

# Beyond Voting

by Seth Baum



stituents and try to change their minds. Write letters to the editor or opinion articles. Join up with organizations working on the issue. When talking with people you disagree with, try to understand their views, and play off the similarities and differences. It's OK to change your mind about something as you learn more about it.

Voting is useful for some things, including electing, but there are many other ways to get involved in American democracy, which are no less important.

## CREATING YOUR NETWORK

Know a lot of people who agree with you? Your arguments will go farther if more people are backing them. Stockpile contact info. Create a little profile for each person based on what issues and actions they're interested in. Do favors for them, so they'll do favors for you (and because it's nice to do favors).

## USING YOUR NETWORK

Send email to existing listserves or create your own. Pass out flyers at events. It's important to have the trust and respect of those in your network if you want them to follow you on anything, and to only urge them to perform the most worthy actions.

## RUNNING FOR OFFICE

Win or lose, a campaign is a great way to draw attention to certain issues, and can even change the incumbents' positions. For example, Democratic businessman Richard Morrison has been running a hard campaign against U.S. House Majority Leader Tom Delay (R-TX), a man whose heavy-handed corruption makes our Tom Finneran look like Tweetie Bird. Though Morrison is still expected to lose, he's polling well enough that Delay has reversed his position on several issues in order to keep his seat. Had Delay run unopposed, he would have no need for this.

## CANDIDATE CAMPAIGNING

Find a candidate whom you strongly support, preferably in a close race, and volunteer to help out with the campaign. Try to bring some friends with you to accomplish more and have more fun doing it. Volunteers are vital to campaigns and frequently make the ultimate difference in who wins.

## LEGISLATION CAMPAIGNING (LOBBYING)

Elected officials often adapt their stances if their constituents voice strong support on a particular side. Some call this flip-flopping; I call it representative democracy at work. Find out what issues are on the table and where your representative(s) stand on them. Let them know how you feel, even if you agree with them. Contact info is easy to find online. Phone calls are the most effective, followed by snail mail, then email. Anything in your own words is better than anything from a form, but even the form is worth something. And break out your network to amplify your voice. Don't leave lobbying to the professionals! And don't think you can't compete with them. Sure, you're an amateur doing it on your own time, but that could be worth more to the politician.

## ISSUE EDUCATION

When elected officials do what most of their constituents want them to do, that's not bad leadership—it's representative democracy at work. If you disagree with a policy, it's important to reach out to those con-

## WATCHDOGGING

Concerned about corruption or other bad behavior? Keep an eye out for it, then if you see it, pass the word on to friendly reporters, officials, or other people well-positioned to do something about it. Volunteer to monitor elections.

## LEARNING MORE

Think you know everything? Well, you don't. Talk to people. Read the news. Read different newspapers, especially ones that offer perspectives you might not agree with. Read blogs (I recommend [dailykos.com](http://dailykos.com)). Go beyond news into more in-depth content on issues, from encyclopedias (I recommend [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)) to books (I recommend the public library). Attend public lectures, of which there are many in Boston, with all its universities and pleasantly intellectual population. **WU**

*Seth thought he was off the hook by handing in this helpful list, but we just made him write more articles. He might still be going.*

## My Dad, Precinct Leader

My father, Allen Baum, is a local precinct leader for the political group MoveOn.org in Pittsburgh, working to help John Kerry win in the battleground state of Pennsylvania. He took two weeks off from work in order to do this. This is a huge change for my father, who has always voted before but never did much else in politics.

I spoke with him over the phone this afternoon (just nine days before the election). He didn't have much time to talk—in fact, he once passed the phone to my mom in order to field a call on his cell from a volunteer who had just gotten back from canvassing. However, I did get a glimpse of his experience.

I was surprised by how much he seemed to be enjoying himself. He's not the most social type, and he usually doesn't have much patience, but he has somehow really been enjoying door-to-door canvassing, of all things.

He switched from his own neighborhood, Regent Square, to the more working class Greenfield, because so many in Regent Square already strongly supported Kerry. In Greenfield, he met immigrants, new voters, and even a few undecided voters, whom he was able to help persuade to vote for Kerry. One encounter that stuck out in his mind was with a woman he described as "a Russian immigrant who had a son in Iraq. She was completely beside herself [over her son's deployment], and was going to be voting for Kerry."

Dad's now recruiting and coordinating volunteers for six different precincts. And there are thousands upon thousands of people like him around the country, ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Win or lose, they are the heroes of this election.

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