

Demystifying Civic Engagement How to Make Your Voice Heard (Beyond Voting!) & 5 Tips to Get Started

OCT 2024

What is civic engagement?

The term “civic engagement” is less intimidating than it sounds! Civic engagement describes the process taken by individuals or groups to identify and address issues of concern within their communities.^{1,2}

Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual events such as working the polls, to longer-term, sustained efforts such as joining an advocacy group and educating others around issues that matter to you.



Why get involved?

As a young person, it is important to learn about the issues that matter to you and take action to shape the future you want to see. As future leaders and changemakers, your participation in civic life lays the groundwork for strong, equitable communities. Youth civic engagement also increases empowerment, builds important life skills, and upholds democracy.³

How can you get involved in civic engagement?

One of the most **basic and important** ways to get involved is to vote in local, state, and federal elections. But voting is not the *only* way to get involved and make a difference!

We've outlined 5 ways to get involved in addition to voting OR even before you're old enough to vote.

1. Join a civics-focused program in your school or government. The State of Rhode Island, for example, has a Student Civic Liaison program for high school students.

- If your school/state government does not have a youth civics program, [icivics.org](https://www.icivics.org) has some helpful resources to share with educators and school leaders to help them get started.

2. Participate within your school. Whether you're interested in running for student government, participating on the debate team, or joining an advocacy group, these opportunities will help you develop foundational skills and knowledge that will prepare you for civic engagement and community leadership.

3. ...and learn about how the issue is covered in the media.

- Media coverage has a major impact on politics. Analyzing the many way(s) an issue is covered in the media can help you develop critical thinking skills. How might different outlets and different formats (print, online, social media) impact what is said? Is a particular perspective being shared more than others? Aside from programs for high school students (such as Temple University's POPPIN), PBS Learning Media has a helpful series of videos in their News and Media Literacy collection.
- The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication.⁴ Having the skills to critically analyze the media you consume will help you be educated on topics you care about and be able to make informed choices on how to act or causes to support.

4. Work the polls. In some states (including Massachusetts), 16- and 17-year-olds are eligible!

- Learn your state's requirements and whether you're eligible by visiting the United States Election Assistance Commission website: <https://www.eac.gov/help-america-vote>.

5. Learn about — and advocate for — legislation that impacts your daily life.

- Start by finding organizations specializing in your areas of interest and look up their legislative priorities.
- Wondering where to start? Your search can begin by typing "[area of interest] organizations in [location]" into Google or finding a network on social media by searching for a Facebook group related to causes that you're passionate about.
- Attend town and school board meetings to learn about what's being done in your town and how it may impact you and the people you care about. Attending town meetings allows you to voice your opinions and directly affect change in your community.
- Many cities and towns have numerous committees and boards which you may be able to join.

References

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Recommended Citation: Morris, V., & Sabella K. (2024). *Demystifying Civic Engagement: How to Make Your Voice Heard (Beyond Voting!) & 5 Tips to Get Started*. Worcester, MA: UMass Chan Medical School, Implementation Science and Practice Advances Research Center (ISPARC), Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research, The Center for Community Inclusion and Reflective Collaboration (CIRC Center).

The contents of this tip sheet were funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), ACL Grant #90RTCP0010, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Grant #90RTCP0010. NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this tip sheet do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, SAMHSA, or HHS and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government

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