

Resolve to get more engaged in 2017

AMY MILLER AND DIANE MACK

This past year's contentious presidential election appears to have had a certain beneficial effect: Citizens who seldom took notice of the politics around them were motivated to become engaged in the national political process. But where do we go from here? It is our hope that citizen engagement will experience a renaissance in the coming year, for the good of the republic and its diverse communities.

Our culture is fond of lists, especially at the start of a new year. The Board of the Institute for Women in Politics is therefore taking this opportunity to offer our recommendations to the citizens of Northwest Florida on the "10 Ways to Be Civically Engaged in 2017."

- Attend meetings of your county commission or city council. You may also be able to watch the meetings in real time on TV or by streaming video on your computer. Check the local government's website to see if they have a video archive for past meetings. Watch CSPAN to keep informed on the workings of our federal government.

- Learn about the state, county, and city boards and commissions to which citizens may be appointed. Choose one or more that reflect your community and policy interests and apply to be appointed when positions become available. Information about Florida state and regional opportunities is available from the Governor's Office of Appointments.

- Learn about issues that will come up before the Florida legislature and connect with your local representatives if you have an opinion or position on a particular issue.

- Participate in the citizens' leadership academy that may be offered by your county or city.

- Learn about Leadership Pensacola, Leadership Santa Rosa, or Leadership Okaloosa and consider participating in the months-long program.

- Join and become active in your neighborhood association or neighborhood crime watch program.

- Volunteer with your area League of Women Voters or other organization in their voter registration efforts.

- If someone you know and can support is going to run for office in 2018, serve as a volunteer in her or his campaign—and do faithfully what you sign up to do.

- Join and become active in the Institute for Women in Politics, the local chapter of your political party, or a civic organization—Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, others.

- Read, read, read! Read your local newspapers. Read the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal or, even better, both. Read books that provide critical insights into American history and jurisprudence. Re-read the U.S. Constitution once every year.

More than 20 years ago, Robert Putnam, a professor of public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, lamented the decline of civic engagement when he published his research paper, *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*. In a later analysis of Putnam's work, the *Journal of Democracy* opined, "the simple act of joining and being regularly involved in organized groups has a very significant impact on society. [Robert Putnam's] central message is surely true. Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric."

Similarly, Peter Levine, professor of citizenship and public affairs at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, recently wrote that the fundamental premise of his entire career has been that "our formal institutions reflect the ways that we talk and work together in everyday life" and that "we can't have decent political institutions without a base of active, responsible, organized citizens."

These distinguished scholars believe, as do we, that civic engagement is a critical cornerstone of successful representative democracy.

Amy Miller and Diane Mack were founding directors of the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida and currently serve as president and treasurer, respectively. This Viewpoint is offered on behalf of the IWP Board of Directors. To inquire about membership in the Institute, email contact@iwpflorida.org.

