

***True change in Washington will require an engaged citizenry. Former Congressman Lee Hamilton lays out what he considers to be the tenets to accomplishing it. (9/23/08)***

***This presidential election, if you believe the polls and the rhetoric, is about change in Washington. Both candidates promise it, while voters clamor for it. It is the cause of the moment.***

***Yet I have news for you: Change in Washington won't happen, and certainly can't be sustained, without change in the country at large. For the point is not to overthrow the system, it's to make it function properly. Government does not fix itself. Only a citizenry that is engaged in our democracy to an extent far greater than in recent decades can help our system. To get change in Washington, in other words, it has to begin with you.***

***Since being a responsible citizen takes commitment, here are some precepts to follow if you want to be effective-what I call:***

## **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF CITIZENSHIP**

***Vote.*** This is the most basic step democracy asks of us. Don't buy the argument that it doesn't matter. Every election offers real choices about the direction we want our towns, states and country to take. By voting, you not only select the officials who will run the government, you suggest the direction government policy should take and reaffirm your support for a representative democracy.

***Be informed.*** To be a knowledgeable voter, you need to know candidates actually stand for, not just what their ads or their opponents' ads say. Read about the issues that confront your community and our nation as a whole. Our government simply does not work well if its citizens are ill-informed.

***Communicate with your representative.*** Representative democracy is a dialogue between elected officials and citizens-that dialogue lies at the heart of our system. Legislators and executives can't do their job well if they don't understand their constituents' concerns, and we can't understand them if we don't know their views and why they hold them.

***Participate in groups that share your views and can advance your interests.*** This one's simple: in a democracy, people tend to be more effective when they work together than as individuals. You can be sure that almost every issue you care about has one or more organizations devoted to it. By joining and working with the ones you think best reflect your views, you amplify your beliefs and strengthen the dialogue of democracy.

***Get involved locally to improve your community.*** You know more about your community's strengths and weaknesses than anyone living outside it. Identify its problems and work to correct them. Involvement is the best antidote I know to cynicism.

***Educate your family, and make sure that local schools are educating students, about their responsibilities as citizens.*** As a society, we're not as good as we should be at encouraging young people to get involved in political life. Too many young people-and even many adults-do not understand how our government and political system work and why it is important for them to be contributing citizens.

***Understand that we must work to build consensus in a huge, diverse country.*** In pretty much every way you can think of, ours is an astoundingly mixed nation of people, with wildly divergent views on most issues and a constantly growing population. This means we have to work through our differences not by hammering on the other side, but by bringing people together through the arts of dialogue, accommodation, compromise, and consensus-building.

***Understand that our representative democracy works slowly.*** There's a reason for this: it is so that all sides can be heard, and so that we avoid the costly mistakes produced by haste. Our Founders understood this 220 years ago, and it's even more vital now, when issues are vastly more complex and the entire world is closely connected.

***Understand that our system is not perfect but has served the nation well.*** Democracy is a process designed to give people a voice in how they are governed. It's not perfect-far too many people feel voiceless, and polls in recent years suggest that unsettling numbers believe the system is broken. And our system offers no guarantee that you'll get what you want. Yet it is also true that it provides every individual an opportunity to be heard and to work to achieve his or her objectives, and it has served our nation well for over two centuries.

***Understand that our system is not self-perpetuating; it demands our involvement to survive.*** Just because it has worked in the past does not mean we will have a free and successful country in the future. Lincoln's challenge is still urgent: whether this nation so conceived can long endure. Being a good citizen isn't something one does just for the heck of it; it's critical to the success of our nation.