

50 WAYS TO GET POLITICAL

"Civilization is not natural," wrote journalist Bill Moyers recently. "It is an accomplishment of politics and culture. It is not just what happens; it is what we make happen. In some ways, to suggest that we must "get" political is inaccurate, since we always are. Politics is simply collective decision making, something we make happen every day. But there are always more and more effective ways to play. Use this list as a brainstorming tool to improve the quality of your own public life, and share it with your friends.

- 1 Vote. People have sacrificed their lives for the right to vote, yet in the U.S., fewer of us do it every year. Voting is your hard-earned right and your official voice.
- 2 Don't vote — and let people know why. If you feel strongly that you have no genuine choices or that the system is broken beyond repair, then say so. But speak up about it; don't just let it slide.
- 3 Register people to vote. One reason the political game's gone sour is that too few of us play. Many of the non-players are on the low end of the economic ladder. Sign them up — they have important things to contribute.
- 4 Vote with your dollars. Buy selectively! Boycott companies or products that violate your principles, and write those companies to tell them what changes you think they should make. Then buy what you need from companies that are socially responsible. (See "Shopping for a Better World," published by the Council on Economic Priorities.)
- 5 Travel. Get some first hand experience in how things happen in other places, and bring home some questions about how you do things at home.
- 6 Don't travel. Travel wastes energy and your troubles come with you. Stay home and concentrate on improving your community.
- 7 Grow a garden (or support local growers). It makes you less dependent on agribusiness, and more aware of your dependence on — and relationship with — the Earth.
- 8 Recycle. First reduce consumption, then reuse what you can, then recycle everything possible of what's left. Promote this practice in your community and workplace. Besides voting, recycling is currently one of the few ways we participate in public life on a mass scale voluntarily.
- 9 Write letters to the editor. Published they can change minds, and even unpublished, they impact the newspaper. (See sidebar.)
- 10 Write a song. Political songs are great tools for organizing and inspiring people. Where would the antiwar movement of the 1960s have been without the music?
- 11 Learn about unions. If you don't belong to one, get someone who does to explain their purpose, history, and current status. Unions are where many of the most important political battles of our era were fought — and often won.
- 12 Get to know your neighbors. It's hard to reclaim politics without some sense of community. Once you know and trust each other maybe you could even talk politics!
- 13 Start political conversations. You can do this anywhere, with anyone. Talking politics (and listening) is critical for a vibrant democracy. Start with a question: "So what do you think about...?"
- 14 Make friends with someone of another race, ethnicity, age, ability, or sexual preference. Ask questions, and learn to listen to the answers.
- 15 Learn another language. This will expand your political (and cultural) horizons in manifold and unexpected ways.
- 16 Teach someone to read. Politics is a dialogue, and those who can't read can't participate as fully or as easily.
- 17 Mount a "slow streets" campaign. Downtown pedestrian malls and low speed limits mean more pedestrian traffic, which means more personal interaction, which can support development of a true civil society. It won't happen if we're all driving around fast in metal boxes.



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BY THE EDITORS OF 'IN CONTEXT' MAGAZINE

- 18 Ride a bike. You'll get healthier, make a statement, and add yourself to the constituency of cyclists calling for slow streets and bike trails.
- 19 Call a radio talk-show. The good ones are often the town meetings of the airwaves. Talkshow hosts will especially appreciate you if you talk common sense about a currently divisive topic.
- 20 Buy produce at a farmer's market. If your community doesn't have one, get one started.
- 21 Be eco-wise. Compost, save water, conserve energy, car pool — all of these contribute to the public good, model good behavior, and shift the political center of gravity in a green direction.
- 22 Correspond with someone in prison. The United States imprisons a larger share of its population (0.4%) than any other nation. More than one million Americans are in jail, either awaiting trial or serving time. Yet prison is one of the political institutions some people say we need more of. Get to know more about it and see whether you agree.
- 23 Join a study circle. Self-education is a fast track to political empowerment. Pick an issue you care about, hook up with some friends who feel likewise, and start reading, thinking and talking about it. If you then come up with some better ideas than the people currently holding the levers of power and get your plans adopted, it won't be the first time such things have happened.
- 24 Carry a camera. Amateur video and photographic records can shine light on an issue, sometimes raising it to national prominence overnight.
- 25 Adopt a creek (or a tree, or a hillside, or...). Learn to care for it, learn everything you can about it, and we guarantee it will heighten your political sensibilities.
- 26 Promote military conversion campaigns. The fact that a sizable portion of our economy is dedicated to the technology of killing contributes to a political climate that tolerates war. Support efforts to wean industry away from the military.
- 27 Run for elective office. Attend meetings of local government — city council, school board, park district, whatever — to learn how they work and be a voice for reasoned sanity and balance. Then run for office, or volunteer for an appointment to an advisory council. The "system" really is a product of the individuals who participate in it.
- 28 Support campaign reform. This is a must. Anything that elevates the quality of political dialogue above the level of "soundbite" and reduces campaign dependence on big money will help people to reclaim politics.
- 29 Start a shadow government. If you're thoroughly disgusted with the decisions of your legislature or city council, start your own! Your mock resolutions won't have the rule of law, but they will help you articulate your concerns and values — and you might draw some media attention to your point of view.
- 30 Be a media guerrilla. Use fax, E-mail, photocopies, T-shirts, newsletters, bumperstickers or whatever to broadcast the message of your choice. Spread empowering information!
- 31 Buy third-world products. Especially those produced by small family-owned businesses and co-ops.

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