to do in this country is to take back control of the democracy. Our best and brightest, who have been missing for years from the great civic process, need to jump in and wrest back control so that our governments can remain the last great hope of freedom on this planet.

Protest! Assemble! March! There's nothing more inspiring to the idea of engaged citizenship than what we're seeing across the country today. The immense power of a concerned citizenry in a democracy is on full display. For many Americans, there has already been a profound awakening. We cannot stop here though. We have to address the systemic problems in civic engagement that have brought us to this crucial moment in our history. To produce lasting change, we have to embrace the energy of today in sustained action.

How can we do this?

1. Local Engagement

When you are ready to accept your responsibility of citizenship, you might think the thing to do is run out and try to get your arms around all your elected officials, all the upcoming votes and the issues of the day and try to formulate some opinions of your own. But this is not the thing to do at all—eventually, maybe, but not at the start. What you should do instead is get intimately involved in some local issue that

you really, actually care about. It might be something as small as traffic patterns in your neighborhood that bother you or the need for speed bump or new stop sign. Or it could be something like a response to a new development in the works or a proposed zoning change. Or it could be something really big like stopping, once and for all, racially motivated police brutality. Whatever it is, it needs to be something really local and really tangible like this.

Once you've identified this local issue, take steps to get involved in it. Attend neighborhood meetings. Request a face-to-face with your city council representative (you'll be surprised how easy it is to get one). Stand-up and express your point of view during the public comment period of a local meeting. Do something like this—or ideally a whole bunch of things like this.

Local engagement will get you into the flow of democratic processes at the right level. Trying to engage in national and international politics as a starting point is ineffective. The issues are just too large and the results, one way or another, just too far removed from the consequences of your daily life, to foster the growth of real democratic citizenship. For to be an effective citizen you have to be able to see, understand and feel, in a very tangible way, the impacts of policy decisions and lawmaking.

As you get into your issue of choice, remember to be patient. It is indeed true that government moves slowly, often frustratingly so. Don't let that deter you. Stick with it and try to see it through to a decision point whether it be a vote, an election or just a decision by some elected official or governing body. When government finally does act, it acts rather decisively. Law has a force to it unlike anything else really.

Sometimes the issues at hand are so important that you shouldn't be patient at all. But you still do though have to see things through. What's made recent efforts so effective in the Black Lives Matter movement is the determination of its supporters throughout the country to force real change at the local level.

It is in this process of local engagement that you can begin to understand what it means to be a citizen. You'll realize a few important things:

1. That government isn't some big, anonymous force. It's really just like everything else in society—a collection of individuals working together.
2. That our system, while opaque, confusing and corrupt isn't all that much so. A concerned citizen can not only gain access to the system but also can actually make a difference.

3. That there are actually a whole bunch of people who do care about the community and care enough to do something about it, to make some personal sacrifices to try to improve or change the state of affairs.

Once you've seen an issue through, it won't be hard to stay engaged. You'll know where to look to stay abreast of issues. You'll know a whole lot more people in your community. And your eyes will be open to the incredibly complex nexus of relationship between you and your government.

2. Fundraising

You might be thinking that after all this, now it's ok to follow the national news and watch the Presidential debates and all that. Armed with your new and enlightened understanding of how things really work, you are ready to be an effective citizen. But there is still more local work to do!

Next you have to engage with what many people feel is the ultimate evil of our system: political fundraising. It is true that elections are big business these days. It is true that politics is about money. Most people express their civic interest by donating money or their time in pursuit of donations of money. While aspects of this are troubling and even disheartening, there is nothing inherently wrong with political fundraising and, in fact, there are quite a few positives from it all.

So, attend some fundraisers or better yet, host one yourself. You'll quickly realize that in these gatherings, these supposedly corrupt events, you find one of the core components of the democratic process: the convening. Think of how rare a thing it really is to get together with your friends and colleagues not to celebrate or socialize but to make a joint sacrifice, where something bigger than self-interest draws you together with your community.

You'll find that convening will leave you feeling closer to your friends and colleagues. It is because you have participated in something quite noble. You are exercising the immense power of your political freedom—something that countless souls have fought and died for. It's not just "donating money." That's only one way to look at it. It is one of the sacred acts of freedom (like voting). The exercise of power in democracy is really nothing more than a continuous series of convenings. Concerned citizens get together to discuss and debate the

important issues of the day. Out of these discussions emerges first, ideas and then, some kind of consensus. Through the channels of power in a democracy this consensus can lead to progress and change through state action.

3. Voting

Once you have a better understanding of your true relationship with your government and your community, it's time to reexamine the way you go about the most sacred act of democratic citizenship: voting. The way our system has evolved, for most people voting is really just a matter of political affiliation. At some point in life we decide to be either

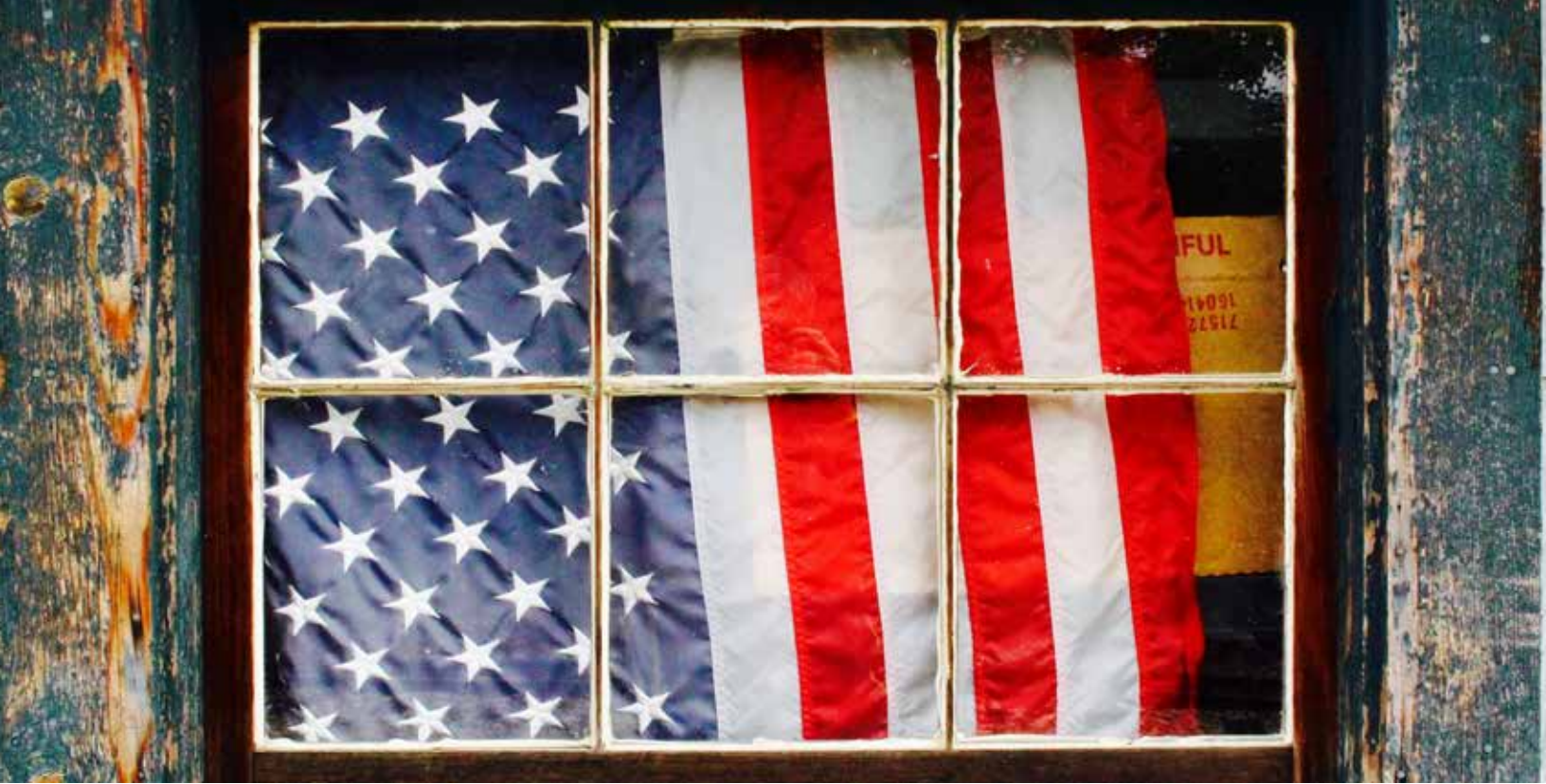
Democrat or Republican (usually based on our relationship with our parents) and then when we get our ballots we simply fill-in all the D-candidate bubbles or all the R-candidates. Is this really a rational approach? A good one? Does this satisfy our civic responsibility? There is a sense in which our two-party system effectively channels our different ideologies and beliefs. And there is some value to this. But what it doesn't do at all is help us as voters in any way measure, understand and evaluate the character of the individuals on the ballot. Is not character at least as important as ideology? Does ideologically based voting really make sense?

Voting is just as much an ethical act as a political one. When we vote for

someone we are giving our consent to his or her leadership. What does it say about us if we are willing to give bad people the sacred power of democracy? Or perhaps, worse, what does it say about us that we are willing to give people that power without even thinking once about the ethical qualifications of the candidate?

To be an effective voter then, you have to engage much earlier in the process—earlier than the election itself, earlier even than the primaries (although that at least is a better entry point)—and much more regularly. Essentially, you have to put yourself in a position where you can actually get to know the candidates and their closest advisors and supporters on a personal level. This is the only way to get the kind of information you need to fulfill your ethical obligations as a voter. There are a number of ways to do this. 1. You could be regularly engaged in political fundraising. 2. You could get involved in party politics. Or 3. You could become a civic leader or activist. The whole point is to find some way to regularly engage with candidates and their advisors





on a personal level so that you can get the kind of intuitive information necessary to make an ethical judgment. Yes, this is hard and time consuming. Such is the price of freedom.

4. Beyond Democratic Processes

Responsible citizenship goes beyond participation in political processes. This is something the Founders thought about and discussed a lot. For one of the best things you can do to honor your responsibility to your community is simply to take care of yourself, your household and your family. In other words, don't become a burden to your community. It's hard to imagine that you could engage effectively in the political process if you are failing at this. Of course, you can fall on hard times and I'm not suggesting here that there should be any sort of prerequisite for other forms of civic engagement. I just want to point out that this alone is a very important contribution to the community and should be honored and respected as such.

You should think carefully about what kind of work you do. It should go without saying that you should refrain from activities that harm your community or your environment. There are plenty of lines of work that quite literally destroy the bonds of the fellowship of humankind. You should seek to withdraw your support and complicity from these activities as much as possible. Same goes for those things that harm the environment. Work is one of the most important ways you can contribute to your community. Be sure that the contribution you are making is a good one.

Another way to be a good citizen is to offer your support to non-profits doing important work in your community. "Seek

out the helpers." In these organizations not only will you find, again, that there are a whole bunch of people looking out for your community but also there are many opportunities to serve and lead. This is a great place to see the nexus of connectivity between citizens and their government.

Conclusion

One of the questions of citizenship is whether it will be just another thing you do in life or, instead, whether it can become the core of what you do. We've lost our way in America in large part because we've gotten comfortable with a compartmentalized attitude towards citizenship. It is ok by our standards if we spend basically all our time pursuing our self-interest and only occasionally exercise our political power by showing up to vote every few years.

When you start to understand the true nature of political freedom, when you realize the bitter truth that while freedom feels like an inalienable natural right, it is really just a precarious privilege, then you will understand just how dangerous this all is. Perhaps the only people who truly understand freedom are those that aren't born into it. For the rest of us, it's almost like we cannot help but take it for granted.

The future of our democracy demands that we change our attitudes toward freedom and citizenship. What is called for is a dramatic reengagement with our civic responsibilities. We have to honor the foundation of our community and be willing to subordinate our own interests to those of the group. We have to take sustained action. We have to actually be citizens for a change.

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