

## DEMOCRACY 101:

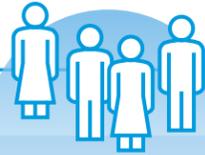
# Representative Sargent's Guide to Engaging in Our Government



Photo by Wendi Kent

*“ Every few generations, Americans are called upon to renew and redefine the tenets of our nation, the course of our culture, and the promise of our democracy. We face that calling now. We know the enormity of the challenges ahead. The road to progress is long and arduous, but we do not travel without hope. We find resilience in our enduring values, our unyielding spirit, and our strength together. I hope that you’ll heed the calling and join this fight. ”*

— Melissa



## ✓ Keep Up With Your Elected Officials

The first step to being actively engaged is to know who represents you at every level of government, from county board supervisors, to local judges, to state senators. Here in Wisconsin, it's easy to learn who your elected officials are by visiting [myvote.wi.gov](http://myvote.wi.gov). Once you've determined who represents you, you can keep up with your elected officials by following their work online and on social media, subscribing to their email updates, subscribing to government notifications systems, or even creating news alerts for when your elected officials are in the local news.

Even better than just keeping up with your elected officials, engage and establish rapport with them by attending their listening sessions, sending them an email, mailing them a letter, or by calling their office. It is an elected official's job to listen and consider constituents' thoughts and concerns, so remember: you're the boss. Your elected official is in office because you voted to put them there and you let them stay there each election—your elected officials are on contract to be your voice, care about your interests, and bring your values with them to work each day, so make sure your voice is heard.



## ✓ Give Your Money

If you are not able to give any of your time or skills (or even if you are but want to do more!), give your money to causes, nonprofits, or people you feel passionately about. It is a powerful statement to give some of your hard-earned dollars to support things you believe in. Now more than ever, organizations and people at every level are working around the clock to organize, strategize, and fight against initiatives that will be harmful to people across our country, and many face the prospect of losing funding because of committing to these values and initiatives. So, if you're able, give your money to these causes, nonprofits, and people with whom you share your values to strengthen your voice and values.



## ✓ Invest Where Your Values Are

Make a concerted effort to think about where you're spending your hard-earned money, not just where you're grocery shopping, but where you're getting coffee, eating dinner, or spending time with friends. It is important to reinvest money in the local economy with businesses that are women- and minority-owned, that treat employees fairly, and are good neighbors to the surrounding community. By investing in local businesses, you can see firsthand a return on your investment in the community, so invest where your values are and where you know your money can support friends and neighbors right here at home.



## ✓ Vote in *Every* Election

Vote. Every few years, you have the option to renew and extend your contract with your elected official or to choose to contract with someone new. Your vote is powerful and can be wielded to remind your elected officials to represent your interests, commend on a job well done, or express your disagreement or dissatisfaction. Whether you're voting for U.S. senator, state representative, or local school board, each election matters, and whether you're 102 years young or newly 18, your vote matters, too. Many people only vote in presidential elections every four years, and skip local and nonpresidential elections despite local government being far more likely to have a direct impact on their everyday life. And the best part about voting in Wisconsin? It's easy. Once you're registered, all you need is a photo ID. Visit our website for more information.



## ✓ Volunteer Your Time

The very fabric of democracy is the social contract: the common bond shared between community members and the core belief that everyone is in this together. The social contract and democratic values and ideals call upon making time for goodwill and service, investing in each other, and spreading social welfare. So, volunteer in your community. Whether that includes coaching little league, planning a local festival, serving on the board of a nonprofit, or giving dogs baths at a local animal shelter, your time can make a big difference in the community you live in.



## ✓ Share Your Skills

Whether you're an attorney, an artist, a dentist, a graphic designer, or an electrician, you have important skills others might not have. We know when we all do better, we all do better, so if you have specialized skills, training, and education, share your skills by doing pro bono work for individuals in need or organizations with limited budgets. Whether that includes doing free dental work in the evenings at a local clinic for homeless persons, doing plumbing work for organizations building low-income housing, or helping clients file legal paperwork, sharing your skills can have a significant impact on someone's life, and will invariably have a positive ripple effect on our community.



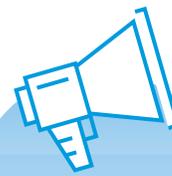
## ✓ Support Fair, Balanced Media Sources

Having a free press at every level has simply never been more important. Access to fair, unbiased press and news is a defining feature of democracy, which thrives on transparency, public awareness, and opportunity for accountability. The best way to ensure the press endures is to subscribe to and read fair, balanced media sources. Support local, state, and national newspapers that have quality, investigative journalism, and get an online or paper subscription. Then not only subscribe, but commit to reading these sources on a regular basis.



## ✓ Say “Yes, in My Backyard!”

Local initiatives or programs which would promote diversity, inclusion, or benefit a greater good often draw serious contention and opposition at the local level. Residents who would otherwise support the proposal ultimately oppose the proposition because of its close geographical proximity in the neighborhood, earning the “NIMBY” characterization or “not in my backyard.” So, when you learn about a proposal that could better the community at large, provide support or stability to people in need, or would increase diversity and inclusion in your neighborhood, or if you find yourself suggesting the initiative should be placed elsewhere in your community rather than on your street or in your neighborhood, say “Yes, in my backyard!”



## ✓ Speak Up

Hate, divisiveness, and false information does not happen in a vacuum—there are often spectators and bystanders who witness acts of discrimination, exclusion, or microaggressions against persons of color, LGBTQ-identified persons, women, persons who are differently abled, among many other minorities. It is extremely important that if you witness these instances and are a person of privilege in the space that you take the opportunity to speak out to correct the incidents and provide support for the person experiencing the acts. Even in the event there is no triggering act to speak up about, it is likewise important to intentionally and consistently make space and elevate voices of minority persons—especially as a person of privilege—in spaces where those voices might otherwise not be heard.

*We the People*



## ✓ Get Involved in Government

One of the easiest ways to get involved in government is to actually engage in the governing process. You can be more involved by attending city council meetings, testifying in legislative committee hearings about bills or issues you feel passionate

about, speaking at a local school board meetings, or serving on a committee, commission, or council. Better yet, the best way to be involved and engaged in government is to run for office. Deciding to run for office can be difficult, but ultimately if you want to see change and have an interest in serving your community, put your name on the ballot and become a public servant.

**This list is by no means exhaustive, and there is plenty more work to be done, but I am hopeful this list can serve as a good place to start.**

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