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*“Something must happen so as to touch the hearts and souls of men that they will come together, not because the law says it, but because it is natural and right.” ~ Martin Luther King*

As we approach the celebration of our country’s independence, it’s important to remember that America was founded as an experiment. At the time, the idea of creating a society governed by ordinary citizens was audacious...and an act of treason. We fought a war for this experiment; people lost their homes, their loved ones, and their lives protecting and defending the ideals of equality, liberty, justice, and opportunity for all.

Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, later wrote, "The flames kindled on the 4th of July, 1776, have spread across too much of the globe to be extinguished..." Sadly, though, these days we are seeing some of the flames grow dim:

- American voter turnout ranks near the bottom among democratic nations – in general, fewer than half of our citizens actually take advantage of their right to vote.
- Most of the forms of engagement measured in the [Civic Health Index](#) have fallen in the last three decades. These include activities such as writing letters to the editor, attending community meetings, and contacting elected officials.

The current economic situation is often cited as one reason for what’s being called our “civic foreclosure.” But civic engagement has never been easy. In the period leading up to the American Revolutionary War about 20 percent of the colonists remained loyal to the British monarchy, and public debates about allegiance, freedom, taxes were common. After the war there was even more public discourse about what form the new government should take. But these discussions were held. People got involved. They spoke their minds. Printed pamphlets. Talked with neighbors.

It may not be easy, but civic engagement isn’t that hard, either.

Got friends with different political outlooks? Cool! Start a discussion group; not necessarily to try to change people's thinking, but to create an environment where all sides of issues can be aired safely. Got a Facebook page or a blog? Write about your thoughts on issues and invite others to comment. Got a Congressperson? Mayor? School board? Neighborhood Association? Write and let them know how you feel about what's going on in your state, city, schools, or block. Got neighbors? Knock on the door and introduce yourself. When citizens are involved and engaged, their lives and communities are improved and enriched.

In an ironic twist, the best way to celebrate our Independence (and honor those who fought for our freedoms) is to work together.

The premise of our democratic form of government – a government of the people, by the people and for the people – is that government is legitimate only when the people as a whole participate in their own self-rule.



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