

Citizenship is Hard Work

I've heard a great deal from citizens over the years about what they expect from their elected representatives. Now I'd like to tell you what one former politician, at least, expects of citizens.

With each passing year, I become more impressed with the obligations and responsibilities that our form of democracy places upon ordinary people. To put it plainly, our nation depends for its health on the active engagement of its citizens. As Adlai Stevenson once said in a speech at Princeton, "Our government demands, it depends upon, the care and the devotion of the people."

This is a remarkably concise summation of a truth that many people who hold public office come to appreciate that while the burdens placed on elected officials in a representative democracy may often seem heavy, they are merely a distillation of those we ask our citizens to shoulder.

For in order to select their representatives carefully and wisely, and then to hold them to account for their behavior in office, voters must be able to judge difficult issues and their solutions, weigh complex arguments, and identify problems that need addressing.

They must have some understanding of the intricacies of the problems confronting the nation and be able to respond to the rapidity with which the biggest evolve problems such as war, a changing economy, global warming, the health care crisis.

And citizens must have a dose of critical attitude toward their leaders the skeptical frame of mind that will help them fairly evaluate those in office without forfeiting their belief in the system as a whole.

This is asking a lot. It means studying the issues, seeking out all sorts of points of view, talking to friends and acquaintances about the crises of the day. It means being open to having one's mind changed as new information comes in, having a fundamental respect for facts, and being able to weigh what's reasoned and unreasonable in the arguments one hears.

Above all, the engaged citizen must be open to compromise, to appreciate that conflicting interests are just part of our society and that resolving conflicts allows our nation to function and move forward.

We live in a diverse and complex society, and it's inevitable that your fellow citizens are going to see things differently from you. A lot is at stake in how this gets dealt with. In the end, for citizens no less than for politicians, finding healthy and constructive ways to resolve our differences is crucial for a functioning democracy.

If what I've just described sounds like the set of qualities you should expect in an elected representative, rather than in your fellow citizens, there's good reason. Despite what the

more cynical political commentators would have you believe, there are no walls that separate Capitol Hill from the rest of the nation. The success of a representative democracy rests in citizens' ability to make discriminating judgments, both about whom they wish to represent them and about how they want to be represented. The conclusions they come to then feed into the political system, whether at election time or through the day-to-day exchange of ideas and concerns between politicians and citizens.

So, at heart, our system relies on citizens making the effort to do the work we also expect of political leaders: to develop a "civic temperament" that allows them to grapple constructively with people of differing opinions, and above all to educate themselves on the issues of the day.

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be," Thomas Jefferson once wrote to a friend. Our first duties may be to our families and our immediate communities, but our freedom depends on the willingness of ordinary citizens to devote time, attention, and effort to the public interest as well.