

~~Can~~ You ^{can} make a difference? !

Grassroots politics begins at home: A Toolkit for getting started in your community

Are you upset with the direction of our government and our country? Do you want to see new leadership and better policies? *Do you feel it's time to "do something"—but you just don't know where to begin?*

This toolkit may help you. It gives you tools to get involved and begin making a difference in the political future of our state and nation. You can use these in your own community, with people you know and talk to every day. Grass roots efforts grow “blade by blade!”

Whether you want to work on political campaigns, promote a friend to run for office, raise awareness about issues you care about, or organize volunteers to clean up the local creek, this toolkit provides you with proven ways to get started.

You can make a difference!

Here's what you will find inside the toolkit:

Becoming more informed

- learn more about the issues you care about
- get information about your elected officials
- check your facts

Speaking out effectively

- write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper
- start a letter-writing or e-mail campaign
- write a neighbor-to-neighbor letter
- call a radio talk show
- use a blog
- meet your elected representative

Finding and working with others

- create and use an e-mail list
- how to run a meeting
- sponsor a letter-writing get-together
- hold a coffee
- organize a political book or film club
- join or start a meet up
- find other organizations to work with
- start your own grassroots organization
- work for a candidate
- organize a precinct

A list of useful resources is included at the end of this toolkit.

To download the toolkit go to www.grassroots-tools.org

To contact the authors go to grassrootstools@yahoo.com

Visit our Café Press Shop at www.cafepress.com/grassrootstools

Becoming More Informed

You will feel more comfortable and be more effective when you talk about a specific issue or candidate if you are informed and your information is accurate. Fortunately, there are many sources you can use and many ways to become knowledgeable. *Here are some ideas to get you started.*

Participate in local meetings. One way to learn about issues is to attend local meetings of organizations like the ones below. Many are open to the public. If you are not ready to speak out, just listen – you can learn a lot.

County Councils

Civic or Citizens Associations

Board of Education

Parent and Teacher Associations (PTA)

Planning and Zoning Commissions

Not linked to the world-wide web? *Here are some other ideas:*

At your local library you can find newspapers, magazines, or newsletters on topics that interest you. Look for books on political or other issues.

Visit your local bookstore – it may sponsor discussions with local authors.

Look for film and television reviews of upcoming documentaries and programs on current affairs.

Check the bulletin board at your local library for notices of **meetings you** may be interested in.

You can also get connected to the web at the library.

Linked to the world-wide web? You are in luck. There are lots of resources available to you. We have included some below to get you started, but you can also use Google (www.google.com) or other search engines. In the “search” box, type in the topic that interests you, for example, “social security reform,” “progressive political groups,” or “women’s health care.” You can also go directly to the web sites for your political party, elected officials, or other organizations of interest to become better informed.

Here are some specific sites that may help you:

Your Elected Officials –

www.capwiz.com/pfaw/home/ [Enter your zip code to find your elected officials and their voting records]

The Issues –

These sites will provide you with information on specific issues

www.pfaw.org [People for the American Way]

www.americanprogress.org [Center for American Progress]

www.lww.org [The League of Women Voters]

Check Your Facts –

Check on the facts being used by politicians and others

www.factcheck.org [The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania]

Speaking Out Effectively

There are several easy ways to express your views publicly. When you speak out, you gain confidence in yourself, and you give others the courage to speak out as well. Write or call in about issues you care about – maybe Social Security, the war in Iraq, or some local educational or environmental issue that concerns you. If elections are coming up, you may want to express support for a candidate. If a local issue really concerns you, think about testifying at a local public meeting. Speaking out is something you can do on your own, right now!

Each of the ideas on the following pages works as well with email as with old-fashioned letters. In fact, when you write to members of the U. S. Congress in Washington, D.C., it is better to use email, as their paper mail is extremely slow. Some newspapers also prefer an email format for letters to the editor. Information about how to locate addresses for elected officials and for newspapers and other media is in the “Useful Resources” section of this toolkit.

Whatever topic or type of communication you choose, these tips will help:

- *Choose a topic you know something about.* (To get more information see “Useful Resources”)
- *Be clear and concise. Long letters don’t get read.*
- *Double check your facts and your spelling.*
- *Use personal stories whenever appropriate. People relate to them easily.*
- *You may not think you’re a great communicator – but just think about talking or writing to one person you’d like to influence, and it will be easier.*

Write a Letter to the Editor

Did you know that the letters to the editor section is one of the most popular sections of the newspaper? If your letter gets published, your views will reach a lot of people. Even if your letter doesn’t get published, it will make the editors aware of what is on the minds of their readers. This can influence their news coverage and editorials. *Here are some tips on writing a letter to the editor.*

Make your letter timely and relevant. Your letter should relate to a recent editorial or article in that newspaper. To make this clear, refer to the editorial or article in your letter (for example, “Re: Editorial on ‘Defense Spending’, on April 26, 2005”). Send your letter as soon as possible, preferably within a few days of the date that the article or editorial appeared in the paper.

Where to send your letter. You can write to your local newspaper or even a national newspaper, but you have a far greater chance of being published locally. Find instructions about where to send your letter in the newspaper itself, usually on the editorial page or on pages two or three of the paper’s main section. Or, you can check their website. If you don’t know the address of your local newspaper, this website may help: http://www.newspapers.com/usa_news.htm.

Address your letter to the editor. Reading the other letters to the editor in the newspaper will show you the expected format

Keep your letter short and concise. It works best if you have one topic for your letter. Published letters are usually short—less than 250 words. A good letter follows the following format:

Paragraph 1 – Explain why you are writing in a sentence or two.

Paragraph 2 – Back up what you say with some facts or your personal experience in two or three sentences. This engages the reader and is interesting to the editors.

Paragraph 3 – Give your conclusion; state why you think this topic is important.

While you can base your letter on a sample letter from another source, your own views and words will have more weight. Talk about other people's ideas but do not attack anyone personally. If you do, your letter is not likely to get published.

Sign your letter. You should include your real name and address and your daytime telephone number at the end of your letter, in case the newspaper needs to reach you. The newspaper may want to confirm that you really are the person who sent the letter. If you send your letter by email, you should include your email address. Do not send your letter in an email attachment, since that is not likely to be read.

Start a Letter Writing or Email Campaign

A letter writing campaign means that many people send their own letters or emails to one individual or organization about the same issue. It is a good tool to use when the views of many citizens can affect a specific outcome – like a school board's vote on sex education policy, or the state assembly's vote on a bill. To be most effective, each letter should be concise, personal, and signed individually. A letter writing campaign also must be timely! Letters need to reach the decision makers before they make their decision.

A letter writing campaign is easy to start. If you use emails, it's even easier.

Here's what to do:

- To find others to join your campaign, use your email list, make calls to like-minded friends, or organize a letter writing get together (described in the "Working with Others" section of this toolkit).
- Decide who should be receiving these letters and be sure to give their correct address – email and/or postal –to everyone you contact.
- Write a sample letter to make it easier for others to write their own letters. If you don't do that, give them useful websites or facts to put in their own letters.
- Let the other letter writers know the time frame and when letters will count the most.
- Encourage each person you contact to ask someone else to write a letter also – that way you can double your effectiveness!

Write A Neighbor-to-Neighbor Letter

A neighbor-to-neighbor letter is one letter signed by many people. It is you and other members of your community – your neighbors, fellow parents, or fellow veterans, for example - reaching out to others may share your concerns. The purpose of this kind of letter is to influence readers by what the letter says AND by the number of people who sign it.

You don't have to know everyone who will get the letter, but everyone who gets it should recognize the names of at least a few of those who have signed it. This is the personal touch that gives a neighbor-to-neighbor letter its impact. A neighbor-to-neighbor letter can ask people to vote for a candidate or an issue, or it can just raise awareness so people will be open to action later.

Here's what to do:

Let's say you have decided to support a particular candidate and you want others to support him or her also. Write the best letter of support you can. Show it to others and ask for their ideas.

Circulate it to your friends and others who might be willing to co-sign it (e-mail works especially well for this), and ask them to sign it. Ask if they know others who will sign it. Twenty, even fifty or sixty names, are not too many! You don't need actual signatures; just type in the names of those who have agreed to "sign" it.

Make enough copies of your letter to distribute to your target audience. You can hand deliver it in your neighborhood, hand it out at school or at church, or mail it. If there is a public event—a school fair, sports event or church bazaar – hand it out there, too. Sometimes you can put letters on windshields in a parking lot. Your goal is to get your idea – backed by the signatures of many others—as widely distributed as possible.

Call a Radio Talk Show

Another way to make your voice heard is to call one of the over 5,000 local, national, and syndicated radio talk shows. Before you call in, listen to the show to get a feel for its tone and the topics discussed. Many of these shows want to hear your views only on that day's topic. Only an estimated 2% of listeners call in to these shows, so go for it!

Here are some pointers to get you started.

How do I find out about radio talk shows in my area? If you are not familiar with radio talk shows in your area, or a show doesn't provide good call-in information on the air, go to www.radiotalk.org. This website lists talk radio stations, shows and hosts, their location on the radio dial, and links to their websites. Using the internet, you will undoubtedly find others. Also, many organizations and candidates will provide you with a list of radio shows. Some give you talking points. For example, in Maryland, you can go to www.mddems.org to find out about the Maryland Democratic Party's radio truth squad.

Get ready before you call. Once you select a show, listen to it before you place your call so you get to know their style. Know what you want to say before you call. Write down your key points so you won't forget them in the excitement of getting on the air.

Calling in: Relax and listen to the show while you wait. Keep the volume low so it can't be heard in the background.

Talking to the screener who answers your call: Your call will probably be answered by a screener, who will want to know your name and the city or area you are calling from before you go on the air. They may also want to know what side of an issue you are on. Just answer their questions and be friendly and lively.

Talking on Air: Talk to the host in a friendly way. Be prepared with new facts or ideas, be concise, and quickly get to your point. State your views firmly, but don't argue with the host. Be polite, even if the host isn't. *Remember, your audience is the listeners, not the host!*

Use a Blog

So, you've heard about blogging and want to try it, but don't really know what it is or where to begin. Many traditional journalists (in TV, radio, magazines and newspapers) believe that blogs and other new media tools (like photocasting and Podcasting) are dramatically changing the way information is being shared. If you'd like to participate in this new forum and add your voice, this will get you started.

What is a blog? Blog is short for "web log." It is an electronic "place" on the web for a blogger to share his or her thoughts. By creating or joining a blog, you join a "virtual community" that enables people to share their views without meeting face to face.

How do I start my own blog? One way to create your own blog is to use the materials provided by a company called Blogger. Blogger was a small company that was recently bought by Google. On their website, www.blogger.com, Blogger claims you can create your own blog in less than five minutes for free, and get technical support if you need it. Their site is user friendly. Check it out for yourself.

What do I do with my blog? On your blog, you post (or type) what you want to say from time to time. Keeping your blog up to date is a good idea if you want people to read your blog. You can decide whether to accept comments from others about what you have posted. Most bloggers like to hear from their readers because that's the fun of having a blog. Although you can delete comments you don't like (since you control the content of the blog), most bloggers prefer to post their responses to comments they receive because that is part of the dialogue. Finally, bloggers usually provide links to other people's blogs on their own blog. If your blog is good, others may link to your blog, too, so you will get more visitors.

How do I join someone else's blog? A web search will help you find blogs you might want to participate in. Each blogger sets the rules about posting or joining that blog, so you'll have to check the blog itself to find out what the rules are. Most blogs want people to look at them so access is free. Some blogs, though, require you to subscribe and even pay subscription fees so they can raise money to support their blog. Others have paid advertising for this purpose.

What is a blogger network? Blogger networks are places on the web where groups of blogs are posted, so that a viewer can locate related blogs. Many blogger networks have rules that the bloggers must follow.

Meet with Your Elected Representative

If you really want to make your views known, you can arrange to meet with your elected representatives either by yourself or with a small group. No matter what their position, whether mayor or senator, your approach will be the same. You want to build a relationship with your representative so that in future they will welcome your thoughts. Always be polite but persistent and don't feel intimidated, they are there to represent you because you are one of their constituents.

Here are some tips:

- Arrange an appointment. You may be asked what you want to discuss so that they can be prepared. Depending upon their position you may meet with the official him/herself, or one of their aides.
- Before the meeting
 - Decide exactly what you want to discuss. If several people are going and more than one person wants to speak, try to avoid repetition. Have each one decide in advance what their key points are.
 - Research the topic.
 - Research your representative – know where he or she stands on your issues.
 - Be prepared with a list of your key points, which you may want to leave with them.
 - If you have found some good supporting material, an article perhaps, then take that to leave with them, too.
- The meeting
 - Dress appropriately – how you look does make a difference
 - Start by making a personal connection with your representative or their assistant
 - Get down to business:
 - explain why you are there
 - what you see as the critical issues
 - how you see them making a difference
 - give them any materials you have brought with you
 - Thank them for their time and service
- After the meeting – write a personal note. In that you can briefly recap your major points.

Finding and Working With Others

Many people prefer to work alone, but working with others builds a community and it's fun!

To work with others effectively, you need to listen well. In recent years, some of us have worried that fewer people are willing to listen to others whose views are different from their own. Whether it is talk radio, the web, or public meetings, far too many people are simply eager to get their point of view and message out... even if it takes shouting to do it! To encourage a spirit of openness, keep in mind the following principles of dialogue and democracy as you work with others:

- *Listen with respect to each person in equal measure.*
- *Set aside your own judgments and reactions.*
- *Speak from your beliefs, values, and experiences.*
- *Ask questions to get a discussion going.*
- *Move together toward resolution and consensus.*

Working with others provides a way for people to become involved and encourages those who might not feel confident enough to act on their own. This toolkit includes a number of ways to work with others. No matter which type of activity you try, these practical tips may be helpful when you meet with others.

- *Be friendly. A friendly attitude can change someone's mind.*
- *Spread a wide net. Contact lots of people since only a fraction will be able to participate.*
- *Get new people involved right away before they lose interest. People can get frustrated and leave if someone doesn't tell them what to do.*
- *Have a "fact sheet" for newcomers that explains what your goals are, how you hope to achieve them, and include definitions of terms, or acronyms that people may not be familiar with.*
- *Make available brochures or handouts that might include some recommended books for working with others. For example, *The One-Hour Activist: The 15 Most Powerful Actions...* by Christopher Kush; *The Activist's Handbook* by Randy Shaw; and *Organizing for Social Change: Manual for Activists* by many authors.*

How to Run a Meeting

To keep people engaged and energized you will want to be able to run an effective meeting. Here are some tips on how to do that:

- Let everyone know well in advance the date, location and time of the meeting
- Collect names, email addresses and telephone numbers for everyone
- Provide nametags and light refreshments
- Allow 10 minutes at the start of the meeting for everyone to get settled
- Introduce newcomers and be sure they get a fact sheet
- Prepare an agenda and stick to it. A good agenda will include:
 - Specific time allotted for each topic. Be sure that people who are making a report keep it short
 - Action items for each topic

- Specific “action” tasks so that everyone can sign up and become involved
- At least 15 minutes at the end of the meeting for new topics
- Be polite, but firm during the meeting so that you can maintain your schedule. New ideas should be kept for the end of the meeting.
- At the end of the meeting be sure everyone knows what their “action” item is and decide what you will address at the next meeting

Create and Use an Email List

To create an email list, start with the address book on your computer, if you have one. This can be the start of an email list that you can use for your grassroots activities. You can also call people and ask them if they’d like to be part of an email group about political or local issues, although if you send too many emails, people may want to be removed from your list. It is important to not give your list to anyone else without the permission of the people on your list. Once you start you may find that others will ask to be added to your list. You are off and running!

Making your list easy to use: Put all the email addresses into a “group” in your address book. Give the group a name. The name will appear in your list of addresses, but when you click on it, all the individual email addresses will come up.

It’s best to send to each person individually, so learn the mechanics of sending “blind copies” on your particular email program rather than putting everyone’s address in the “send to” box. That way, recipients do not get a list of everyone else’s email addresses.

Using your list: What can you use a list for? Here are a few ideas:

- Encourage others to get involved.
- Organize events.
- Post a list of upcoming events in your area.
- Share information.
- Forward information. Many political parties and political action groups regularly send out informative, *easy-to-read emails that can be forwarded on – try to be sure that the organization is reliable before you do this!*

Sponsor a Letter Writing Get Together

This is a fun way to get together with like-minded people to do something that will advance a cause. The letters people write can be used in different ways. People can get together to write letters to their friends, neighbors, or relatives on behalf of a candidate or to express views or support an idea. Or, they can get together to start a letter writing campaign in which the letters all go to the same place (See “Start a Letter Writing or Email Campaign”). Either way, the letters are effective because they are personal.

Here’s what to do:

- Invite a group of people to your home or to meet for coffee someplace where you can sit for a while. They should be people who share similar views about an issue or a candidate.
- If the purpose is to write to friends and relatives, ask everyone to bring their holiday card lists, ad-

dress books, school/church directories, or other lists along with some writing cards or paper and a pen. You should have extras for those who forget!

- To help people get started, prepare a sample letter ahead of time and have copies available at your meeting.
- After talking for ten or fifteen minutes about the letters and their purpose, ask people to sit and write their letters. They can either write original letters or use variations of your sample – whatever seems most natural for them.
- To make sure they really get sent, it would be a good idea to provide the postage, but that is up to you.
- Since people probably won't get through their lists, you can urge them to write more letters at home on their own.

Host a Grassroots Coffee

Do you want to build connections with neighbors, friends, and acquaintances who share your interest in local and national issues? Do you want to work with others on a specific issue in your community, for example the school curriculum? Perhaps you want to raise awareness about an issue such as Supreme Court nominations. Maybe you have a particular candidate you are particularly excited about. All of these are good reasons to host a coffee. Our own experience is that a coffee's informal setting where people can relate their own personal stories and concerns is a great way to encourage others to become informed and involved.

Here are some tips to help you get started.

I. Get Ready

- Decide why you want to hold a coffee and what your topic will be.
- Decide whether you will host it alone or with a friend(s). Holding it with others can be a lot more fun.
- Decide if you want to invite a guest (a local politician, member of a grassroots organization, or other individual), who knows about a particular topic you want to discuss. Their schedule may determine your date.
- Set the date, time, and location and decide on simple refreshments.
- Develop your guest list - include friends, relatives, neighbors, and colleagues. Invite enough people so you will have at least 10-15 at your coffee.
- Send out your invitations - you can do this by mail, email, fax, phone, or hand delivery. Urge people to respond at least one week in advance and be sure to follow up the invitations with a reminder by telephone or email.
- Gather the materials you will need, including
 - A sign-in sheet so you can get contact information.
 - Name tags.
- With your topic in mind, you may want to gather materials that you think would make your discussions more meaningful, such as information on specific topics, organizations, elected officials, or candidates. You could include press clippings, a reading list (see the Political Book Clubs section), or web sites (see "Useful Resources").

II. At Your Coffee

- Set up a welcome table with name tags and a sign in sheet for addresses, telephone numbers, and emails.
- Set out simple refreshments.
- As the host, and leader of the discussion, you may want to follow an agenda to keep things moving along. Here are some ideas:
 - Introduce yourself and explain why you are hosting a Coffee.
 - Allow others to introduce themselves and talk about why they came.
 - Introduce your guest, if you have one, and the topic(s) you want to talk about. Have available the information you have gathered.
 - Give everyone a chance to talk, but try to keep the conversation focused. (See the section on “Finding and Working With Others” for ideas.)
 - At the end, you may want to encourage each person to commit to taking some positive action, such as hosting their own Coffee, joining an organization to get involved, talking to their friends, or learning more about a specific issue.

III. After Your Coffee

Be sure to send a note or email thanking your guests for coming
Prepare a contact (email) list for those who want to stay in touch

Host a Grassroots Book or Film Club

A grassroots book or film club is like a coffee in that it's a great way to discuss issues and ideas in an informal setting. There are a couple of differences, though. The first is that the Club generally meets once a month and the discussion focuses on a specific book or film. (In our neighborhood one group is starting out with Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas*.) The other difference is that at the end of each meeting the members agree to effect change by taking a specific action. This can be as simple as asking someone with opposing views out to dinner, marching in a protest, attending a community meeting, participating in voter registration, or cleaning up the local stream.

You can organize your own Club as you want, but here are some tips from others who have started one.

I. Get Ready

Discuss the idea of a club with friends, family, and neighbors and get together to organize your group. Set a day, time and location (meetings usually last about 1 1/2 - 2 hours]. Don't forget to allow time for people to socialize, too.

At the first meeting:

- Allow everyone a chance to talk about why they want to join the club and what they hope to get out of it.
- Create an initial list of books and/or films that you will discuss over the next three months. Perhaps you know a local author that would like to attend a meeting.
- If your group wants to discuss a film you might think about a longer meeting at which you would show the film first and then discuss it.

- Ask one person to lead each meeting. This can be the person who recommended the chosen book. This shouldn't be daunting, since some books provide reader's guides that can be used to create talking points. One example is *God's Politics* by Jim Wallis (www.sojournal.net/special/items/GP_studyguide.pdf)

II. A Club Checklist

- Prepare name tags and a sign in sheet for addresses, telephone numbers, and emails.
- Provide simple refreshments.
- Create your agenda. Like the Coffees this helps to keep things running smoothly. Here are some suggestions on ways to run the meeting.
- At the start, some people may want to talk about the action they proposed to take at the end of the last meeting.
- The leader of the book/film discussion may want to use talking points they got from the reader's guide or prepared themselves.
- Everyone should be encouraged to participate. Relating the book's themes to personal experiences can make the discussion particularly meaningful.

At the end of the meeting:

- Members may want to discuss what particular action they will take before the next meeting. Remember, this can be as simple finding someone with opposing views to talk to, or attending a political or community meeting.
- Select the book or film for your next meeting.
- Encourage everyone to bring a friend the next time. This helps to spread the word on how much fun a Club can be. Perhaps they will start their own.

III. Need Some Help?

Here are some places to look for advice on Book Clubs:

<http://vapoliticalbooks.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.progressivebookclubs.blogspot.com/>

To get ideas for books or films talk to your friends, see if your newspaper has reviews, look for articles and reviews in magazines, or check these web sites:

www.democracycellproject.net/bookroom.intro1.html

http://www.americabeyondcapitalism.com/reading_list.pdf

Join or Start a Meetup

Howard Dean successfully used the concept of meetups in his presidential campaign. Today meetups are local gatherings, usually monthly, enabling people with shared interests to get together, discuss issues, and take action in their communities.

How to Join a Meetup

You can join a meetup in your area by going to www.meetup.com or www.democracyforamerica.com/meetup/ to find one nearest to where you live or work. Simply enter your zip code. Or, check libraries and community notice boards.

Meetups are usually in the evening, in a convenient location such as a café, library, community center, or someone's living room.

Meeting topics are often posted in advance. Sometimes interesting speakers are invited. Meetups are informal and new members are encouraged .

How to Start a Meetup

Join with a few interested friends or neighbors and agree to set up your meetup. Choose a leader. Agree to a time and place and an initial topic of discussion. If you expect a lot of people or you want to reserve space, check with your meeting location in advance to make certain you can hold a meetup at that time and place.

Invite others to join you. Have each member of the group send out emails and make phone calls to invite others. Post flyers announcing your meetup on community notice boards, at libraries and supermarkets.

Agree to share tasks. Your leader should guide the meeting, enable everyone to introduce themselves and to speak during the meeting, keeping to your time limit. Another person can bring name tags, a sign-in sheet for names, addresses, phone numbers, and emails. A third person can bring light refreshments. (You can all share the costs.) Everyone should greet newcomers and make them feel welcome.

Agree to disagree. Meetups are designed for the exchange of ideas. Not everyone will be likeminded. Listening and finding common ground is democracy at work.

End your *meetup* by agreeing on the topic for your next meeting, planning a strategy for action, or inviting a knowledgeable speaker to your next meeting. Announce the date, time, and location of your next *meetup* before you leave.

Helpful Resources

Meetup.com or Democracy for America can help you get started. For a small monthly fee, either of these organizations will provide meetup organizers with suggestions for local venues; tips for choosing dates and times; how to arrange your meeting's set up; guidance for setting an agenda. Meetup.com or DFA will maintain your group's website, automatically send reminders of meetings to your members, and track rsvps. Share the monthly cost among the group's organizers. (Keep In Mind: Meetup.com is a for-profit company and Democracy for America is a political action group. Check them out before you decide to use either of them.)

Find Organizations to Work With

You don't have to go it alone! No matter what issue you are interested in, or which candidate you support, there are lots of organizations you can work with. You can start by checking the "Useful Resources" section, and don't forget to ask family and friends for advice. There are lots of books, magazines, or other publications that focus on your area of interest. *Here are some additional ideas:*

Do you want to organize your neighborhood? You can contact www.mddems.org or a grassroots political group to help you. A handbook for precinct organization is available at <http://www.mcdcc.org/ht/d/sp/1/612182/pld/612182>.

Are you interested in local issues? Attend City Council or School Board meetings, or look for information on their web sites; scan your local papers; check for meeting notices on your grocery or library's bulletin board.

Are you interested in the impact of proposed Social Security issues? Check out publications by the AARP or go to their web site, www.aarp.org.

Are you interested in health care issues? There are lots of organizations to work with. In Montgomery County, there is the Montgomery Health Care Action, c/o River Road Unitarian Church, Bethesda, MD. State wide you can contact the Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative (www.healthcareforall.com or 410.235.9000) or Medicaid Matters! Maryland, 1-877-625-9409 (grassroots org). For national organizations refer to the "Useful Resources" section.

Are you interested in women's issues? Again, try those library and grocery store bulletin boards and magazines. You can go to www.democrats.org/wvc to sign up for a weekly update from the Democratic National Committee, or check the National Women's Political Caucus at www.nwpc.org.

Are you concerned about the environment? For local issues, check your library and grocery store bulletin boards and the newspaper for notices of upcoming meetings and events. Look for environmental publications that include listings of organizations, or look on the web. The Sierra Club site (www.sierraclub.org) lets you enter your zip code so you can find out what's going on in your own backyard.

Remember that building a community or a democracy is done "blade by blade." It can be challenging, but there are others who agree with you and they would welcome your interest and support.

Start Your Own Organization

If you and a group of people feel passionately about something, and you realize that it will take time and commitment to accomplish it, you may need to create an organization. If, on the other hand, your problem is short term, you may not need a formal organization to work on it.

Grassroots organizations come in all stripes. For instance, a group of us formed a political action group that undertook voter registration, door to door canvassing, travel to swing states, and Get Out the Vote efforts during the 2004 election cycle. Other organizations have formed locally around land use, school issues, and building a bike path. There is no set way to go about forming an organization of your own. However, a few basic principles apply to most.

Think through the purpose of an organization. What is the problem you want to solve? For instance, are you concerned about people who cannot afford to live in your community? Do you want to advocate for affordable housing, reach out to others who are equally concerned, and together pressure elected officials and government agencies to solve this problem?

At first, keep it informal. You can start with a few others in your neighborhood, at your workplace, or at your kids' school. Assess whether you have the person power and commitment of time and energy to work on your issue. Bringing health care reform to your state could take years of work. Keeping a clinic open may be more short term.

Identify the problem you want to work on and become knowledgeable about it. If you want to build a bike path, you will have to research zoning laws, contact hiking and biking clubs, and get to know your local officials. You may also have to learn about engineering issues, who does it, and what it costs.

Work for a Candidate

If you already have decided to support a candidate, contact his or her headquarters to see how you can help them. There will be candidates running for everything from the local school board to U.S. Senator – and all of them will need volunteers! If you want to become deeply involved in a campaign, sign on early when fewer volunteers are around.

To get the correct contact information for a candidate's campaign, either type their names into a search engine like Google on your computer or check with your local library. You can also contact the state or local party headquarters. Since the campaigns are temporary, they will not be listed in the phone book.

Most candidates would be thrilled to have you use ideas in this toolkit on their behalf. For instance:

- The candidate might speak at a coffee you organize at your home.
- The campaign might ask you to write letters to the editor.
- They may need you to help organize your precinct.
- At the campaign headquarters, there are often administrative needs to be filled such as answering the telephone, entering names in the computer, or folding and stuffing envelopes.

Organize a Precinct

If you'd like to focus your efforts directly on the next election, one way to do it is to begin organizing your precinct for a political party or for a candidate. A well-organized precinct turns out the vote on Election Day! Everything you can do in your precinct up to that day will increase voter turnout for your cause.

Just what is a precinct? It is the area assigned to a specific polling place, the smallest divisions made by the state for electoral purposes. In a suburban area, a precinct is basically one or two neighborhoods, while in a more rural part of the state it may cover a larger area. A group of precincts in a geographic area make up a legislative district; a number of legislative districts make up a congressional district, and all the congressional districts together cover the entire state.

Only a few counties have precinct organizations – but that is the grassroots level for election organizing. A precinct is a manageable size and information about the voters within a precinct is available from the state and county Boards of Elections, or often, from the state or county Democratic Party. You may be able to become the chair person of your precinct. If there already is a Chair, that person would probably welcome your help!

Here are some tips to get started:

- Contact your county Democratic Central Committee (A list of them can be found under “Get Local” at www.mddems.org.) or other party you wish to work for. Find out if your precinct needs a Chair. If not, you can work in another precinct.
- Download the Precinct Handbook from www.mcdcc.org/precinct/handbook.doc. This gives you all the basics for running a precinct, including information about how to use Voter Lists, get to know the voters in your precinct, canvass, and what to do on Election Day.
- You can use many of the ideas in this toolkit to build interest and participation within your precinct.
- If your county doesn't have a precinct organization, don't let that stop you. You can still organize your precinct—and it can be the model for others!

Useful Resources

In addition to finding organizations that relate to your other interests, there are literally thousands of useful web sites where you can locate helpful information. We have selected some that we have found useful and accurate. There are two caveats to our including them on this list, however: (1) web sites and addresses can change, and (2) we are not specifically endorsing any of the groups that are listed here. This toolkit and these resources have been compiled based on the needs of Maryland residents. If you are from another state you may wish to look for your own local resources. In addition, there are many useful resources on the web. We encourage you to explore these and to add them to your own list.

The Issues

Examples of sites that provide information on specific issues

www.pfaw.org {People for the American Way}

www.americanprogress.org {Center for American Progress}

www.lww.org {League of Women Voters}

<http://realclearpolitics.com> {collection of current news stories}

Check Your Facts

Check on the facts being used by politicians and others

www.factcheck.org {The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania}

Your Elected Officials – One site for all

www.capwiz.com/pfaw/home/ {Enter your zip code to locate your elected officials and their voting records}

<http://www.congress.org> {Capitol Advantage}

Your Elected Officials – The President and Vice President

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact>

Your Elected Officials on Capitol Hill – Who Are They, How Do You Contact Them, How Did They Vote and Where Does Their Money Come From?

<http://thomas.loc.gov> {Library of Congress}

www.opensecrets.org {Center for Responsive Government}

U.S. Senate

www.senate.gov/ {Main page for U.S. Senate}

www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm {Contact information for U.S. Senators}

www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/a_three_sections_with_tasers/votes.htm {Senatorial voting records}

U.S. House of Representatives

<http://clerk.house.gov> {Main page and contact information for members of the House of Representatives}

www.house.gov {Another way to locate your Representatives and Committees}

<http://clerk.house.gov/legisAct/votes.html> {Link to Representatives' voting records}

Your Elected Officials in Maryland

<http://www.governor.maryland.gov/contact.html> [Contact the Governor]

<http://mlis.state.md.us/> [Home page for the Legislature]

<http://mdelect.net/> [Find your legislators]

<http://mlis.state.md.us/cgi-win/mail32.exe> [Email your legislator]

Local Political and Policy Organizations

www.elections.state.md.us

www.mdems.org [Maryland Democratic Party with links to local organizations]

www.ydmaryland.org [Maryland Young Democrats]

www.mdgop.org [Maryland Republican Party]

www.progressivemaryland.org [Progressive Maryland]

<http://www.mc-progressivealliance.com> [Montgomery County Progressive Alliance]

www.mdgreens.org [Maryland Green Party]

National Political and Policy Organizations

www.aarp.org [American Association of Retired Persons]

www.ourfuture.org [Campaign for America's Future]

www.americanprogress.com [Center for American Progress]

www.cbpp.org [Center for Budget & Policy Priorities]

www.commoncause.org [Common Cause]

www.democrats.org [Democratic National Committee]

www.democracyforamerica.com [Democracy for America]

www.gop.com [Republican National Committee]

www.grassrootsdemocrats.com [Grassroots Democrats]

www.faithfulamerica.org [Faithful America]

www.ips.org [Institute for Policy Studies]

www.moveon.org [MoveOn.org Democracy in Action]

www.pfaw.org [People for the American Way]

www.citizen.org [Public Citizen]

www.sojo.net [Sojourners: faith, politics, culture]

www.urban.org [The Urban Institute]

www.usaction.org [U.S. Action]

www.wellstone.org [Wellstone Action]

www.workingforchange.com [online journal of progressive news and opinions]

www.yda.org [Young Democrats of America]

Health Care Related Organizations

All are resources on health care policies for advocates and activists.

www.familiesusa.org {Families USA}

www.womenshealthnetwork.org {National Women's Health Network}

www.uhcan.org {Universal Health Care Action Network}

www.kff.org {Kaiser Family Foundation}

www.cmwf.org {The Commonwealth Fund}

www.healthcareforall.com {Maryland Health Care for All}

Staying in Touch—The Blogging Community and Membership Groups

Blogs

www.technorati.com/blogs/Politics {Technorati is a search engine where you can locate blogs on topics you are interested in}

Mailing lists (or listserves) for Groups

Yahoo and Google both require registration. Enter an area of interest and you will receive a list of groups that you can join if you want to be on their email list.

Letters to the Editor

The following sites provide ways to get contact and other relevant information on newspapers and other media outlets.

www.capwiz.com/pfaw/home/ {Enter your zip code for media contact lists and email addresses.}

www.newspapers.com/usa_news.htm

Publications Online

You can get access to current articles without purchasing a subscription.

www.theatlanticmonthly.com {The Atlantic Monthly}

www.thenation.com

www.nybooks.com {New York Review of Books}

www.nytimes.com {New York Times}

www.slate.com

www.salon.com/index.html

www.washingtonpost.com

Organize a Grassroots Organization or Become Politically Active

www.democracyinaction.org/dla {Provides online tools to start your own organization}

www.capitoladvantage.com/index.html {Capitol Advantage provides technology and tools to help organizations influence legislation or public opinion}

<http://www.mcdcc.org/ht/d/sp/1/612182/pld/612182> {Montgomery County (MD) Democratic Central Committee's downloadable handbook with precinct-organizing information}

Training Political Activists

Both of these organizations have training programs

www.wellstone.org {Wellstone Action}

www.21stdems.org {21st Century Democrats}

About the Toolkit's "Authors"

Who are we?

We are a small group of women who became friends during the 2004 election. Each of us has a different background and some of us are new to politics. During the last election, we each tried many of the tools in this grassroots kit. We found out that there really is such a thing as grassroots democracy. It may start small, with just a few people, but it does grow “blade by blade” and with a little “fertilizer” we can change the landscape.

Why did we put this toolkit together?

We created this toolkit because we could not find one source for the information and tools we needed to make our voices heard. The tools in this kit are not new, but we hope we have packaged them in a way you will find easy to use. We want to share what we have learned so that others, like us who are new to grassroots organizing, can become active in the democratic process.

You, too, can make a difference!

Feel free to adapt this toolkit to suit your own goals or the needs of your community. Remember that becoming informed, speaking out, and listening to others are essential elements of a successful democracy. Our political leaders need to hear from all of us, and that includes you. We can be most effective when we work together to make our voices heard and to solve our problems both large and small. We've tried it and it works—now you can do it, too. Good luck, and don't forget to have a good time!

Want to know how to contact us?

We would be happy to answer your questions via e-mail at the following address:
grassrootstools@yahoo.com