



10 ways to be a great American citizen for the Fourth of July

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On this Fourth of July we recognize the birth of our nation with parades, fireworks, new-car clearance sales and the grilling of mass quantities of meat. But we ought to take a couple of minutes to consider what it means to be an American and, more specifically, what it means to be a great citizen.

Being a great citizen takes thought, and it takes effort. So I've put some effort into a few thoughts. Here are 10 suggestions:

1. If you want to be taken seriously when debating a fellow citizen or addressing a problem of some kind, avoid getting personal. Try civility. Try empathy. Do not applaud anyone who engages in name-calling or ad hominem attacks. Resist bullies.
2. Do not countenance politicians who lie, even if you generally agree with them on major issues. Once you look the other way, or pretend you don't hear the lie, you normalize it, and we end up in a bad place.
3. This sounds self-serving (and, well, it is), but, for the sake of the country, you need to read newspapers, print or digital. At the local, state and national levels, newspapers still provide the most illumination of problems in our midst, of the actions of elected officials and government, of almost all aspects of life, foreign and domestic. It's fine to watch cable news shows, but the talking heads provide more opinions than facts. You need a balanced menu in your news feed, not just a steady diet of chatter that keeps you comfortable with your prejudices.
4. Sharpen your critical thinking skills to form judgments about political candidates or take sides on issues. Consider the controversial prospect of the government extending an opportunity for citizenship to undocumented immigrants. A lot of people oppose it outright. "What part of illegal don't you understand?" they say, arguing that the millions who crossed our borders illegally should never be offered amnesty, and that's that. This issue, like most issues, is complicated, and complicated issues can give you a headache. Being a great citizen requires effort, and sometimes aspirin. The easy thing is to listen only to the side that simply matches your established view, or to think your personal experiences match everyone else's. Great citizenship requires the heavy lift of opening your mind, even if you don't like what might come in.

5. Healthy skepticism is good. In fact, it is essential to critical thinking. But you can overdose on skepticism, to the point where your brain rejects everything from objective science to fact-based journalism. Avoid the leader who declares “fake” anything he finds offensive or contrary. That approaches nihilism, a belief that nothing is real, nothing matters, and life is meaningless. Too much of that, and democracy dies.

6. Remember: If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. That goes for politicians who want to cut our taxes. It might be possible for them to wangle tax cuts here and there, but, given circumstances — the age of our infrastructure, population growth, the cost of stuff generally — we should be skeptical. No one likes the amount of taxes they pay. But, at the same time, we want nice things. The real estate agent wants to be able to say the local public schools are great. When an emergency happens, we want first responders to be well-trained. We want roads to be smooth despite the pounding they take every day. All of that costs money, and in the real world, nothing gets cheaper. A great citizen always asks: “If you’re going to cut taxes, what are you going to cut to pay for it?”

7. Related: Do not buy into trickle-down economics. Cutting income taxes for the wealthiest Americans does not mean benefits will trickle down to the rest of us in any sustaining way, if at all. It always sounds good, but it never happens as promised. Those who do not live where the air is rare end up paying for federal tax cuts in one way or another — in new state or local taxes, in interest on mortgages and credit card balances, in the loss or reduction in some useful government service because of deficits. Being a great citizen means looking past partisan politics and opposing wealthy politicians who want to give tax cuts to their wealthy peers.

8. Volunteer for something. Show up for something. Do something. You cannot be a great citizen if you just tweet snarky comments about the people and things you oppose. Take some action. At least once a year write a letter to a member of Congress or your state legislature. If they never hear from us, they think everything is fine.

9. Get a pocket-sized copy of the U.S. Constitution, read it each year and keep it handy. You can get one from the Cato Institute or from the American Civil Liberties Union.

10. Remember: Standing for the National Anthem is patriotic. Dissent is patriotic. Protest is patriotic.