



On the Fence

Why join a political party: Activism is the antidote to feeling helpless

The first two major political parties were established in 1792: the Federalist Party and the Democratic-Republican Party. Obviously, party names and platforms have shifted over the centuries, but the two-party system has endured for 226 years.

In 2000, the major parties ruled that for a candidate to be included in the national debates, he or she must demonstrate at least 15 percent support across five national polls. Because it effectively excludes all but candidates of the two major parties, this ruling remains controversial. Considering the immense number of choices available in virtually every aspect of our daily lives, faced with a limited either/or choice, a number of voting-age citizens have affiliated with neither. In 2017, 31 percent of Americans identified as Democrat, 24 percent identified as Republican and 42 percent as Independent.

Some have aligned themselves with splinter parties like Libertarians, Green Party and Progressives, even though the candidate they support is unlikely to appear on the presidential ballot. They also cite a preference for the European parliamentary system, which provides proportional seats and influence to a variety of parties, depending on the number of votes each candidate receives. Regrettably, many have chosen to withdraw from the political process altogether. In the 2016 election, of more than 250 million citizens of voting age, less than 138 million voted.

Why join a political party? The alarming dominance of relatively new forces that function outside the major political parties — super PACs and individual billionaires who exercise unregulated influence on the political process — is one compelling reason.



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Working within your party to focus on campaign finance reform is more likely to yield results than complaining about your frustrations to friends and family. No matter the issue, affordable health care, gerrymandering, climate change or immigration reform, your opinions will resonate when echoed by millions who agree with you.

If you decide to “sit it out,” that’s exactly where you will be — out, with no voice in your government. Eighty percent of Americans have never contacted their elected representatives in Congress. One of the best suggestions I’ve heard at a party meeting was “Put your elected officials on your speed dial.”

Most governors, senators and members of Congress begin their political careers close to home. Campaigning for a local candidate is invigorating and rewarding. Win or lose you’ve joined with like-minded individuals to act on your shared convictions and enthusiasms. Plus, involvement in the county and state levels of your party lets you influence state platforms that may then affect national policies.

Americans enthusiastically dedicate themselves to supporting their favorite sports. We avidly watch games and discuss individual players and team performance. At the same time, only 46 percent of Americans know that each state has two senators. These elected officials decide if our water is safe to drink, if our air is safe to breathe and whether our country goes to war. You need to be paying attention to this life-or-death political game, the candidates, policies and programs that daily affect your quality of life.

Why join a political party: Local political engagement is the foundation of our entire political system

Do you ever find yourself dissatisfied with local or national public policy? Have you ever wondered if you can have more say on how you are taxed and what your tax money is spent on? Can elected officials be held accountable for the commitments they make? Is it time something important gets fixed, changed or maintained in your community? Answering yes to any of these questions makes a compelling reason for you to become personally involved in the political process, especially locally.

It is important to be engaged in the political process, and it is important to engage in the process in specific ways. Not all actions will yield the same results or provide the same level of satisfaction for the individual making the effort to be involved. Three great places to consider starting are: (1) affiliating with a major political party and (2) becoming a Precinct Committee Person with your local political party’s central committee or (3) volunteering to do something or fill a role with your local political party’s central committee. One or a combination of all three is perfectly acceptable as a starting point depending on the time you have available and the results you want to achieve. I will briefly share why I think each one is important.

In my opinion, affiliating with a major political party — either Republican or Democratic — is the best way for you to have your voice heard and to effect change or maintain something that is working well. This is because the respective state parties control who is put forth for political positions and legislator nominations as well as what bills are brought before the general voters. So, if you are not affiliated with the Republican or Democratic Party, you practically do not have access to any of the political process, which then prompts the question: What’s the point? To determine which major party you should affiliate with, conduct a detailed review of each party’s position on various issues and decide which platform best reflects your own feelings.

Once you have decided which party to affiliate with, make sure your current voter registra-



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tion matches and your address is up to date. This action makes you eligible to then contact the local Republican or Democratic Party Central Committee in your county and stand for (or in some cases be appointed to) an open Precinct Committee Person position. Why does being a PCP matter? PCPs are the foundational building block positions for each party’s central committee and are involved directly in almost every key action or matter the party is involved with. There is no better place to learn, contribute and thrive. PCPs can be involved with a multitude of things, including voter registration, party activities, candidate fundraising and door knocking/calling, internal working committees, representing voters in their precinct to elected officials, marketing and engaging the community at various events.

However, in some cases, due to time or other constraints, becoming a PCP right way does not make sense. In those situations, old-fashioned volunteering may be a great place to start. If you are interested in supporting a specific issue, learning how something works politically or wanting to help in a particular way with a personal skill set, I suggest connecting with the local major political party you are affiliated with to discover opportunities to engage, learn or contribute to the political process in a less formal and more relaxed way.

In short, any of the three ideas shared in this article are excellent places to start, but the key takeaway is engagement. Getting involved locally in the political process is important because it allows you to have a direct say in matters that impact your family, community and business.

Local political engagement is the foundation of our entire political system. If we do not exercise our rights to participate, we risk losing them altogether or eventually rendering them ineffective.

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