8

Lee Hamilton "Strengthening Congress"

Strengthening Citizen Participation

WHEN I TALK TO GROUPS of people across the country about the need for a stronger Congress, no one disagrees. But we need to transform agreement into action; it takes more than a nodding of heads. With each passing year, I become more impressed with the obligations and responsibilities 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, "Our government demands, it depends upon, the care and the devotion of the people."[1]

Are the People Prepared?

Every election year, I'm struck by a basic imbalance in media coverage. A great deal of time, space, and attention go to what we should expect from the candidates—on their policy stances, their strengths and weaknesses, their frame of mind at any given moment. Given that voters are called upon to judge the fitness of these politicians to lead this nation, this is understandable.

Yet I can't help but think that something is missing. Such coverage sends an unspoken message that the candidates and their personal qualities are all that matter to our government, which isn't true. There's another part of the equation: the American people. Far too little gets written or broadcast about *our* role in making this democracy work. We ask the candidates whether they're prepared for their responsibilities. We need to ask the same of the American people.

Because we have the oldest enduring republic in the world and a robust ongoing public discourse, it's easy to forget that our system needs constant tending by the people most invested in its success: American citizens. It depends on broad participation in the political process, participation that goes well beyond voting. It depends on an active belief in accommodation and compromise, rather than the winner-take-all single-mindedness that has come to characterize political culture of late. And it depends on a widespread understanding that our system of government gives all of us an *opportunity* to achieve what we want by following paths defined and limited by our Constitution; it does not *guarantee* that we'll get what we want.

Many Americans get discouraged because government works slowly, sometimes frustratingly so. Issues that bedevil society—a failing health-care system, for example, or a poorly performing economy—might not be adequately addressed for years, as the various interests involved hammer at each other in Washington. Our astoundingly diverse nation—each fragment of it with its own beliefs about what is right and wrong—has to find a way of forging an agreement on appropriate policy. This is hard work, and just because Congress and the president don't produce exactly what we want when we want it does not mean that the system is broken, dysfunctional, or even unrepresentative.

To some extent, a more thorough civic education would be helpful here, both in school and afterward. Many Americans' knowledge of basic concepts—the need for a balance of powers at the federal level, or the crucial role compromise plays in making the system

work—is weaker than it ought to be. Consultation and accommodation across ideological and party lines, which is how we reach common ground and sustainable solutions, is one of our strengths, not a weakness. Public tolerance for it is crucial. A firm grounding in the fundamentals of American democracy would also build an understanding that final consensus in our system can only rest on extensive deliberation and the input of many different points of view. These are what produce policy that addresses the needs of our people, not the sound bites and spin that Americans too often confuse these days for civic discourse.

Disappointed as people might be with the president or Congress or the Supreme Court, I've never had someone stand up and say, "I don't support the Constitution." There is an inbred respect for our constitutional structure and its system of checks and balances. The challenge for ordinary citizens is to make it work.

This is a challenge for every generation. Our system does not function on automatic pilot. Just because it has worked in the past does not mean we will have a free and successful country in the future. To achieve this, we need a citizenry that not only participates actively, but also expects and encourages each of its members to do so. We need debate, deliberation, accommodation, a healthy system of checks and balances—that includes a strong president and a strong Congress—and an electorate willing to hold those in power accountable when they stray from these basic constitutional principles.

So each election season it's all well and good to inquire aggressively about how well the candidates are prepared for public office. But remember also to turn the inquiry inward and ask how well we are prepared for the obligations of citizenship.

There is no replacement in our system for accepting the responsibility that comes with being an American to help make our system work. It requires skill, patience, and above all an appreciation for the gift given us by our predecessors and a determination not to squander its legacy. So how do we go about ensuring this?

First, We Need an Informed Citizenry

One of the more disturbing pieces of news that came out during the Iraq war was the large number of Americans who believed that Saddam Hussein was involved with the September 11 terrorists. There has never been any evidence for such a link.

You can pass off this widespread belief as simple confusion, or the result of misleading statements by those with a vested interest in pursuing the Iraq war, but it's nothing to be shrugged away. In a democracy, public misperceptions carry an enormous cost.

Consider the federal budget. If you look at polls surveying how Americans think Congress spends their money, you'll find that several sorts of programs top the list. Alongside spending on defense, people often believe that foreign aid or even spending on environmental protection eats up a large proportion of the budget.

This is just wrong. In truth, the largest single portion of the overall federal budget—a full 39 percent of it in 2008—goes to programs for seniors: Social Security, Medicare, and other retirement benefits. This is followed by defense, which gets 22 percent of the budget; welfare, including food stamps and unemployment insurance, at 17 percent; and interest payments on the federal debt, at 7 percent. The environment and foreign aid both check in at one percent. So when someone stands up at a public forum and talks about cutting foreign aid as a way of reducing the budget deficit, the truth is that it wouldn't get us very far.

You could argue, I suppose, that this mismatch between the facts and Americans' beliefs doesn't really matter, so long as their representatives in Congress understand what's what. But it's not a very big step from there to suggesting that we should just forget all this talk of democracy and leave the difficult art of governing in the hands of our betters.

The truth is that for our democracy to work, it needs not just an engaged citizenry, but an informed one. We've known this since this nation's earliest days. The creators of the Massachusetts Con-

stitution of 1780 thought the notion important enough to enshrine it in the state's founding document: "Wisdom and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people," they wrote, are "necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties."[2]

Getting the basic facts right is essential to governing well. The late Senator Patrick Moynihan put it well when he said to an opponent during a floor debate, "You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts."[3] One of the most critical jobs facing political leaders in a society as complex as ours is to forge a consensus among the many people and interests holding competing views. This is difficult enough to do when everyone agrees on the underlying facts; it is virtually impossible when there is no agreement. Voters' misperceptions, in other words, can become formidable obstacles to the functioning of our system of representative democracy.

These misperceptions develop for many reasons. Public policy is often complex. It can be wearying to sort through all the sources of information—the media, advocacy groups, the internet, politicians, commentators—on any given subject. And there are always political leaders, lobbyists, and others who are willing to let misperceptions linger. After all, if you're opposed ideologically to spending tax dollars on foreign aid, it doesn't hurt your cause if people believe we spend ten or twenty times more on it than we actually do.

By the same token, there is no single fix for the problem. Part of the answer lies with members of Congress and other public officials, who should feel great responsibility to correct public misperceptions when they surface. Part of it lies with the media, which in recent years has shown a worrisome tendency to downplay its role as even-handed, in-depth civic educator and focus instead on entertainment or once-over-lightly reporting. Part of it lies with civic groups—some of them do their level best to counter the flood of misinformation, but they often seem entirely outmatched.

In the end, though, the burden lies with each of us citizens. There are a lot of powerful groups and interests in this country that

try to manipulate public opinion, and they're very good at it. Yet a democratic society depends on the ability of its citizens to separate the fact from the fiction, to form good judgments, and to put pressure on their representatives to act accordingly. If ordinary people can't do this or don't want to devote the time and energy to it, the country suffers. No matter how good our leadership, if we don't have discriminating citizens, this nation will not work very well. There is an old observation that a society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves. Living in a democracy may be a basic right, but it is also a privilege, and it is one that must be earned by living up to the fondest dreams of our founders for a well-educated and knowledgeable citizenry.

"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.[4] 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.

We Also Need a Citizenry That Looks for Candidates Who Respect Congress

Given the media's fascination with the race for the White House, it's easy to forget in presidential election years that contests are also taking place for all 435 U.S. House seats and a third of the 100 seats in the U.S. Senate. Unfortunately, in those many congressional contests the candidates and press rarely talk about one of the most important issues we face as a nation: the role of Congress itself.

The litany of matters worrying Americans and absorbing the attention of congressional candidates is, of course, long and complex: the economy, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the challenges posed by Iran, the state of American public education, climate change, a long-term energy policy, immigration . . . Not surprisingly, many voters want to hear how Congress can protect them from financial ruin or how candidates propose to keep America strong.

Yet unless Congress learns how to reassert its constitutional responsibility to be the president's equal in policy making, the progress voters yearn to see on all those issues will be much harder to come by. This is why, as you listen to the various House and Senate candidates campaigning for your vote, I hope you'll pay attention not only to what they say about the economy or Iraq, but to how they talk about Congress itself.

It's been the habit of both incumbents and their challengers in recent years to run for Congress by running against the Congress. They criticize its profligate spending or its do-nothing ways or its shoddy ethics or the undue influence of money and lobbyists, and they say that *they* are the candidate who can clean up the mess in Washington. These are all choice targets, and they have their place in the campaign debate, but you have to wonder how long this denigration of Congress can continue before Americans lose their faith in representative democracy.

There's another path, and that's to recognize that Congress is flawed but that, as an institution, it needs to be upheld and shored up, not stigmatized. As I've argued, a robust, functional, and assertive Congress is crucial to making our system work. It must be able to keep an eye on the executive branch, advance an agenda based on its members' understanding of what the country needs, be the place where the cross-currents roiling the American community meet in constructive debate, and in general play the muscular role our founders envisioned for it in policy making. It cannot do any of these things if it is filled with politicians who are adept at making themselves look good and the Congress look bad, or who care little about its institutional powers.

I've noticed something interesting as I have moved around the country recently: people are starting to catch on to this. They express disappointment that Congress for decades has allowed the White House to dominate it. They fret that the expansion of presidential power pursued by the George W. Bush administration went too far, and are bewildered by Congress's timidity in asserting its own powers. This is an extremely promising development—if it translates into an electorate willing to look carefully at how congressional

candidates propose to set Congress back on track, and if it begins to wake up Congress as a whole.

For make no mistake, this is not just a matter of political theory or a topic for a good speech on the importance of constitutional checks and balances. It has to be practiced in the day-to-day workings of Capitol Hill. If you ask candidates whether they are in favor of reasserting congressional authority, the answer will almost certainly be yes. But that's not enough.

What you also want to know is whether they'll be aggressive in shaping the federal budget; whether they believe Congress has a strong voice, along with the president's, in declaring war or pursuing military intervention overseas; whether they'll work with their colleagues to develop and fight for Congress's own agenda, and not simply respond to the president's; whether they see that getting Congress's ethical house in order is crucial to building its institutional strength, not just a matter of political expediency; whether they understand that Congress must be a truly deliberative and consensus-building body, not a place where the majority ramrods its wishes through without debate; and whether they understand that violating long-standing and fair procedure—by passing sprawling omnibus bills, for instance—merely hands the president more power.

If they get all this, even if they don't share your views on a few policy issues, then you and our country would be ably served by their presence in Washington.

Why Political Virtue Matters

When Americans talk about what kind of people they like to have representing them in Washington, personal integrity is high on the list, above almost any other trait. Most of us also want to know that the people to whom we entrust our hopes for this nation aren't just in it for themselves.

The Founding Fathers would approve. Indeed, they were quite clear on which particular quality they thought most important in our elected representatives: virtue. It's an old-fashioned word that is

not much in vogue at the moment, yet in a very real sense, the vitality of our democracy depends on what the Founders meant by it.

People today might think of "virtue" in any number of ways: as moral probity, honesty, self-discipline, a sense of responsibility, and, of course, integrity. These are all qualities that citizens want in their representatives, and understandably so. Yet the Founders had something even larger and more encompassing in mind when they talked about virtue. They were looking for a sense of civic self-sacrifice—the ability to overcome self-interest and act for the benefit of the broader community.

There is nothing anachronistic about "virtue" when seen in that light. Our republic functions best when it generates political leaders who are capable of setting aside their own desires for power or partisan domination or pecuniary self-interest, and it suffers when our politicians are incapable of doing so.

Of course, the Founders also understood human nature. They anticipated that no one could be so virtuous that he or she could be entrusted with unlimited power. That is why they developed a constitutional system of checks and balances aimed at restraining the power of any single person or, indeed, any branch of government.

Yet the Founders were keenly aware that even this was not enough. They were creating a representative democracy, and in a democracy, power ultimately lies with the electorate. In 1788, at the Virginia Ratifying Convention, James Madison laid out what this meant: "I go on this great republican principle," he said, "that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom. Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation . . . To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea."[5]

The ultimate check, in other words, would be the American people. In order to preserve our freedoms they, too, must be virtuous—at least, in the civic sense that the Founders had in mind. As the historian Bernard Bailyn put it, "an informed, alert, intelligent, and uncorrupted electorate" is vital to sustaining the American republic. George Washington, Bailyn once wrote, believed "that

the guarantee that the American government would never degenerate into despotism lay in the ultimate virtue of the American people."[6]

This faith—that man possesses sufficient virtue for self-government—is hardly something to take for granted. The Founders never envisioned the dark arts of modern politicking: the insistence that what is good for me is good for everyone; the evasive answer to an uncomfortable question; the efforts we've seen in recent elections to suppress voter turnout; the television advertising that misleads without actually lying; the "spin" put on the facts by a political operation. Nor could they have foreseen the pressures that make it difficult for members of Congress and other political leaders to step back and disentangle what is best for the country from their more personal preoccupations: the high-stakes gamesmanship of politics today; the influence of campaign contributions; the complexity and sheer quantity of legislation; the bewildering clamor of different voices and divergent needs that confront any lawmaker.

Under these circumstances, the responsibility that the Founders laid on the American people weighs more heavily than ever: to pay attention, to discern insincerity and reject misinformation, to enter the voting booth prepared to set aside one's own self-interest and focus on the good of the country. None of this is easy. Yet that is precisely the expectation that the founders of this nation bore for the generations that followed them: that the American people not only would choose leaders of wisdom and virtue, but would themselves possess the intelligence and virtue to do so. Let us hope we never prove them wrong.

The Ten Commandments of Good Citizenship

Everyone is talking now about change in Washington, and how we want our political leaders to bring it about. It is the cause of the moment, and expectations are high. 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 Good Citizenship." Some involve what citizens should do, others what citizens should understand:

1. *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.

2. *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.

3. *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.

4. *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.

5. *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.

6. *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 will become adults without understanding how our government and political system work and why it is important for them to be contributing citizens.

7. *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.

8. *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.

9. *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.

10. *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 at Gettysburg is still urgent: whether this "government of the people, by the people, for the people" 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.