Civic Engagement and Its Importance to Society

From this experience, I learned a lot about what is needed for civic engagement. It requires differentiating your feelings on an issue from what you want to accomplish and being open to community allies who may offer support. It may not require profile-raising news media coverage, but it certainly doesn’t hurt—and it often helps a great deal. And it requires staying engaged. My friends and I eventually met with the city planner, and with Mr. Brown’s assistance, we pitched our idea for downtown bike lines. Later that school year, the city installed them. Civic engagement works, but achieving what you are fighting for requires a lot of effort—and plenty of communicating. In the sections that follow, we explore the ways you can apply a basic form of human communication—public speaking—to the process of civic engagement.

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As we noted in Chapter 1, civic engagement is active public participation in political affairs and social and community organizations. Examples include engaging in voter registration efforts, circulating petitions, taking part in community or political organizations, attending and perhaps speaking at government meetings, participating in demonstrations, and discussing issues. When you participate in a number of these activities, you will have the opportunity to put your public speaking skills into practice.

Civic engagement is not limited to any particular ideology or political perspective. The #BlackLivesMatter movement, libertarians, Occupy protesters, and Tea Party advocates have all used civic engagement in an effort to express their message and achieve social change.

Although civic engagement is vital for a healthy society, participation in public affairs has been decreasing. Harvard professor Robert Putnam triggered a discussion about the decline in civic engagement with his article “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” in 1995. The article’s title was inspired by Putnam’s observation that although the number of people who bowled in the United States had increased, the number of people who participated in bowling leagues had gone down. This pattern of decreasing engagement went well beyond the bowling alley. Putnam observed that voting, attending public meetings, attending political rallies and speeches, and serving on local communities had declined since the 1960s. Putnam was concerned about declining public participation based on his research of regional governments. He found that in regions where there was a higher level of public participation and connection, there were also better schools, greater economic development, reduced crime rates, and successful local government.
Declining rates of civic engagement have continued since the time “Bowling Alone” was published. A 2018 study by the Public Religion Research Institute found that during the past twelve months, few people had contacted an elected official (19%), attended a community meeting (12%), or attended a rally or demonstration (8%). Despite the popularity of social
media, less than one-fourth of all Americans (23%) had posted on an issue that mattered to them.\(^6\)

Not only is the level of civic engagement low, but the quality of public discourse is also low. The news is loaded with stories about members of Congress making racist comments, a candidate for governor threatening to “stomp on his opponent’s face with golf spikes,” news show panelists shouting over each other, and family members who no longer speak to one another due to political disagreements.\(^7\) Former Supreme Court justice Anthony Kennedy noted that although “civil discourse is critical to democracy’s survival,” we are seeing “the death and decline of democracy” in the twenty-first century.\(^8\) It comes as no surprise that an American Psychological Association survey found that almost 60 percent of Americans were stressed out by divisions in society.\(^9\)

Declining levels of civic engagement are unhealthy for democratic self-government. If government is to be “by the people and for the people,” then those people must be actively involved. The public needs to make its goals and desires known and put pressure on its leaders when they are not serving in the public interest. Hollie Russon Gilman, a lecturer at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs, notes that members of the public can take many different steps in order to serve as watchdogs. From recording the actions of law enforcement to using Freedom of Information laws to demand documents to providing testimony that may be more credible than sources linked to special interests, there are many ways to hold elected officials accountable.\(^{10}\)