



# HOW TO RUN FOR PUBLIC OFFICE

**National politics feels like a spectator sport to many Americans. We vote, then watch and comment from the sidelines as the game gets played. But local government, on the other hand, offers residents a meaningful chance to shape their communities. Township trustees, city or village council members, and school board members oversee issues that impact our daily lives. They direct decisions on zoning, public safety, economic development, parks and recreation, HOA rules, and responsibilities, school policies and more.**

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Conservation-minded residents seek candidates that balance a healthy environment with a strong economy and vibrant community. But what if no such candidates can be found? Consider the old adage, “If you want something done right, do it yourself!” On odd years like 2025, 2027 and 2029, Ohio communities hold non-partisan elections for local positions. The candidates vying for these offices are your neighbors, friends, and fellow community members. But it could also be you! You don’t need to be a “career politician” to run for an elected position in your community, and in some cases, there may not be a lot of competition.

While city council, school board and trustee elections are still nonpartisan, that might not always be the case. A bill has recently been introduced in Columbus that would add partisan labels to local races. If it goes through, it might be harder for independents, moderates, and people who place policy over party to win local elections. So the time to run is now!

Some of our local leaders have been in office for 30-40 years because they continue to run and get re-elected. While their service may be commendable, a governing body can get complacent and out of touch with the changing needs and values of their communities over time. And if they run uncontested, local officials don’t need to campaign, nor even explain their priorities or vision to voters. So while it may seem like the system is rigged, it isn’t.

It’s simply because nobody stepped up to challenge the status quo. **Will YOU?**



**Many citizens have never considered running for an elected position in their township, village, city or school board. Most of us wouldn't know how to begin. Consider this to be a primer for absolute beginners.**

Learn how you can take the first steps toward running for a seat on the local governing body. The conditions in each community are unique, as are the strategies you will take. So, while the order may vary depending on your campaign strategy, the basic steps are all presented below.

**Even if you aren't ready to run right now, maybe this booklet will plant a seed of intention that will grow in time. Good luck on your civic journey!**

## **1. Engage in Your Community**

If you're a civic-minded resident, you likely already attend public meetings on a regular basis and have some understanding of the concerns of residents, appointed and elected officials, and business owners. Maybe you already volunteer on an advisory committee, as a poll worker, on the local PTA, or in other ways. You are likely a curious person who seeks to understand the root causes of problems and the many perspectives and motivations of community members. You've likely researched how other communities have successfully tackled common problems and you have some ideas of what needs to change. You might feel that your perspective, skills, or experience will fill a void in local leadership. All of this will become part of your campaign message when it comes time to discuss your qualifications and civic commitment during your campaign. But you don't need to be an expert—once elected, you'll have access to resources and support from statewide organizations like the Ohio Township Association, Ohio Municipal League, and Ohio School Boards Association, which offer training, publications, and guidance to help local officials succeed.

## **2. Look for Openings**

Don't expect to see a job opening posted for these local positions; you'll have to take it upon yourself to find out. There are two places to look.

Start with your township, municipal, or school district website where you'll find bios of your elected officials, often with dates of when they were elected or when their current term ends. Alternately, call your county Board of Elections—they are happy to tell you if anyone is up for re-election in your municipality or school district. Trustees and council members serve 4-year terms, and generally their elections take place on odd years (2025, 2027, etc.). Terms are staggered so they don't all rotate off or run for re-election in the same year. But there is no way to know whether someone whose term is up will run again, so you might not know what competition you'll be facing.

## **3. Seek Support Early On**

For trustee and council positions, you might ask for campaign assistance from your local Democratic or Republican party if you are associated with them. But at a time when many people feel that neither party represents their interests and values, don't hesitate to run as an independent.

**Independents and moderates from both sides can win an election if they have a compelling cause, a unifying message that cuts across party lines, and a focus on the needs and concerns of their communities.**

Women might get extra help running for office, whether they are aligned with a party or completely apolitical, from an organization called Matriots. Activists and other stakeholders who are aligned with your message may support your campaign too. You may want to ask friends for help: for instance, the organized friend could be your campaign manager, the one that's good with numbers could be your treasurer, and the one that's good with words could be your communications specialist.

## 4. Pull Your Petition

This is a fancy way of saying “get the paperwork you need to begin the process of running for office.” The paperwork is called a petition, and it’s a formal written request to put your name on the ballot. It must be signed by a designated number of people who are all registered to vote in your township, village, city, or school district. You can get a [Candidate’s Guide](#) at the Secretary of State’s website which will explain filing requirements and fees, how many signatures you need (typically 50) and when they’re due (in August, 90 days before Election Day). You could pull the petitions discreetly online, as a strategy to sneak up on an incumbent who doesn’t think there will be any competition and therefore is complacent about campaigning. Or you could make your intention to run more public by pulling your petition in person at the local Board of Elections, where your signature will be available for all to see.

## 5. Get Signatures and File Your Petition

As you get people to sign your petition you have an opportunity to practice your message and build support. When you have the required number of signatures, you’re ready to file your petition with the local Board of Elections who will verify the validity of each signature, and then you’ll be officially certified to be on the ballot. You might want to get more signatures

than required because some people will think they’re registered when they’re not. It’s a good idea to go to the Board of Elections long before filing to confirm that each signature is from a registered voter, in case some turn out to be invalid and you need to get more.

## 6. Leverage Personal Relationships and Connections

You’ll have an advantage if you already have a wide social network in your community, and if not, you’ll want to build one. As you talk to people, become informed about local issues, and help where you can, you’ll likely develop a reputation as a thoughtful and genuine person who cares about others. Never pass up an opportunity to meet a new person in your community. Will Rogers once wrote, “strangers are just friends I haven’t met yet,” and this should be your motto too. Find common ground to build trust and overcome differences.

**When you begin campaigning, you’ll want to talk to neighbors and friends, people at work, church, in social groups and clubs, and door-to-door. The more people you already know, the easier it will be to spread the word and get support for your campaign.**

It’s easy for an incumbent to get re-elected because, as they serve, they build name recognition and expand their community connections. In fact, there’s a little trick a council or board can use to help their preferred candidates get into office. When a vacancy occurs before an upcoming election, Ohio law allows the remaining members of a board or council to appoint someone to serve the remainder of the term. While this process ensures continuity in governance, it also gives the appointee an opportunity to build connections and name recognition ahead of the next election, which can provide an advantage if they choose to run. You will not have that advantage, so you will need to plan your campaign wisely.

## 7. Plan Your Campaign

Some candidates in larger communities spend a bundle on campaigning. But it's possible to win with a shoestring budget.

Every donation matters, even if you're only comfortable asking family and close friends. Money isn't everything in politics—candidates with modest budgets can and have beat well-funded opponents. In smaller communities, some candidates self-fund their campaigns with less than \$2,000—maybe because they prefer not to solicit donations, they want to avoid the paperwork involved in campaign finance reporting, or they're running unopposed and don't need to campaign. What is the money for? You will want to get the word out with yard signs, flyers, ads in newspapers, mailers or awareness events.



Before you get donations or spend money, you must file a designation of treasurer form, obtain an EIN from IRS.gov, open a bank account and retain all financial records for both donations and expenditures. The Candidates Guide explains this in detail. Other campaign techniques include using social media like NextDoor and Facebook, arranging meet and greets where people gather (local barber shops, bars, restaurants) and knocking on doors. Someone who has a unifying cause and a compelling message can win without much money if they are willing to put the energy and work into getting elected.

Local elections are the cornerstone of our democratic system, shaping the very foundations of our communities. Many people say that serving as a local elected official is the best thing that ever happened to them, as they engage in careful planning and collaboration between government, businesses, and the community.

**Is it time for you to help create thriving environmental, social and economic systems in your community? This might just be your year to shine!**



**Cincinnati Nature Center wants to help members serve their communities in elected positions.** If you would like to attend a session about running for office, please contact **Connie O'Connor** at [coconnor@cincynature.org](mailto:coconnor@cincynature.org).

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*Inspiring Conservation*  
THROUGH PERSONAL EXPERIENCES,  
EDUCATION, AND CARE FOR THE LAND