

## Back to Basics Policy 101: Action Steps for Political Involvement Resource Package

Do you have an issue that you are passionate about? Are you looking to make a change in your community or state? Then policy is the place for you! The presidential election tends to draw the most media attention, but it is equally as important to be involved in politics and to vote on a local and a state level. Getting involved in policy is easy, once you know where to look and where to start. This resource package is designed to help you:

- Navigate the world of politics with tips and tricks for involvement.
- Form connections with elected officials and organizations.
- Communicate with your elected officials.
- Find out who is on your ballot and where you can vote.

At the end of this resource you will find a [Glossary of Terms](#), which includes common terms in politics, as well as political terms used in this resource.

### Start Locally

Your state and local elected officials tend to make more decisions about issues that affect our day-to-day lives, so it is crucial to build connections with them if you are hoping to make an impactful change in your community.

#### Finding Your Elected Officials

- [Usa.gov/elected-officials](https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials) will help you find contact information for the President, your U.S. Senators and Congressmen, your State Governors and

Legislators, U.S. Mayors, County Executives, and other Local Government Officials. Simply click on the link, choose the elected official you would like to contact, and then follow the prompts for entering in your geographical information.

- You can find a comprehensive list of your local elected officials by visiting [commoncause.org/find-your-representative](https://www.commoncause.org/find-your-representative) and entering your address. This website will provide you with many of your local elected officials, in addition to your state officials.
- Your state legislature website is also a good resource for finding your representatives. For Minnesota, visit [gis.leg.mn/iMaps/districts](https://gis.leg.mn/iMaps/districts) and enter your address. This website will provide you with your U.S. and State Representatives.

## Local Level Involvement

Local government has many levels, but is often forgotten about when it comes to involvement and awareness. Below are a few ideas for simple involvement with your local government.

- Find your city hall. You can google “[your city, state] city hall.” This should bring you to your city hall webpage where you can find your local elected officials, and the address for city hall should you want to visit. <https://www.lmc.org/page/1/city-directory.jsp> will be helpful in finding your local city council, for *most* Minnesota cities.
- Familiarize yourself with your local government’s website. This site will likely have information about the elected officials, how to contact them, who serves on what local boards and commissions, as well as meeting dates, times, and locations.
- You can find your local boards and commissions by googling “boards and commissions in [your city, state].” Knowing what board or commission does what will help you find the one that most closely connects with your issue or concern.
- City council or town hall meetings often have time set aside for public input. These meetings are usually under-attended, but are a great opportunity for you to personally meet your elected officials and speak to them directly about any concerns you have. Meeting dates and times can usually be found on your local community calendar posted on your community website, bulletin board, or in the local paper.

## State Level Involvement

State government is larger than local government, but it is still possible to be involved! Easy state government involvement can include attending legislative meetings or meeting with your legislator. State legislators typically have a larger staff than local legislators. So, you may meet or communicate with a staffer instead of the legislator themselves. This is okay! Legislators seek their staffers' advice and opinions on many issues, so if you meet with a staffer, they will be able to communicate your concerns to your legislator.

The Minnesota Legislative Session typically runs January to May. During this time, legislators will be in St. Paul at the State Capitol regularly. Constituents can attend hearings or inquire about providing testimony. You can find session meetings to attend by viewing the combined Minnesota Legislature Calendar here:

<https://www.leg.state.mn.us/cal?type=day&d1>

If you plan to attend a legislative meeting, it may be helpful to familiarize yourself with the bills that are being discussed. You can use this website to find past and current bills, track their status, and receive updated alerts:

<https://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/legis>

You may also choose to write an email or a letter, or meet with your legislator in person. Tips for doing so are included later in this resource package.

## Tips for Speaking with Elected Officials

It may seem intimidating at first to speak with your elected official. Remember, they were elected to serve you. They want to hear from you about your concerns and your ideas! Below is a general step-by-step guide for speaking with your elected official. The same guide can be altered for emails or letters to your elected official as well.

- Once you find your elected official using one of the links provided above, send an email requesting a meeting time. State what you are hoping to discuss, and suggest some times you would be available.
- Introduce yourself as their constituent.

- Explain what you hope to see or hear them do as your elected official. If you are supporting or opposing a specific piece of legislation, know the bill number and topic.
- Try to limit the focus of the conversation (or letter/email) to one topic, issue, or piece of legislation.
- Share your perspective or concern. It may be helpful to share why you are qualified to speak to this issue. For example, if the legislation you are discussing addresses training for law enforcement on speaking with victims/survivors or sexual violence, and you are an advocate who has helped victims/survivors navigate the legal system, you may have a unique perspective into areas of improvement.
- Be sure to include a plan, suggestion, or new idea that you have for addressing the issue. It is not always helpful for elected officials if you simply state the problem.
- Listen to your elected official's perspective on the issue you are discussing.
- Don't be afraid to ask them questions if you have any.
- Ask for a response or follow-up, this is especially important if you are writing a letter or an email. Requesting a response increases the likelihood that your comment will move past a general staffer to the elected official.
- Thank the legislator or their staffer for their time, both in person and with a follow-up note or email.
- If you are part of an advocacy group or an organization, invite local staffers to events being held. This helps them to get to know the community and become more familiar with the work you are doing.

MNCASA has previously created a policy resource, "[Meeting with your Legislators for Beginners](#)" ([bit.ly/MNCASA\\_MeetingLegislators](http://bit.ly/MNCASA_MeetingLegislators)) that has other tips and information that may be helpful when preparing to meet with a legislator.

## Be an Educated Voter

While the presidential election may be the biggest election, it is so important to vote in each and every election! It is equally important to be an educated voter.

You can find your polling place, the districts for your precinct, candidates, and questions that will be on the ballot in the election at [pollfinder.sos.state.mn.us](http://pollfinder.sos.state.mn.us).

The website will typically include links to each candidates' webpage where you can read more on their stances on various issues.

For more information on the national/federal election, visit [isidewith.com](https://www.isidewith.com). This website is not affiliated with any particular political party, candidate or interest group making it a great resource for information on all parties and popular political issues. There is also a very detailed quiz asking about your personal stances on various political issues. Your responses are organized and results show which candidate and political party your views best align with. Of course, the results are not intended to tell you who to vote for, rather to help you better understand the candidates and how they stand on issues that are important to you.

## Action Steps for Involvement

If you are looking for small, simple ways to become more involved, we have included some suggestions below!

- Sign up to work the voting polls on Election Day. You can contact your town registrar or local election office for more information on this.
- Don't be afraid to partake in peaceful protests for issues you feel strongly about. This can help bring the issue to an elected official's attention, gives you the opportunity to use your voice, and allows you to meet others you share mutual interests with.
- Support an organization that already does work around an issue that you care about. Your support can be shown through volunteering, fundraising, donating, signing petitions, or raising awareness of the issue on social media.
- Engage in open and honest conversations about issues you care about with others. It is good to voice your opinion, but remember to listen and be open to hearing other people's opinions, which may differ from your own.
- Contact officials either by letter, email or phone to get your opinion heard.

## Lobbying

If you are affiliated with a specific organization or nonprofit, check to see if there are already lobbying efforts in place for the issue you are passionate about. Be sure to know your organization's lobbying policies. Some organizations do not allow lobbying on work time, so you may have to lobby for your causes on your personal time.

# Glossary of Terms

Most definitions were adapted from [usa.gov/voting-and-election-definitions](https://www.usa.gov/voting-and-election-definitions)

**Absentee Ballot:** A voting ballot filed when a voter cannot be physically present on Election Day at their polling place.

**Attorney General:** They are in charge of the state's legal business. They provide state officials with advice regarding the meaning of laws. They will represent the state in court if the state is part of a lawsuit.

**Ballot:** A list of candidates and proposed laws to be chosen by voters.

**Caucus:** A meeting held by party members to decide an issue, often used to refer to meetings where a party chooses a candidate to support.

**City Council:** The legislative body that governs a city, town, municipality, or other local government area.

**Congressman/Congresswoman (Representative):** A congressman/congresswoman serves a specific district and is elected for a 2 year term. The number of representatives per state is proportionate to the state's population. Responsibilities of congressmen/congresswomen include writing and passing bills, introducing resolution bills between the House and the Senate, and serving on committees.

**Constituent:** A person who lives, works, or pays taxes in the area that a politician represents.

**District:** A geographical area that an elected official represents and serves.

**Elected Official:** An individual who becomes an official through an election.

**Election Official/Poll Worker/Election Clerk/Election Judge:** A person who monitors the voting process at a polling place to ensure that voters follow state requirements, certify that the election was conducted legally, and provide the official vote count from the polling place.

**General Election:** The final election for a political office that has a limited list of candidates to choose from.

**Governor:** The chief executive of each state. They are elected by the people of the state, and are responsible for leading the state government, setting priorities, making government appointments, and implementing laws that meet the needs of their state.

**Incumbent:** The person currently holding political office.

**Legislator:** A person who makes laws or is a member of a legislative body.

**Lieutenant Governor:** Presides over the state senate and is the successor of the governor should the governor die, resign, or be removed from office.

**Lobbying:** An attempt to influence an elected official on an issue or piece of legislation.

**Mayor:** The elected head of a city, town, or other municipality.

**Midterm Election:** Federal election that occurs between Presidential elections where voters elect members of Congress.

**Nominee:** The final candidate chosen by a political party to represent them in a certain election.

**Platform:** The collection of beliefs, legislative goals, morals, and ideals held by a political party or candidate that typically outlines their principles and plans to govern.

**Political Party:** A group with a certain set of principles or a platform intended to be used to govern and legislate a specific way.

**Polling Place/Polling Station:** The location where you cast your vote. Polling places can be at schools, churches, town halls, community centers, or other public places. Your polling place is determined based on your legal address.

**Precinct/Election District/Voting District:** Cities, counties, or geographic areas are divided up by address into precincts in order to assign a polling place for voters.

**President:** The highest elected officer. The President of the United States is the elected commander in chief of the United States.

**Primary Election:** An election that determines which candidates from each party will receive the party's nomination and be the sole candidate of the party in the later general election.

**Registered Voter:** Individual who is qualified, has applied, and has been added to the voter registration system in their area.

**Sample Ballot:** An example of what the official ballot will look like on Election Day. Sample ballots will show voters what candidates will be on the ballot and help voters make their decisions before they arrive at the polling place.

**Secretary of State:** They keep state records and carry out election laws

**Special Election:** An election held outside of the regular election schedule that occurs if an officeholder dies, resigns, or is impeached, and the position needs to be filled.

**Senator:** An elected member of the Senate who serves a 6 year term. Each state elects 2 senators. Some of the roles of a senator include writing and passing laws, representing their constituents, approving presidential appointments, and approving treaties with other countries.

**State Auditor:** They monitor the state's financial records and ensure that public funds from the state treasury are not used without authorization.

**State Treasurer:** They are in charge of handling all of the state funds. They may supervise the collection of taxes and pay the state's bills.

**Term:** The set length of time that someone can serve in elected office.

**Term Limit:** The total amount of terms someone can serve in a particular position.

**Town Hall Meeting or Debate:** A setting where candidates running for office can answer questions from voters. Sometimes a moderator is present to ensure candidates follow the set rules during debates.