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Stand Up and Speak Out

Nine Fine Ways to Get Involved in the Political System

The political system in the United States (and most other countries) is all about power. Simple things like who has the power, who doesn?t, and how to use it to make change or keep things the way that they are.

Too often too many people -- including youth, people of color, LGBTQ folks, and low-income individuals -- get shut out of the political system that can provide the most change for their respective communities. To help make sure that things like equality, fairness, and social justice are REAL in America, you need to get educated, get active, and get INVOLVED.

1. **Learn the System & Make Connections.**
Find out how the political system works?not just in Washington D.C. or in Sacramento?but also right where you live. Get involved in local politics. Educate yourself about how the system works, who makes the decisions, how those decisions affect people?s lives, and where the money goes. For example, the kinds of decisions that are made by your local school board members have a

direct impact on the curriculum you are taught and the rules you have to follow in school. Knowing the system is essential before you can make change. Once you know who is making the decisions, you have the ability to design the action plan for the change you?d like to see happen.

2. **Investigate Your Community & Learn About the Issues.**
Take a look around your community. Start figuring out what works?or doesn?t work?in order to identify the issues that deeply affect people?s lives and how they are connected to issues of power and the political system. For example, are there lots of kids and families in your neighborhood who go hungry? Does your school have clean bathrooms and enough supplies for all students? Talk to your friends and family, read the newspaper, attend community meetings, visit city council and/or school board meetings, etc. Pay attention to what?s going on where you live.

3. **Speak Out! Testify, Lobby, Comment.**
There are many different avenues to speaking and reaching out to lawmakers and others who make policy decisions. These people in power play a role in the rules we are expected to follow, but you have a voice and the ability to organize other community members to effect change. Become an advocate ? represent the needs and views of people who are not able to be there and speak for themselves. Don?t be afraid to speak out because politicians want to hear from their constituents about the impact of the laws and policies they decide on.

Lobbying ? There are two different kinds of lobbying. Direct lobbying involves directly asking a policymaker to support or not support a specific bill or measure. Grassroots lobbying can take the form of writing letters, phone calls, etc. to inform a policymaker about an issue that you are concerned about and explain how it is affecting others and what you would like to see them do about this particular issue.

Testifying or Commenting ? This usually means addressing people with decision-making power at events like public hearings (i.e. school board meetings, committee meetings).

4. **Pick Up a Pen.**
Writing a letter to a policymaker or an administrator in charge of a government agency or school is a great way of making your voice heard. For example, legislators count how many letters they receive on an issue and use those numbers to estimate how many people are concerned about it. Personal, handwritten letters are especially effective because people understand they take more time to write. Lawmakers pay most attention to letters from people living inside their respective districts, so don?t forget to include your address.

5. **Make Your Voice Louder By Using the Media.**
Get your message out to more people by getting news sources like newspapers, blogs, or TV stations to report on your issue and what you are trying to accomplish. An especially influential strategy is writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, which can be done through a written letter you mail in or a letter you submit online, depending on the newspaper. People, including decision-makers, pay attention to and are influenced by what the media says, and they always read the letters to the editor section of the paper.

Don?t forget?you can BE the media too! Start your own news blog, start your own show on your school?s TV station, or write and pass out your own underground newspaper. The ability to communicate, using the free press as our medium of communication, is another example of power.

6. **Unite & Organize!**
You are probably not the only person willing to fight for what?s right. It?s true what people say?there is POWER in NUMBERS. Stand together and combine your voice into one loud, strong tool for social change. By uniting with other GSA clubs and other non-LGBT groups, you can share resources and increase your visibility. Don?t forget?it?s often much harder to ignore 100 people than it is to ignore just one person.

7. **Vote! Vote! Vote!**
This is one of the easiest ways to get involved in the political system and the democratic process. For a variety of reasons, the folks most often shut out of the system in America are often the folks voting the least. To build power and strength for these groups, this must change.

Even if you are not old enough to vote yourself or are not allowed to vote, learn about the candidates and the issues and help to influence those around you to cast their votes for justice and equality. Help register people to vote. But don?t forget that voting is often not enough. There are many different things you can do in addition to voting when it comes to making change. Stay active!

8. **Get Elected!**
In order to make sure our needs are getting met by the people in power, this sometimes means you need to become one of the people in power. The people who represent us should ideally know and understand who we are. We need to take part in deciding who gets to be in power. This extends beyond voting. Work to support (or become) the people who are responsible for making local, state, or national policy decisions. Tactics you should consider include researching political candidates and their opinions, learning about the electoral process, and volunteering at a local lawmaker?s office to see how things work from the inside.

9. **Take Direct Action!**
There is more than just one way to make change happen. Direct action is a kind of political activism that usually involves directly confronting and exposing the social wrongs that are happening. Or direct action can also entail addressing the people in power and demanding they address problems immediately. Direct action tactics such as guerilla theater, sit-ins, and protest rallies are often meant to attract lots of public awareness and change many people?s minds at once. (Definition adapted from The Ruckus Society.)

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