"Citizens actively participating in their governance." This idea has been the core principle of citizenship in a democracy since Pericles first articulated it in fifth-century Athens B.C.E. There are two necessary conditions for this kind of citizenship. First, citizens must be able to acquire the information essential to make informed judgments. Second, they must have the means to implement those judgments in the body politic. This classical idea of democracy understands citizenship as the responsibility to preserve the best in the community's tradition and as the duty to work for the community's best possible future.

In the United States today, both the Tea Party and Occupy movements, their differences aside, are efforts to achieve this type of classical active citizenship at a time when big money and big media have so profoundly corrupted our political process that the exercise of true citizenship seems compromised beyond redemption.

Both of these movements raise this essential question: Does voting or any action of the individual citizen really matter in a democracy dominated by: massive financial institutions, often more powerful than the governments that seek to regulate them; bulky, frequently dysfunctional government; and global conglomerates, whether of business or terrorism, that act with impunity beyond the reach of any civil institution?

Each of us has his/her own preferred list of complaints about the current political processes, ranging from the profound to the petty. Here are two concerns that keep me awake at nights worrying about the health of our republic.

Money 2012: It is estimated that the cost of TV advertising for each presidential campaign (includes PACs [political action committees] and Super PACs) in 2012 will be 1 billion dollars. In the 2010 congressional elections, according to the Boston Review, the average U.S. Senate campaign cost about $9.2 million and the average U.S. House campaign was around $1.4 million. Does the cost of running for public office discourage good candidates from participating in our electoral system?

Media 2012: Negative ads have become the norm of our national elections, not the exception—and they work. A CNN report dated Jan. 2, 2012, demonstrates the effectiveness of negative ads in derailing candidates and their campaigns. Sadly, it seems that both the Romney and Obama campaigns have decided to employ negative ads as their primary type of ad rather than ads that present policy. Naively, I had hoped that the vice-presidential candidacy of Paul Ryan would force a discussion of policy issues concerning budget and deficits. It has not. Thus far, the Ryan candidacy has only intensified misleading and abusive rhetoric and the use of negative ads.
In a society that requires obscene amounts of money to run for public office, and in a society in which attack ads destroy candidates regardless of their worth or the worth of their ideas, it is small wonder that 40 percent of our voting age population fails to vote in presidential elections. Many thoughtful, good citizens make the decision to not vote because they understand the forces that render active citizenship almost impossible.

Is it inevitable that our democracy must degenerate into oligarchy (the rule of the few)? And that oligarchy must degenerate into plutocracy (the rule of the rich)?

Neither the Tea Party nor Occupy has been able to create the new models of citizenship that meet the new challenges in our 2012 politics. Both movements seem locked into the rhetoric of failed paradigms of our economy, of our society, of government, of individual liberty, and of community. And, sadly, both movements—which should be allies in this struggle to recover authentic citizenship—are pitted against each other by the very forces they would oppose.

How can we engage the forces defining our politics? What are the ideas and means through which we can re-create the art of citizenship in our present-day society and contribute to the making of our best future?

In the hope of promoting a productive, civil conversation in our contemporary political context, I would like to recommend several books which, in my judgment, present non-partisan ideas for creative, active citizenship.

In Gardens of Democracy (2011) and The True Patriot (2007) Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer, two successful Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, argue that we must abandon the mechanistic models of society and of the individual that dominate our culture. The political divisions of Right, Left, and Center that resulted from the French Revolution in particular and the Enlightenment in general are no longer valid in our post-modern world. Rather, today, the divisions are among competing fundamentalisms, all of which must be shunned in favor of a genuine thinking that re-imagines the idea of citizenship as an organic process within a living organism.

They propose a new paradigm based on the idea of community as an organism and of citizenship as participation in the processes of this organism. We are organisms that require a healthy, dynamic matrix of fellow organisms in order to grow and prosper.

In A Capitalism For The People: Recapturing the Lost Genius of American Prosperity (2012), Luigi Zingales, professor of business in the graduate program at the University of Chicago, argues that capitalism as currently practiced in the United States no longer creates productive wealth: It doesn't create jobs and it doesn't create a vital middle class. Zingales maintains that neither political party has understood the realities of today's markets and that both are debating very old and irrelevant understandings of economics and the wealth of nations.

My final recommendation is Bill Bradley's We Can All Do Better (2012). Bradley, former U.S. senator from New Jersey, shows, in his personal actions in the body politic and in his ideas, how
it is possible to act responsibly in our contemporary political situation, free of ideology and self-righteous rage, open to listening to the other and dedicated to the good of the entire community.

It is my hope that we can create an environment for a mature, active citizenship that frees itself from the blaring, clarion calls of fundamentalisms, secular or religious, that dominate the current presidential campaigns.

It is said that a people get the government they deserve. We deserve better. We can create a garden for our democracy to continue to grow and flourish. We only need to exercise the political will and courage to make it so. Then, perhaps, the nightmarish night sweats of this classical humanist shall transform themselves into sweet, ever so sweet, dreams.

Nick Patricca is professor emeritus at Loyola University Chicago, president of Chicago Network and playwright emeritus at Victory Gardens Theater.

The Lake Shore campus of Loyola University Chicago is hosting "Money, Media and Your Vote" Friday, Oct. 12, 4-6 p.m.

The moderator will be Beth Konrad, senior professional in residence at the university's School of Communication. Panelists will include Newton N. Minow, senior counsel at the law firm of Sidley Austin LLP; Susan S. Sher, executive vice president for corporate strategy and public affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center; and Patricia Widder, who worked at the Chicago Tribune as a reporter and editor for 36 years before retiring last year.

Chicago Network, Gannon Center for Women and Leadership, and Loyola Homecoming Weekend are sponsoring the event. For further information, contact Nick Patricca at 773-338-9416 or nicholas.patricca@gmail.com; also, visit www.chicagonetworkjp.org.