



# Getting Involved In Public Policy

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In 1765, John Adams said, "Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people..." Adams and other founding fathers such as Thomas Jefferson supported the concept that democracy can only be preserved by active involvement of citizens in public decision making. Recently, Oregon State Representative Barbara Roberts stated, "You are only one cause, one concern, one tragedy, one moral indignation, one economic crisis away from political involvement." Roberts believes that when people are personally involved in a public issue, they will actively participate in policy actions related to that issue. Whether individuals are as pro-active as Adams and Jefferson desire, or wait until an issue has a personal impact, the tools of public policy involvement are essential to individual and group success.

There are many ways you can get involved in public policy issues. Most people start on a local issue, something that affects them close to home. Some people work on issues, others work with partisan politics. There are many organizations that research and then lobby for a cause in which you may have an interest.

When public decisions are made, the definition of the problem and the solutions to the problem depend on the people involved. Decision-making groups are made up of individual people. People have their own values, beliefs and experiences that influence the way they look at problems. For example, residents of a neighborhood may see problems and public issues differently than local people who hold leadership or power roles. Individuals at the state or regional level may see the situation differently than local leaders.

This publication stresses the need for informed citizen involvement in public policy to strengthen the democratic process. Public issues often affect

the quality of life in varying ways for different individuals and groups. Affected individuals can make a difference, and their rate of success is likely to improve as they become more informed.

## What Is Public Policy?

The term "public policy" may make people think public decision making is such a formal process that they are unable to become involved. This simply is not true. Public policy is a set of principles that direct action. Public policy takes many forms: laws, rules, programs, funding decisions, court decisions, and yes, even customs and traditions. Also, the absence of laws or regulations does not mean there is no policy. Instead, it means that, for that issue, the policy is to do nothing as a government body.

Let's consider customs and traditions as public policy. How often have you heard, "But that is the way we have always done it." However, interested and concerned citizens often have the power to change tradition (policy) in a positive way to better serve the people.

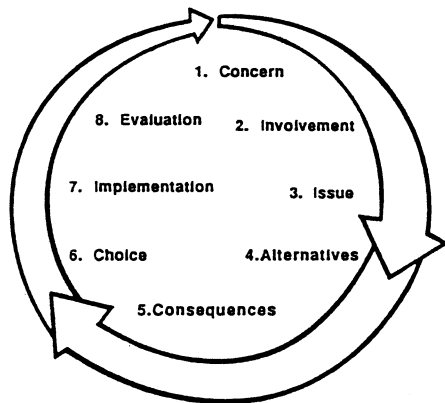
## Getting Started

It is not easy for our policymakers to find out the variety of public opinions on an issue. Therefore, it is the responsibility of citizens to become involved. To become involved, you need two things: (1) **commitment** to find out the facts, organize your efforts, and maintain the patience to see things through and (2) **common sense** to evaluate each possible solution and express your opinions to the people in a position to respond to your concern.

Have you ever had a cause in the back of your mind? Is there a concern tugging at you, a community problem that someone should do something about? Could that someone be **YOU**? It may be a scary thought at first, but individuals and families are finding out that they can change things. **They can make a positive difference** in their community, their state, the nation and maybe even the world.

## Issue Evolution

As an active citizen interested in making a difference in your community and state, you should be aware of how public issues develop and evolve. In most cases, the evolutionary pattern of public issues is very similar. Understanding this pattern might help an individual understand how to become involved in making public decisions related to the issue. Figure 1 illustrates how public issues develop and are resolved.



**Figure 1. Phases of Issue Evolution**

Issues do not just happen; they spring from (1) a **concern** or aggravation, or someone's vision of what could be. If this concern is shared by other people, they begin their (2) **involvement** by means of informal discussion. As more people become involved in the concern, communication becomes more complex. Finally, (3) the **issue** emerges.

The discussion of issues usually generates differing ideas as to what could be done. These are (4) **alternative solutions**, each of which may be evaluated in terms of (5) its **consequences**. What will be gained or lost? Who will benefit? Who will lose? How much difference will it make? Is it feasible?

Eventually (6) a **choice** is made. The choice may be to forget the whole issue and maintain status quo; it may be a referendum or a vote by a public body.

If the new policy is to change something, (7) **implementation** is necessary. As the policy is being implemented, the affected public will be involved in the (8) **evaluation** of the benefits and disadvantages of the choice. Evaluation is not likely to be done in the systematic or analytical way a scientist or policy analyst would do it. Rather, it is a social process in which people who are affected discuss what the policy does and does not do. If some people perceive that the problem is not being resolved by the new policy or the new policy is creating new problems, their concern becomes a

catalyst for renewing the phases of issue evolution. Even when most people are satisfied with the policy, a vocal or powerful minority can renew the cycle with their concern and persistent involvement. In truth, many policies are in a continual state of change; thus, they continue to cycle through phases of evolution.

It is important to note that an issue may die at any stage. In addition, the length of stages is hard to predict. The key in terms of public involvement, however, is that a citizen can become involved at any stage of the issue evolution cycle.

## Making Things Happen

In a democracy, we have the right and the responsibility to make our views known to key decision makers. Here are some strategies to assist you in making things happen.

**Sound Factual Information.** It is important to gather as much factual information as possible on the issue. Remember, information is power. There is no substitute for knowledge about a cause or concern. You need to know where to go to start asking questions about the problem or concern. You need all kinds of information, including **facts**, information known to be true, and **myths**, information thought to be true. There may be conflicting information. Even experts can disagree. You need to know how people feel about the cause: Who supports your view and who opposes it? Why? What public body deals with this issue? What is the current law? What things have been tried in the past? Is anyone else involved? What is their position?

**Networking.** Many of the answers can be gathered by a process known as networking. This seems to be a more and more important method for solving public problems. Networking has been around for years and is a way of making connections with people who have similar concerns or have information which may help. You know someone who knows someone, and if you are persistent, following the leads given, you can often find information or people to help.

It is amazing how good you can feel if your networking activity produces positive action. You need to be a good link in the network. That means helping others when they call you, meeting and getting to know a wide circle of people, searching for a missing bit of information and looking for the answers among the people you know or they know. Networking may also involve interacting with groups that do not agree with your position. Such interaction might strengthen your position or form the basis for compromise.

**Support Groups.** A new group may form as a result of your contacts while networking. Sometimes we find we can join a group already functioning. It may be a service group or agency which has an interest in the problem and will take the leadership in working toward a solution. At any rate, becoming an active member of a group, whether newly formed or already in existence, may help you make your views known to public decision makers.

**Coalitions.** These are alliances, usually between organized groups. They can be informal or formal. One group has a certain goal or view on a problem. Its members contact and become aligned with other organizations who support this goal also. Coalitions can be very effective because they increase the number of people involved and bring more power to your cause. Coalitions are most effective if people and other resources of the organization are committed to the cause.

**Action.** Ultimately, to make change or improve a situation, you must be committed to personal action. This may involve working on an individual basis or in a group. But change requires action.

## Social Change

Creating positive social change is not easy or quickly accomplished. Long-term Oklahoma advocate for children and families, Eva Carter, shares ten steps to social change.

**1. You must care.** Be aware of local and state problems and concerns. Be willing to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

**2. Carefully select your issue.** Determine the most pressing issue in your community. Be sure this is an issue of importance to many people in your community, rather than your personal problem or concern.

**3. Break the issue into small pieces.** Recognize that social change is not a one-time effort. You may only be able to work on one segment of a larger issue.

**4. Choose effective leadership.** Your cause must have a strong, dedicated and visible leader.

**5. Get your facts together.** Do careful research on the issue, and be sure the information you use is correct.

**6. Work with coalitions.** Groups are stronger than an individual. Select groups who believe as you do.

**7. You can't beat something with nothing.** Do not have a negative attitude. Make positive suggestions rather than only attacking the current situation.

**8. Take risk.** It is important to remember that failure is just another way to learn how to do something right. Each person and group has a different perception of risk and that may change with issues and over time. At some point the discomfort with the status quo will overcome the fear of risk. That is the time to act.

**9. Publicize.** The media is powerful. Use a variety of techniques and strategies to get the attention of key decision makers.

**10. Choose your style.** Choose a style that you are comfortable with but that gets decision makers to do what you want. This requires confidence and a sense of humor, as well as the ability to keep dreaming.

Turning ideas into action is often prevented or slowed by inertia, a willingness to accept the current situation as okay, or inevitable or beyond control. Some individuals can overcome this inertia, while others may wait for a group or leader to marshal their efforts. That conservative, do-nothing attitude may be the best choice—the action is inaction. But such a choice made as a result of reasoned consideration is more likely to be supported.

Sojourner Truth was a woman who never gave up talking or fighting against slavery and the mistreatment of women. Against odds far worse than those we and our children face today, she was rudely confronted by a person who said, "Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Why, I don't care any more for your talk than I do about the bite of a flea." Truth replied, "Perhaps not, but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching." Every single person can be a flea and can bite. Enough fleas can make even the biggest dog—the biggest institutions—very uncomfortable.

One person can make a difference. Influencing public decisions requires an alert person, the right circumstances and a willingness to invest time and work. Citizen involvement makes democracy work.

## Citizenship Development

Today's children will become more active and involved citizens as adults if they start learning now about the political process and how to affect it.

Discussing public issues at home can be an effective way to strengthen family communication, support the development of citizenship and foster an orientation of social responsibility. Building that awareness is a long process. Listed below are ways families can interact together to foster interest and a sense of responsibility for citizen involvement.

- **Talk about issues.** Elementary-age children as well as teens can become intensely interested in issues that may affect their future or that deal with discrimination and injustice. State your own opinion, but also try to explain the views of the opposing side. Encourage them to question why people behave in certain ways.
- **Use cartoons.** Political cartoons from magazines and the newspaper are an excellent starting point for discussion with junior high and high school students. Discuss one at dinner each night.
- **Reading the newspaper.** Older children will benefit from reading the newspaper and listening to news programs. Follow-up discussion is very important.
- **Campaign involvement.** If you are involved in any kind of campaign (on an issue or supporting a candidate), let your child also play an active role. School-age children can do an excellent job of helping to distribute leaflets and stuffing envelopes. It will help them feel that they have played a specific part. They can also learn to discuss issues and express their opinions.
- **Group involvement.** If you are working with any kind of group of youth, incorporate information about the governmental process. This is particularly important at election time. Groups such as the League of Women Voters have some quizzes, skits and demonstrations that could be useful.
- **Take part in meetings.** Help youth to understand your local government. School boards and local units of government hold meetings.

Take children to part of a meeting if an issue that they can relate to is being discussed (changes in school rules, bike paths, building a teen center or pool, etc.).

- **Writing letters.** When your child feels strongly about an issue and has had a chance to think out and talk out his/her position, encourage and facilitate writing a letter to the appropriate official. Help your child to understand that one letter will not bring about the desired change, but that elected officials need to hear from all of us.
- **Plan visits** to state and federal capitols if possible.

## Summary

Remember that you are the best judge of what public issues are important and how involved you should be. Your county Extension office may be a good place to start when you want to get involved. Extension staff can offer a variety of objective resources, depending on the issue: facts, research in process, networking, facilitating and organization, just to name a few.

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