

# Campaign to Promote Civic Education

## ABOUT US

The Campaign to Promote Civic Education effort is a fifty-state campaign (including the District of Columbia) aimed at restoring the civic mission of our nation's schools by encouraging states and school districts to devote sustained and systematic attention to civic education from kindergarten through twelfth grade. This monthly newsletter is part of a new initiative to provide a forum for information exchange in the civic education community and is administered by the Center for Civic Education (Center). The Center's Campaign to Promote Civic Education is cooperating with the Civic Mission of the Schools Campaign (CMS) to help promote our common goal of improving civic education policy and practice.



The Campaign to Promote Civic Education has contributed to concrete policy improvements in civics and government across the country. While we often showcase the outstanding work of our state facilitators in the guest commentary, this month we feature the writing of a legendary champion of civic education. Perhaps reading his words following this historic election will reinvigorate your own efforts to restore the civic mission of our schools. We thank Lee Hamilton of The Center on Congress at Indiana University ([www.centeroncongress.org](http://www.centeroncongress.org)) for sharing his post-election comments in his recently penned "The Ten Commandments of Citizenship."



### Guest Commentary: The Honorable Lee H. Hamilton Director, Center on Congress at Indiana University

*Now that the national elections are over, and Americans have voted, our nation enters the most challenging opportunity for citizens to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Voting is only the first step in the process. In the months ahead, our country will face important challenges on the economy, national security, energy independence, and health care.*

*More than ever our citizens must be prepared to be engaged, to stay informed, and make government accountable to their needs. The column below is intended to remind all of us of our solemn obligation to be active participants in our democracy instead of spectators—and to live up to the ideal of a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."*

**The Ten Commandments of Citizenship** 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 to heal 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":

- I. 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.
- II. Be informed. To be a knowledgeable voter, you need to know what 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.
  - III. Communicate with your representatives. 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.
  - IV. 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 rather than acting 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.
  - V. 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.
  - VI. 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.
  - VII. 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.
  - VIII. 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.
  - IX. 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.
  - X. 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.

The Center on Congress joined the National Conference of State Legislatures and the Center for Civic Education to create the Alliance for Representative Democracy in America ([www.representativedemocracy.org](http://www.representativedemocracy.org)). Representative Democracy in America is a national project designed to reinvigorate and educate Americans on the critical relationship between government and the people it serves. The project introduces citizens, particularly young people, to the representatives, institutions, and processes that serve to realize the goal of a government of, by, and for the people.

### Update: Campaign to Promote Civic Education Needs Assessment Survey

As Charles N. Quigley noted in the October newsletter, the Center is conducting a needs-assessment survey in each of the fifty states and District of Columbia. The survey is about one-third completed and we are targeting January 15th as a tentative deadline for completion. The information you have provided thus far has revealed extremely useful information that will assist the Center in providing future resources and strategic direction to your campaign. The culmination of this survey will lead to a report on the achievements and challenges at the state level since the conclusion of the Congressional Conferences on Civic Education in 2006. Thank you again for helping us to paint a clearer picture of the status of civic education in each state. The final report will allow us to better serve your state's campaign needs with technical assistance and grants.



**Join the Campaign on The Five Freedoms Network** The Campaign keeps an interactive discussion forum, in the form of a blog, to exchange best practices in civic education and engagement. We are proud to build this community of civic education policy leaders amongst an outstanding pre-existing network at The Five Freedoms Project (<http://www.fivefreedoms.org>). The Five Freedoms Network is an online community of educators, students, and citizens who share a commitment to First Amendment freedoms, democratic schools, and the idea that children should be seen and heard. The Campaign was also proud to be featured in this month's *Degrees of Freedom* newsletter. Please join us on the network at <http://network.fivefreedoms.org/group/cpce> and lend your voice to this important discussion.



### Quick Facts: Youth Vote Up 4–5% in 2008

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) reports that youth turnout among 18-29 year olds was up again in the 2008 presidential election. According to the most recent polling data, “CIRCLE estimates that youth voter turnout rose to between 52 percent and 53 percent, an increase of 4 to 5 percentage points over CIRCLE’s estimate based on the 2004 exit polls. The 2004 election was a strong one for youth turnout, reversing a long history of decline. If we compare 2008 with 2000, the increase in youth turnout is at least 11 percentage points. This year’s youth turnout rivals or exceeds the youth turnout rate of 52 percent in 1992, which is the highest turnout rate since 1972 (55.4 percent).” While there is obviously still much room for improvement in young voter turnout, the trend remains positive. To read more about the youth vote in 2008, visit CIRCLE at: <http://www.civicyouth.org>

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