The belief that an informed citizenry is essential to the survival of American democracy is as old as the republic itself. Thomas Jefferson emphasized the link, pointing out that "wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights." Some two centuries later, the forty-fourth president, Barack Obama, made a similar point, arguing that "This democracy doesn't work if we don't have an informed citizenry."

All of which raises a few questions: What is an informed citizenry? Why is it so important? And what does it take to become and stay an informed citizen?

First things first. An informed citizen is someone who understands the fundamentals as to how the government and the

economy and society operate, the principal challenges facing the country at home and abroad, and the contending options or policies for dealing with those challenges. An informed citizen is someone who puts himself or herself in a position to weigh what others say or write and contribute their own perspectives. Ideally, this individual would also know something of the country's history and how it came to be what it is today, as it is impossible to understand the present without an appreciation of the past. History also provides lessons for contemporary challenges.

Why is an informed citizenry essential? American democracy is a representative (rather than direct) democracy, in which citizens do not make day-to-day decisions as to what the federal, state, or local government should do with its powers and resources but rather elect individuals to do just that. It is thus a republic; in the words of James Madison, "a government which derives all its powers directly or indirectly from the great body of the people, and is administered by persons holding their offices during pleasure, for a limited period, or during good behavior."

The obvious reason, then, for citizens to be informed is to be able to wisely cast their votes. In almost every instance there are two or more candidates vying for a position, and it is in your self-interest to know enough to determine which of the candidates would be likely to advance or support policies you judge to be desirable. Implicit in this decision is knowing not simply what a candidate stands for but also the likely consequences of the poli-

cies they stand for and oppose so that you are in a position to determine what policy choices make the most sense.

Related to this is the importance of holding officials accountable. Reelection is something to be earned, not a right. And between elections there are other avenues to affect the behavior of elected officials, above all by shaping the context in which they operate. Few public officials want to alienate voters, and organizing rallies and protests, contacting the office of your representative or senator, asking questions at candidate forums, contributing money, and otherwise supporting groups dedicated to particular political outcomes can have a meaningful impact.

Being informed also empowers individuals to have influence over positions the business or organization they work for might take. Or to shape the views of the people in their lives.

By contrast, an uninformed citizenry constitutes a risk to democracy. Those who are uninformed are less likely to be involved if for no other reason than it is difficult to motivate yourself to vote if it is not clear why it is worth it. And an uninformed citizenry is much more vulnerable to being misled by falsehoods and unfounded conspiracy theories or manipulated by politicians who are pursuing their personal interests.

Where does one go to become or remain an informed citizen? In principle, it should be easy, as we are living in an age in which accurate information is more accessible than ever before in human history. In practice, though, it is anything but, as misinformation

is just as abundant as the facts. As a result, becoming an informed citizen is not easy. I suggested earlier that becoming an informed citizen begins with understanding how the government operates. This is the material that ought to be taught in every school in the country. Outside of school, the basics can still be gleaned from a reading of the country's founding documents and a handful of books. What comes to mind are the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist Papers*, along with the best biographies and speeches of major presidents as well as some respected histories and commentaries, such as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. In the "Where to Go for More" section at the end of this book, I have listed some of my favorite books dealing with this country's past and politics. The wisdom in these texts is evergreen, especially since the information they pass along to a reader changes slowly, if at all.

The same cannot be said for issue-related content, which changes all the time. Remaining up to speed requires constant effort, ideally on a daily basis, or, failing that, weekly. There is also no one-stop shopping when it comes to this information; indeed, a principle ought to be that every citizen seeks out more than one source given that any single source is inevitably biased in what it covers or how it covers it. That said, all sources are not equal, and any citizen would do well to read a major newspaper such as the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, and others that have bureaus around the world and cover global developments. Smaller newspapers that cannot afford national and

international bureaus or staffs of their own can still provide useful coverage of local issues. What traditional newspapers have in common is that they have fact-checkers and editors, and they make an effort—admittedly not always successful—to separate the political biases of the paper from the news coverage. There are several quality weekly and monthly magazines and political newsletters, which are also discussed in the "Where to Go for More" section. Public radio and television offer serious coverage of domestic and international news. The nightly news broadcasts on the networks offer some news, the network morning shows less.

We live in a world shaped by a large and growing number of AM, FM, and satellite radio shows; cable and network television channels; podcasts; social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram; websites; and more that often have a narrow or biased take on events and seek to reinforce the views and biases of their select audience. Seek out a range of sources and choose those that traffic in facts rather than falsehoods and conspiracies. Social media can be especially problematic, as people choose communities or follow only those who are like-minded. Misstatements and opinions are often presented as facts when they are anything but. It is not research to visit such sites and accept what they say as gospel.

Given all of this, how do we know when a fact is a fact? It is essential to differentiate among facts, misstatements, opinions, predictions, and recommendations. Facts are assertions that can be demonstrated to be so, measured, and proved. Misstatements

are assertions that can be shown to be false or inaccurate. For the record, there are no alternative facts, just facts and misstatements. Opinions are judgments or assessments, often suggesting why something took place along with its consequences. They must be made from or based on the relevant facts—not just those that fit a certain preference—if they are to hold value. But even then they are not to be equated with facts. Predictions are statements about the future and how it is likely to turn out. Recommendations are statements of preferences about what should be done about a certain problem or situation.

For example: It is a fact that the national debt of the United States is approximately $31 trillion. To say anything else is a misstatement. But to argue that a debt of this scale is something that is dangerous and ought to be reduced, or is something that can safely be maintained, is a matter of analysis. To say the debt will increase to a certain level by a certain date is a prediction. To argue that the debt should be reduced through increased taxation or reduced spending is a recommendation. Informed and reasonable people can and do disagree on everything but the basic facts. The reasons for their different views might reflect assumptions about future economic growth or interest rates or policy priorities. What is clear, though, is that a productive debate over how to view the debt and what, if anything, to do about it can occur only if the debate is based on a common set of facts as to its size.

Or take climate change. That the temperature of the atmosphere has increased 1.1 degrees centigrade (approximately two