

Actions That Keep Us Involved In the Democratic Process

One of the unique characteristics and basic tenants of a democracy is that its citizens get to vote - both figuratively and literally - and that each citizen is able to live the life of their choosing - to be able to say and do what they want - within the law.

We are a democracy. A democracy is a form of government that is "of, by and for" the people. *Of the People* means the government is comprised of *regular* citizens; *by the people* means the government is elected by its citizens; and *for the people* means that the sole purpose of the government is for the benefit of all its citizens.

The democratic process is the way we make that happen. We make the "of the people" part happen by running for public office; we make the "by the people" part happen by doing the things needed to elect *our best* to public office; and we make the "for the people" part happen by doing those things that keep us educated on important issues, that keep elected officials aware of our points of view, and which enforce our laws. The democratic process is not a methodology, but a lifelong way of thinking and acting.

When we invest time, energy and money in something, we tend to care more about that something. So actions that keep us involved in the democratic process help us care about and appreciate our democracy and freedoms. They are the actions most closely associated with citizenship.

Citizen Actions

1. [Ask a friend how they feel about a specific issue.](#)
2. [Email the address of this website to a friend.](#)
3. [Encourage others to vote.](#)
4. [Express your opinion to an elected official, to a radio station, to a publication or to a company.](#)
5. [Pay the taxes you owe.](#)
6. [Place a link to \[www.goodcitizen.org\]\(http://www.goodcitizen.org\) on your personal website.](#)
7. [Protest over something you feel strongly about.](#)
8. [Pursue injustices, even at personal inconvenience.](#)

9. [Serve on a jury, if asked.](#)
10. [Sign an initiative or petition you agree with.](#)
11. [Talk about current events at dinner with your family.](#)
12. [Tell someone when you don't approve of their actions.](#)
13. [Vote.](#)
14. [Watch or listen to a debate between candidates for elected office.](#)
15. [Work at a polling location.](#)



**Reader Submitted
Actions**

Ask a Friend How They Feel About an Issue



In some ways this action is so easy and so useful and can be so intellectually invigorating. It's so valuable because listening to someone else's thoughts is so educational. Educational in that it gives us another person's perspective on the issue; educational in that it gives us a better sense of our friend; and educational in that it gives us an opportunity, and presents a challenge, to more clearly formulate and articulate our feelings on a specific issue.



Yet in another way, this action is hard so for most of us! It's hard because discussing an issue becomes a possible source of disagreement and thus a possible barrier to a friendly relationship. Most of us want to be liked and, unfortunately, many of us believe that discussing issues may lead to disagreements and that if we disagree, we won't be liked by the person we disagree with.

If a person doesn't like you because of what you think then perhaps that person isn't worth being a friend with. Discussing issues can be the foundation for a great and intellectually stimulating friendship.



Readers' Stories



If the basic beliefs of citizenship set forth of this web book resonate with you, then you'll appreciate the importance of this action. Citizenship is, almost by definition, a grass roots activity.

Email the address of this site - www.goodcitizen.org - to your friends to encourage them to do the small things, that when done by all of us as the opportunities arise, keep the country strong and thus free.

Thanks.

Encourage Others to Vote



Voting is so important and for so many reasons. And not only do we have the privilege of voting, but we can encourage others to vote by:

- Voting yourself, which is a form of encouragement. It tells others that voting is important and that it's not too difficult.
- Display the "I Voted" sticker or button often given at polling locations as a reminder to others that it is an election day. An oval-shaped sticker with a red, white, and blue design. It features a stylized American flag on the left and the text "I Voted" in the center.
- Offering to take someone to their polling location.
- Taking your children with you when you vote - they can come into the booth with you and begin to understand how one votes.
- Explaining to someone how to register to vote, how to find their polling location or how easy it is to vote absentee.

And as the following snippet suggests, simply reminding others to vote has been shown to significantly increase the chances that they will vote.

"The Yale University political scientists who let this study sent students out to deliver nonpartisan get-out-the-vote messages to randomly chosen houses. After the election, voting records revealed that the turnout was six percent higher among the households contacted. (That's not exactly peanuts, given the lackluster voter turnouts in the United States recently.)" - *October 2000 Reader's Digest*

Sometimes knowing that someone else cares is all it takes.





There are many things we take for granted, and the ability to freely say what we believe is one of them. Amazingly, in many countries, when one speaks out against the government, there is the prospect of recrimination, jail or even bodily harm.

When you hear or read something that has national implications and with which you agree or disagree, writing a note to the appropriate organization or person does a couple of things:

- 1) It lets the organization know that people are hearing their message and how they're reacting to it and
- 2) it allows Americans to express their viewpoints in ways other than voting.



Elected Officials

Expressing our opinions is the only way others know what you think. It helps you formulate your own beliefs, and encourages others to form theirs also. You'd be surprised and pleased at the impact a letter to a public official can have. Here are some links for sending your senator, house representative or the President a note.

- The official [White House](#) web site.
- The official [U.S. House of Representatives](#) web site.
- The official [U.S. Senate](#) web site.
- [www.congress.org](#) This site allows you to find and communicate with members of congress; the president and vice-president and white house staff; the Supreme Court and state governors; and to track legislation.
- [www.e-thepeople.com](#) A creative, interesting and useful site. Allows on-line letters to be sent to over 170,000 government officials in over 9,800 towns. It also allows one to start a petition or to sign one already established and/or join in discussion groups about major topics being discussed nationally.

Radio Talk Shows

Another great venue for expressing your opinion is on a radio talk show. It's not as hard as it might seem to get through.

Letter to Editor

Writing a letter to the editor is also an effective way to express your opinion. Because letters to the editor need to be brief, writing such letters often forces us to find the essence of our thinking

There are so many issues that need creative, well-thought out solutions. The country needs to hear what you think. Our country is based upon an educated citizenry.



Sites & Resources



Readers' Stories



Until we go to a flat tax system or a use-based tax system, this action should probably have said "Pay the taxes you think you owe." The current tax code makes it difficult for many Americans to accurately determine what they owe. But the reality is, the federal government does provide needed services, and those services are funded by the taxes we pay.

Explain to your children why we pay taxes and what services our taxes provide.



Sites & Resources



If the basic beliefs of citizenship set forth of this web book resonate with you, then perhaps you'll consider placing a link to www.goodcitizen.org on your personal web site or asking that it be placed on your company's web site.

The book's cracked flag-heart logo is included here. To include it, and a link to www.goodcitizen.org in another site, just copy the following HTML and paste it into another site.



```
<a href="http://www.goodcitizen.org" target="_blank"></a>
```

Thanks.

Protest Over Something You Feel Strongly About



To protest is to express objection to an idea, a cause, a position or an action. The ability to express one's opinion freely and peacefully is one of this country's great strengths. It allows all points of view to be heard and thus considered. I have always thought that holding up a sign in public in protest over something you feel strongly about takes a lot of courage and commitment.

There are many ways to protest, some more visible than others - from privately boycotting a product or service, to sending a letter of protest to an organization, to publicly protesting, to circulating or signing a petition of change.



Protest over
something you feel
strongly about



Readers' Stories

Pursue Injustices, Even at Personal Inconvenience



It's so easy not to do anything when we are the target of an injustice or see someone

The Giraffe Project is a great organization that recognizes individuals who "stick their neck out".



Readers' Stories

Serve on a Jury, If Asked



Laws are important. They prescribe how a society will function. Without them, a society like ours wouldn't survive. In this country, it is the judicial system that determines whether individuals or organizations have broken the law. The most common way the judicial system makes this determination is to have a jury of other Americans listen to the evidence and determine the guilt or innocence of the accused.



If individuals who break the law were to be found innocent, and individuals who have not broken the law were to be found guilty, then our laws would become meaningless. Thus the ability of juries to properly determine guilt or innocence is critical to our survival.

Serving on a jury is one of the most important, and in many cases, interesting ways in which an American gets to serve her or his country. Avoiding jury duty because you are busy at work may seem important in the short-term, but in the long-term, it is not a good reason and hurts the country. Jury service reinforces and makes real the need for laws and the need for juries!

If you are brave, then when someone complains that they have just received a summons for jury duty or brags about how they got out of jury duty, speak up.

One more thought. If you are fortunate to get onto a jury, remember how important it is to make your decision based upon the evidence and the law. Making decisions based upon prejudice or what you think the law should be, destroys the credibility of the system. By the way while juror selection varies by state, jurors are often selected at random using voter registration and Department of Motor Vehicle lists.



Readers' Stories



Sites & Resources

Talk About Current Events at the Dinner Table with Your Family



Talking about current events at the dinner table with ones children is not only a great way to spend time with your kids (or parents) but it sets a good example that it's okay and important to talk about events to have ones own opinion.



Readers' Stories

Tell Someone When You Don't Approve of Their Actions



Most of what other people do is not our business. Fortunately in this country, each of us gets to live our own life in our own way and not according to how someone else wants us to live it. However, we are also a society, and because of that, each of us must make certain accommodations to our behavior.



When someone acts in a way that is detrimental to the society, we, as members of the society, have the responsibility to let that person know that their actions weren't in the best interest of the society. Easier said than done, but our actions impact others and eventually our society.

Saying something to someone who does something you don't approve of is one of the toughest "citizen actions" in this book. David Viscott, a psychiatrist and national talk show host, used to say that an effective way to tell someone when they do something that "hurts" you is to form the sentence as follows:

When you (fill in - i.e. "ignore me"), it makes me feel (fill in - i.e. lonely). This directs the feeling to you and not to the individual.

Allow yourself to voice disapproval for actions that undermine our freedom.



Readers' Stories

Vote



Voting is the essence of democracy. Failing to vote is to become a member of what the media calls the "silent majority" and to open the door for the demise of democracy. The reality is that in a democracy the notion of a "silent majority" is an oxymoron. A more accurate term would be the "silent minority". To not vote is to take the "by the people" out of Lincoln's Gettysburg address line "Government of the people, by the people and for the people".

To vote "properly", one needs to be eligible, be registered, know about the candidates and issues, know where to vote, and finally vote.

Voter Eligibility

To be eligible to vote, one must:

- be a citizen of the United States
- be a resident of the state in which they intend to register
- be at least 18 years as of the day of the next election to vote
- NOT be in prison or on parole for the conviction of a felony.
- be registered 29 days prior to the election.

first register. In order to register One can register to vote by:

Voter Registration

To be eligible to vote, one must first register. One can register by:

Whom to Vote For?

To vote effectively, one must understand the issues and compare candidates. In most states, Voter Information Pamphlet's are sent to registered voters prior to an election. These pamphlets usually contain information about the issues and candidates. Also a number of web sites offer election information. Smart Voter is a Web site that offers personalized election information based on a voter's address. Try it out!

	Get your ballot!
<hr/>	
Street Address:	
Zip Code:	
<u>Your address is confidential.</u>	
From the League of Women Voters of California	

[Democracy Net](#) is a public interest site for election information. The site is funded by the League of Women Voters. One can simply enter their zip code to find out who's running for offices on their ballot and where the candidates stand on issues you care about.

Where to Vote

To cast ones vote, one needs to know where to vote. Voter information pamphlets usually contain the closest polling location.

Actually Voting

Voting first thing in the morning or scheduling the time to vote are two ways to increase the likelihood that one votes. Visiting the location prior to election day also increases the likelihood of voting.

Absentee Voting

Usually Voter information pamphlets contain an application for an absentee voter's ballot. It takes only a couple of minutes to complete the application. In California, for instance, the Application For Absent Voter's Ballot only requires one's birth date, phone number and signature in addition to the printed name and address information. I was also pleasantly surprised that the Absentee application could be received as late as one week before the general election. The actual absentee ballot is virtual identical to the ballot at voting locations. The only difference is that one punches out their selection rather than do it via a mechanical device.



Sites & Resources



Readers' Stories



Political debates are perhaps the best way to assess candidates for public office. Such debates present a forum for voters to listen to the candidates' ideas and to observe their style, poise, persuasive ability and reaction to challenges and criticism. And while many of the debates may not be "real" debates, they often provide the opportunity to see for ourselves and not rely solely on candidate spin doctors, or media-driven perceptions.

Unfortunately, there tend to be few debates and the media often doesn't cover them. Front-runners tend to avoid debates for fear of making a mistake. All too often in today's society and political environment, the candidate who is the incumbent, or who is most attractive, or who has the money, or whose family has political experience and connections is given front-runner status. We as citizens need to demand more debates.

As citizens, we have gotten away from scrutinizing candidates and voting for those whose ideas match our beliefs of what is good for the country. The [League of Women Voters](#) does a good job of promoting and sponsoring political debates. Educate yourself on the issues by seeking out more information on candidates and demanding better media coverage of debates.



Other than perhaps working as part of a candidate's election campaign, there isn't anything like working in a polling location during an election. It gives one a unique feeling of participation and a unique understanding of a democracy - of the importance and power of voting. Ensuring the privacy of voting and ensuring that fraud isn't committed are powerful responsibilities.

While elections are handled differently in various states, it is often the County Registrar of Voters that is responsible for conducting elections. In most states, they need individuals to "man" the multitude of polling locations. A small fee is often paid.



Readers' Stories

Additional Reader-submitted "Democratic Process" Actions

[BACK](#)