

THE VETERANS AND CITIZENS INITIATIVE

Moving Forward Together.

WGS

About The Veterans and Citizen Initiative

The Veterans and Citizens Initiative is a nonpartisan initiative of veterans and military families who are committed to rebuilding and reenergizing our democracy, in coordination with More in Common.

We have served our country in uniform, and we are now serving our country as citizens, working to ensure peace, solidarity, and a renewed faith in the institutions of our country.

America will be what we make it.

Partners



Acknowledgements

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Foreword

2020 revealed new depths of division in America. The year witnessed a deeply-polarizing election, combative disagreements over how to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflicting responses to invigorated civil rights movements launched in the aftermath of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans. The violent attack on the nation's Capitol on January 6, 2021 laid bare the profound risks to our democracy and nation posed by our hyper-polarized politics. Americans enter a new year, a new decade, and a new presidential administration knowing we cannot continue down this path of division, yet unsure how to find meaningful common ground.

Our path toward greater unity depends upon there being values and ideas which are

shared across our fault lines, and upon our ability to tap into these unifying themes. Our public opinion research shows that there is much about which we agree as Americans: we are all proud to be Americans, and we are grateful to be Americans. We believe in American exceptionalism and that democracy, while possessing flaws, is the best form of government. We believe that we all have a duty to participate as citizens in our country. A more daunting challenge is finding ways to act on these shared beliefs amidst the diet of divisiveness consumed daily from national media, social media, and the various forums of information we turn to in order to observe the world around us. So long as we lack communities - online, in-person, and in terms of the news and information we consume - that bring together people of different ideological backgrounds, we will face great difficulty in forging common ground.

There are a number of efforts to address these challenges: groups which are physically (and virtually) bringing Americans together across lines of race, geography, and ideology; movements to shape healthier online news and social platforms; and, political actors working to build more constructive norms of debate, compromise, and statecraft. We applaud these efforts but know more must be done. One opportunity we see is for veteran and military family organizations (and individuals) to play a significant role in building new spaces and communities where Americans can act on all that binds us together.

Our research suggests that veterans and military families are among the most trusted voices in our society today. For various reasons, Americans admire those who have stepped forward to serve the country in its all-volunteer military. Recognizing the urgency of this moment, The Veterans and Citizens Initiative



Foreword

seeks to partner with veterans, military families, and the myriad organizations of veterans and military families in an audacious vision - a new birth of civic engagement, working with countless citizens across the country to create a shift from 'I' to 'we', to build up and remind ourselves and our fellow citizens that we have far more that unites us than divides us, that we share a faith in our common values, beliefs, and hopes for the country.

One of the ways to approach this is to provide content, opportunities, and conversation pieces that are not related to the polarized politics of the moment. Our hashtags #VetsAndCitizens and #ChangeTheConversation are useful monikers of our intent. Moreover, because we have partners who are already engaged in civic activity (for instance, assisting veterans and military families, an activity with near universal approval), there is an opportunity to promote these activities and move the conversation toward positive, unifying activities that are taking place in our communities and our country. Not only is there an opportunity to do so, but we believe that the actions that individuals take on a local scale are the bedrock of American democracy. Spotlighting these activities and amplifying them will hopefully serve not only to unify but to fortify our democratic culture.

America is at an inflection point. People consume a diet of divisive rhetoric. Rather than reading the local newspaper or watching the local news program, too often our world consists of Fox News or MSNBC, Facebook, forwarded emails that are fervently political, and a Twitter space that is focused on the most controversial liberal versus conservative topics of the day. We don't presume to be able to supplant this material completely, but our message testing and polling has indicated that

there is an appetite for unifying themes that remind us of our pride in country, what we have in common, our ability to make progress together on deepening the reach of freedom and equality in our country, and the good things that are occurring on a daily basis in our communities, our states, and yes, even the country writ large. We also know that many, if not most Americans, don't engage in this online battlefield and so there are new audiences we can reach and engage.

This report summarizes our work. It also provides a roadmap for this and other initiatives of community-building, divide-bridging, and messaging that can make a difference. This includes data on Americans' attitudes towards civic responsibility, messages of citizenship that resonate most strongly with the public, and clear examples of good citizenship across the nation.



Methodology

The data cited in this report were sourced through two national quantitative surveys, reaching 6,000 Americans. For all quantitative studies referenced, More in Common collaborated with global data and public opinion company YouGov for fieldwork, survey execution, and data tabulation.

Quantitative National Surveys

Survey 1 (American Fabric)

More in Common surveyed 4,000 Americans in July of 2020. The data was weighted using propensity scores and post-stratification, with a sampling frame built from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The propensity score function included gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-category), race (4-category), and education (4-category). The weights were then trimmed at a maximum value of 7, and then re-centered to have a mean of 1. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 1.74.

This survey included questions that explored major phenomena related to American identity and pride, including American beliefs about the country's history, Americans' shared experiences, and Americans' vision for the future.

Survey 2 (Civic Culture)

More in Common surveyed 2,000 Americans in December of 2020. The data was weighted using propensity scores and post-stratification, with a sampling frame built from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). The propensity score function included gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2016 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-category), race (4-category), and education (4-category). The weights were then trimmed at a maximum value of 7, and then re-centered to have a mean of 1. The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 2.54.

This survey included questions that explored major phenomena related to American civic culture, democratic norms, and citizen roles, rights, and responsibilities.

Overview of Civic Attitudes in America

Americans have rarely been as polarized as they are today. On January 6, 2021, people willing to use violence to subvert democracy and defeat those they viewed as their political opponents attacked the US Capitol. Our democracy withstood that test, but there is much work to do to repair the damage.

People believe the differences between them are more than just politics and policies. A recent [Pew Research Center study](#) found that “roughly eight-in-ten registered voters in both camps said their differences with the other side were about core American values, and roughly nine-in-ten – again in both camps – worried that a victory by the other would lead to “lasting harm” to the United States.”

The study reveals that the fissures have pervaded nearly every aspect of public life in the U.S., especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Americans differ “over mask wearing, contact tracing, how well public health officials are dealing with the crisis, whether to get a vaccine once one is available, and whether life will remain changed in a major way after the pandemic.”

But all is not lost. More In Common has been studying the nature of division in America since 2018, and its year-long study, [Hidden Tribes: A Study of America’s Polarized Landscape](#), found that differences in deeply rooted core beliefs are at the center of the divisions in America today. And yet despite those differences, most Americans hold more nuanced views and have more in common with their fellow Americans than the vocal ‘wing’ groups who tend to dominate the national discourse.

More In Common continued their study and analysis of this in 2020, with three national surveys across more than 8,000 Americans, supplemented by qualitative data collected over the course of 2020. Those studies (two of which were published: [Democracy for President: A Guide to How Americans can Strengthen Democracy During a Divisive Election](#) and [American Fabric: Identity and Belonging](#)), found many common threads of agreement among all Americans:

A large majority (more than six in ten, of all racial and ethnic backgrounds) share a sense of national pride.

“I am proud to be an American”

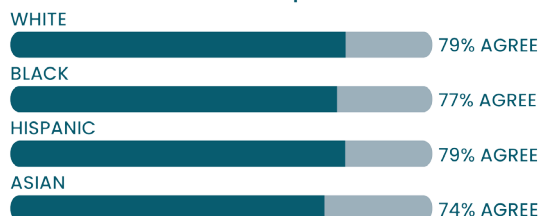


More than 75 percent are thankful to be American and would choose to live in America if given the choice to live anywhere in the world.

“I am grateful to be an American”



“If I could choose to live anywhere in the world, I would still pick America.”



Showing % of respondents who agreed with the statement. Source: American Fabric

Overview of Civic Attitudes in America

Americans across political parties agree on many of the norms within a democratic system, including: “voting in elections,” “respecting other cultures and beliefs,” “learning American history,” “paying your taxes,” and “following what happens in government and politics”.

Showing % of respondents who said the following are “important to being a good American.”

Voting in Elections



Respecting other cultures and beliefs



Learning American history



Paying your taxes



Source: American Fabric

Following the news and being aware of current events in the government.



Majorities of Americans feel a sense of duty to engage with others whose views “I don’t agree with”.

“I believe it is my duty as an American to engage with others whose views I don’t agree with.”



65 percent of Americans feel that “the differences between Americans are not so big that we cannot come together” and 76 percent say “we are all in it together.”

“The differences between Americans are not too big for us to work together anymore.”



“We’re all in it together.”



Source: Civic Culture

Overview of Civic Attitudes in America

Fully 94 percent believe that America is “divided politically” and 92 percent are “worried for the future of America”.

“America is very divided politically.”



“I am worried for the future of America.”



Source: American Fabric

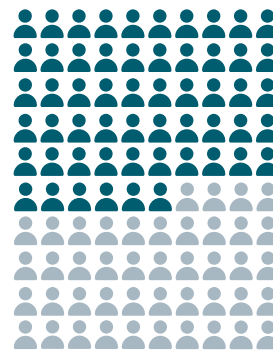
If, then, there is a broad consensus across so many important values and themes about America, democracy, and American identity, how do we regain a sense of unity? How do we craft a new shared sense of purpose and belonging as Americans? The hypothesis of this work is twofold: first, that messages, stories, and experiences which emphasize those areas of broad agreement will resonate with Americans across the ideological spectrum; and second, if we have credible, effective messengers carrying these messages through words and action, they will have a meaningful impact on the health of our democracy and civic culture.



Veterans and Military Families as Messengers

In the December 2020 survey, *More In Common* delved more deeply into the role of the veteran and U.S. society. It verified that military veterans and military families are among the most trusted voices, and that they are trusted because of their self-sacrifice, bravery, and commitment to the nation. Moreover, there seems to be a broad consensus that Americans would like to see more of the attributes they associate with military service be more salient in American life more generally. There are many studies that indicate this, including the [Report of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service](#), a bipartisan group of eleven members whose findings offered a revolutionary and inclusive approach for service for Americans, greatly increasing opportunities to serve beyond the military. Our survey data supports these ideas, and even more enlightening is the view toward veterans and military families.

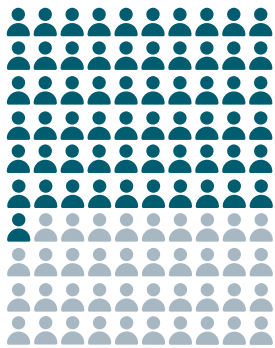
When asked about reasons why people felt veterans were good role models, two of the factors with the highest agreement included their willingness to sacrifice for the greater good of the country and their willingness to put others' needs ahead of their own.



56%

of Americans agree that in general military families are role models for good citizenship

SOURCE: CIVIC CULTURE



61%

of Americans agree that in general veterans are role models for good citizenship.

SOURCE: CIVIC CULTURE

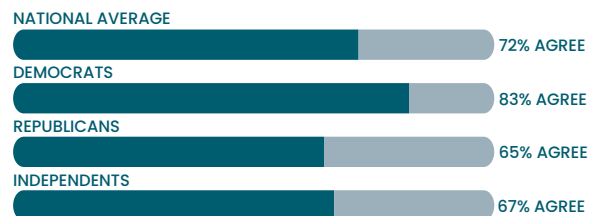
When asked about reasons why people felt military families were good role models, two of the factors with the highest agreement included their willingness to sacrifice for the greater good of the country and the discipline they showed by having loved ones serving in the military.

Veterans and Military Families as Messengers

As part of the survey, respondents were asked their reactions to a message about moving the country forward. 72 percent of Americans - including majorities of both Democrats and Republicans - agree with this statement. →

We also pressure tested the extent to which Americans feel veterans and military families are good messengers for this theme. ↓

“2020 has been a challenging year for America. Now that the election is over, it is time for us to change the conversation and talk about what each of us, as Americans, can do to improve our communities and bring our country together. We do not need to agree on everything, but we do need to find ways to come together and support each other in 2021.”

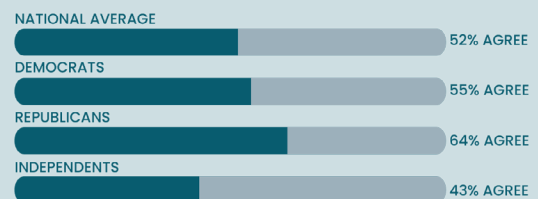
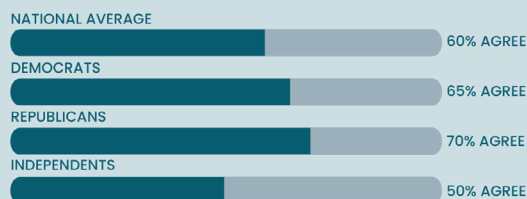


SOURCE: CIVIC CULTURE

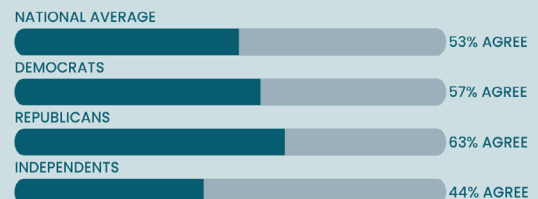
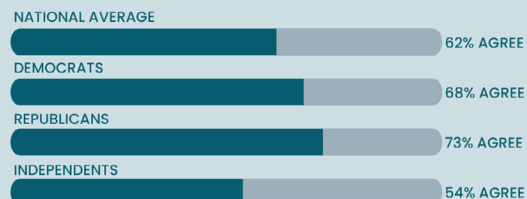
VETERANS

MILITARY FAMILIES

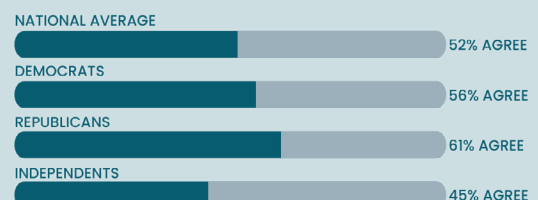
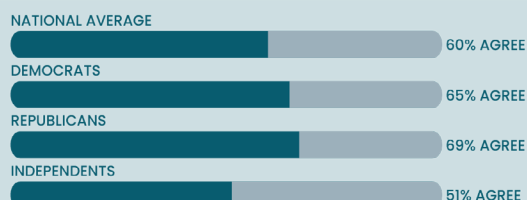
Trustworthy messenger



Good fit to deliver message



Would pay attention to veterans as the messenger



SOURCE: CIVIC CULTURE

Veterans and Military Families as Messengers

In 2008 when Senator John McCain conceded his defeat in the presidential election, he said in his remarks, “I had the honor of calling Senator Barack Obama - to congratulate him on being elected the next president of the country that we both love.” The country that we both love. That is a unifying message, and one which emphasizes the common ground we have discovered in our polling. Senator McCain continued:

Tonight — tonight, more than any night, I hold in my heart nothing but love for this country and for all its citizens, whether they supported me or Sen. Obama, I wish Godspeed to the man who was my former opponent and will be my president. And I call on all Americans, as I have often in this campaign, to not despair of our present difficulties but to believe always in the promise and greatness of America, because nothing is inevitable here.

His remarks are instructive, both for their content, and for the person who delivered them. The military is consistently the most trusted institution in the U.S. Every year since 1973 the international analytics firm Gallup has compiled a [confidence in institutions poll](#), ranking institutions from the Supreme Court to Congress, from organized labor and big business to public schools and newspapers. The military has consistently been at the top of the poll.

The conclusion? Americans have more in common than they believe. In another project, journalist James Fallows and his wife, Deborah, spent several years traveling around America speaking with people about their own lives and their own communities. The result was a

book, *Our Towns*, which they summarized in a long-form article in the [May 2018 issue of *The Atlantic*](#). They concluded that while most Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction, they have confidence in their own communities and their own abilities to pursue the American dream. Veterans can be a significant and positive influence toward recognizing that commonality.



Launching The Veterans and Citizens Initiative

In framing this effort, we began with a simple declaration:

We are a nonpartisan group of veterans, military families, and military family and veteran support organizations who are committed to working with our fellow Americans in a nonpartisan manner to bridge divides, strengthen American democracy, and promote the shared obligations of citizenship.

The polarization in our country is the greatest threat we face. We all have an interest in working toward reconciling our differences and coming together as one country.

From this statement, we created a website, social media account (Twitter and Facebook), and we began reaching out to veteran and military family organizations to join as partners in the work. Organizations who joined as partners agreed to sign onto a statement of solidarity, and then to share with The Veterans and Citizens Initiative the work they are doing in community engagement and citizenship.

The statement of solidarity is as follows:

Together with our partners, we have published this statement of solidarity:

We represent a nonpartisan coalition of veterans, military families, and military family and veteran support organizations, united by our pride in America and our gratitude to be Americans. We believe our experiment in democracy is unique and historic in the annals of human history. For nearly 250 years, through challenges such as the 1918 pandemic, two World Wars, and other crises, we successfully held elections that were free, fair, and peaceful. That long history is one of the greatest legacies of our country. It is core to who we are as a people that we celebrate the peaceful continuation or transfer of power following our elections.

Our confidence in elections held throughout our history is buoyed by the fact that our elections are administered by bipartisan and nonpartisan officials and volunteers at the local level. These individuals are our neighbors and our fellow citizens, performing their civic duties to ensure every ballot is counted fairly and properly. Their work is at the core of what it means to choose those who will represent us, and we emphasize that the systems we have

Launching The Veterans and Citizens Initiative

are ones we must participate in and work to make more free and fair in every election cycle.

Duty is a word that has deep meaning to us, as it does to all Americans. Duty means doing the right thing, even when it is difficult. Generations before us have done their part to keep our democracy strong. That duty is ours now.

We believe that our democracy demands engaged citizens, that we all have the power to make positive change in civic life, and that we have the responsibility to try.

We are speaking out because we are concerned, and also because we believe that we all must do our part as citizens. We share our love of our country, and we pledge to work for a stronger democracy and a more unified country. We believe that continued acts of civic virtue will save our Republic. America will become what we make it - together.

Below are our current partners and a short summary of their work. Our coalition of partners continues to grow.



Secure Families Initiative:

a nonpartisan group of military spouses, they seek to elevate military spouses and family members as uniquely qualified advocates and organizers on matters of foreign policy. They led the

Military Vote Coalition, promoting policies that increase voting accessibility for veterans and military families.



Count Every Hero:

a cross-partisan initiative committed to ensuring every service member's right to vote is protected and their votes tallied.

Led by many retired 4-star generals and admirals, as well as former service secretaries, they advocated patience as ballots were tallied in the days and weeks after the November 3, 2020 election day.



Student Veterans of America:

the premier organization leading service, research programs, and advocacy for veterans in higher education. From college

campuses to student leadership institutes, SVA engages in the public square to train student leaders to be involved in their communities as citizens after taking off the uniform.



New Politics Leadership Academy:

a nonpartisan non-profit dedicated to recruiting and supporting servant leaders to serve through politics.

Their programs, specifically "Answering the Call," assists servant leaders from all political spectra to continue serving, either by running for office or serving on campaigns to assist others to public office.

Launching The Veterans and Citizens Initiative



With Honor:

a cross-partisan movement dedicated to promoting and advancing principled veteran leadership in elected public service. They support military veteran candidates who agree to take a pledge to put principles before politics.



Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America:

a movement of more than 400,000 veterans and allies committed to connecting, uniting, and empowering post-9/11 veterans. They recently led national discussions about the importance of voting, and joined in an effort to encourage veterans to volunteer as poll workers.



Veterans for American Ideals:

a nonpartisan group of veterans who share the belief that America is strongest when its policies and actions match its ideals. In the 2020 election, they led the “Vets Power the Polls” initiative that brought more than 900 veterans to serve as poll workers around the country.



Evocati:

a service disabled veteran owned company, they provide consulting services to business and nonprofit ventures that want to realize their potential inside the military-connected community. With partnerships across the business, veteran, and nonprofit communities, they are leading the way in community-based work among veteran owned small businesses.



High Ground Veterans Advocacy:

a nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of servicemembers, veterans, and their families through education, charitable action, and scientific research. Each year they convene a class of servicemembers and veterans to educate government officials and the general public on issues important to our communities.



Minority Veterans of America:

a nonpartisan nonprofit designed to create belonging and advance equity for underrepresented veterans, including women, people of color, LGBTQ, and religious minorities.

Launching The Veterans and Citizens Initiative

Though not formal partners, many other veteran and military family organizations are engaged in promoting active citizenship. Some examples include:

- Veterans of Foreign Wars “[Voice of Democracy](#)”, an essay scholarship program that provides high school students with the opportunity to express themselves about democracy and patriotism.
- American Legion [Boys State and Girls State](#), a week-long educational program where rising high school seniors run a mock government and learn the importance of responsible citizenship, leadership, and love of country.
- Blue Star Families [Racial Equity Initiative](#), a multi-dimensional, cross-sector, collective-action effort to improve the service experiences of military families of color.
- The Mission Continues [Service Leadership Corps](#), an annual program of leadership training for veteran leaders to lead service platoons and have an impact in under-resourced communities.
- [Team Rubicon](#) in its many forms, which in its mission statement “utilizes the skills and experiences of military veterans with first responders to rapidly deploy emergency response teams,” but they have broadened that notion to commit to “alleviating human suffering and restoring human dignity.”

There is certainly more work needed to be done. In this moment it falls on American citizens of all political persuasions to renew a common commitment to serving the greater good. The Veterans and Citizens Initiative aims to nurture more opportunities for veterans and military families to join with others - united by our common identity as Americans - in efforts that unify and strengthen our civic culture.



Where We Go From Here

Our work is to promote civic engagement within the veteran and military space. This will take many forms, including highlighting existing initiatives run by veteran and military family organizations that strengthen our civic culture, such as those listed in the previous section. We will also work with veteran and military organizations to incubate and launch new initiatives and projects at the local, state, and national level. Finally, we will work to connect veteran and military family organizations with efforts that are “external” to the community but which serve our common vision of a new civic awakening.

For instance, the [Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship](#), a two-year bipartisan commission that explored how best to respond to the weaknesses and vulnerabilities in our political and civic life, is a monumental effort. Their Commission’s report, released in June 2020, identified six strategies and 31 recommendations that communities, institutions, and individuals can take to promote engaged citizenship. Another effort, [Citizen University](#), designs gatherings, rituals, and workshops that focus on civic power and civic character as the building blocks of powerful citizenship.

These are but two of many efforts which could benefit from additional involvement from the veteran and military family communities. We will serve as a connective tissue, building bridges and fostering connections. We recognize there are challenges we will need to navigate with our partners. Given the crucial work to be done advocating for military and veteran communities, most veteran and military family organizations understandably are deeply hesitant to engage in anything that feels remotely partisan or political. And in the highly polarized landscape there appear fewer spaces which are universally viewed as

truly nonpartisan. Wading into waters of civic engagement could risk controversy. But we are convinced this need not preclude involvement, and in fact, is further evidence of the need for veteran and military family involvement. Our democracy depends upon our ability to engage with one another in civic activities that bring together people of different ideological backgrounds. It just means there must be a thoughtful, inclusive, and fiercely nonpartisan approach that is both substantive and reflective of all Americans.

We also see cultivating new civic engagement as directly aligned with the critical advocacy and support missions of many veteran and military family organizations. Military and veteran advocacy dates back to the Revolutionary War when [Congress failed to pay troops](#). Since then there has been a never-ceasing need to deliver better for those who served and their families. And such initiatives, from the Post 9-11 GI Bill to other initiatives that have provided care for veterans, have often served as rare space of bipartisan cooperation. In this way veteran and military family organizations have long worked toward healthier political discourse and engagement.

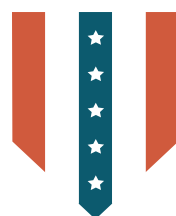
Veteran and military family organizations have also led long-standing efforts to cultivate civic values among the broader American population. For instance, the Boys State (and subsequent Girls State) programs that the American Legion began in the 1930s was an effort to teach democratic governing principles to American youth in hopes of instilling confidence in our governing institutions. We see cultivating new civic engagement as directly aligned to these mandates, and in the same spirit as the Boys State and Girls State programs.

Where We Go From Here

The toxicity in our politics and the profound levels of distrust evident in our country negatively impact efforts to foster enduring bipartisanship, compromise, and progress in our governments, be it local, state, or national. A counter narrative to that is the experience of the military, which, while imperfect, is a model of unity, common purpose, and pride in America. Veterans, and the Americans who support them, take pride in how they led diverse teams, accomplished difficult missions, made hard decisions, and bore painful sacrifices. But they also worked in an honor-based culture that valued integrity and hard work and put the needs of the nation and the larger group over the desires of factions. Cultivating new civic engagement is directly aligned with these ideals of the military, ideals which Americans almost universally support.

In 2021, the Veterans and Citizens Initiative will continue its work to grow the partners working to support the vision of a new civic awakening. We intend to engage and support our partners, from promoting content of these organizations to supporting activities such as service projects, panel discussions, and even advocacy efforts that are in the civic space.

People can get involved, first and most easily, by reading this [“Individual Action Guide”](#), which provides ideas on ways to be civically engaged. Another way to join this effort is to visit the “Get Involved” page on our website thevci.org.



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