

RUN FOR SOMETHING ACTION FUND

Running for Office: Beginner's Guide

Disclaimer: This document is not intended to be legal advice and is not written by attorneys.

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Introduction

Once you've decided to run (woohoo, let's go!) you've probably got two big questions:

- (1) Which office should I run for?
- (2) What do I do to get started?

This guide aims to help you answer those two key questions.

An important note: Every state and even some localities have different rules around running for office. We have [guides for most states](#) on how to file, but do some research to find which office makes sense for you and to make sure you are compliant with local campaign laws. We outline the basics but we suggest a few keywords to Google.

Step 1: Choosing Which Office

TL;DR: Start small. Start local. Pick the problem you want to solve and pick the office that lets you solve it. (Then do a little research.) Think about what it is that you want to change and use that to figure out your office.

IDENTIFY A PROBLEM

Start by asking yourself a very basic question: **What problem do you want to solve?**

A few examples (obviously there are thousands of reasons to run but these are all enough of a reason to get started):

- School funding for the arts
- Voting restrictions in your state
- Your state laws around reproductive rights
- Zoning laws in your city
- Corruption in city government
- Liquor licenses in your town
- Local city pollution limits
- Your school district's protections for trans kids
- The pothole in front of your house

- The lack of stop sign in front of your local grocery store's parking lot
- The difficulty in navigating your local library while on crutches

Not sure where to start? Take a piece of paper and start brainstorming into two lists: "things I hate about where I live" and "things I love about where I live." (After all, maybe the problem you want to solve is taking something good and making it even better.)

I know, it seems cheesy to start with this kind of question.

But this matters. If you're approaching this decision from the **perspective of "what office lets me solve my problem" instead of "what office I can win," everything else gets easier.** Your campaign message is clear. Your work will be based in passion instead of opportunism, and that authenticity will come through when you're talking about why you're running -- a question you'll get asked over and over again. You'll have a clear anchor for your work and you'll be driven every day by something solid and unchanging instead of what could be a whim.

Campaigns can be hard. Focusing back on your answer will make it easier to get out of bed and knock doors in the pouring rain, or to make that final 45th call of the afternoon to a potential donor.

DO A LITTLE RESEARCH

For example, challenging a member of the city council who has been in office for 12 years may be much harder than running for a seat on the school board which is vacant due to a member retiring. Finding what office is right may also depend on your background. Are you an educator that wants to be on school board or an expert in a field that uniquely qualifies you to run for that office? These and other factors can help you decide by doing your research. Here are some factors you should assess:

- Which local offices are on the ballot in 2019?
 - How to find this: Ballotpedia.org; google your city's name + elections + 2019
- Which of those offices appeal to you or fit your background in a unique way (in other words does it make you more qualified for the position?)
 - Not sure what a particular office does? Wikipedia can help or your local government webpage
- Who are your representatives? Unless its an "at-large" position, meaning it spans the particular jurisdiction, you typically can only run for offices in your district, where you live.
 - Are your local and states elected officials running again? Google it to find out.

- Are there “at large” positions in your area? These do not restrict who can run based on which district they live in.
- Is your representative particular controversial in the community? In other words, would a challenger be welcomed?
- Which office do you think you want to run for?
 - What problem do you want to solve? What office lets you solve that problem?
- Who is currently running for that office (again, see resources below for election information on candidates who have already filed to run)
 - Do you know them?
 - Does that affect your decision to run?
- Is the office you seek really appropriate for your background?
 - For example, do you really want to be the Mayor when you’ve never held office?

By asking these questions you can help assess the current political landscape to see if there is an opportunity for you in an upcoming election. After asking some of these questions the answer of “which office” may be easily answered.

Conclusion:

While no one can choose for you which office you should run, it is important to make smart decisions about what is the right fit for your background. Conventional wisdom would say that running for U.S. Senate when you have no experience as an elected official may not make sense because other more experienced and established candidates have a competitive advantage. Running for office is your decision and is part of what makes our democracy great. We encourage you to start with your community first -- but hey, if you want to run for U.S. Senate, rock on.

Step 2: Researching the rules

Find your state’s candidate guide or equivalent

Many states have few accessible documents that give you the information you need to begin running for elected office. For example, Illinois has a 63 page [2017 Candidate Guide](#) that outlines every deadline a candidate must complete to qualify for the ballot. Do your research before filing paperwork to run or opening up a bank account.

Helpful Tips and Next Steps:

- Find your state's governing authority around elections. In some states it is the Secretary of State, in others it is a Board of Elections, Supervisor of Elections, or another governing authority.
- Mark your calendar with important deadlines -- like the deadline to file for ballot access or when campaign finance reports are due. Also look for deadlines like voter registration dates and absentee ballot request dates.
- Find out what information you need to file paperwork with the governing authority. Do you need a treasurer and a bank account? [Here](#) is an example from Wisconsin on the paperwork and information you need to have before filing to run for elected office in 2018.

Step 3: Preparing to file

You've decided after doing research that you want to run and know what your state requires to file the paperwork. The next step is to obtain the necessary items to complete your paperwork to run.

Create a Campaign Calendar

- Once you have completed your research, a helpful exercise is to create a calendar and work backward from the deadlines required to file to run for office.

Helpful Tips and Next Steps:

- **Name your committee:** It's a small step but setting up your committee name is a important. Typically, it includes your name to distinguish it from the other committees. Common examples include: Friends of Jane Doe, John Smith for State Representative, or the Committee to Elect Steve Johnson.
 - Note: This is where your donors will write checks payable to your campaign
- **Identifying a Campaign Treasurer:** This person usually has to sign off on all campaign finance filings which will be discussed below. This is usually a trusted individual who is helping your campaign. In a lot of states, they are considered an officer of your campaign and have the authority to file campaign finance reports on your behalf.
- **Create a bank account:** Find a local financial institution and open up a checking account. It is important that you keep your personal and campaign finance separate for

reporting purposes. Many individuals give their own campaign a donation or a loan to start.

Step 4: Filing campaign paperwork

Now that you have a Treasurer, bank account, and other required information to file, you must actually file your paperwork. Some campaigns use this as an opportunity to put out a press release announcing your candidacy.

Helpful Tips and Next Steps:

- Though it sounds simple, confirm you have all of the pieces you need to file or your submission may be rejected by the governing authority. These may include: A filing fee, completed declaration of candidacy paperwork, a bank account, a treasurer, and/or ballot access petitions (discussed below).
- Remember that in most states, once you file paperwork it becomes accessible to the public. This is helpful to see who else would be a potential opponent.
- Note: Some states require a fee to file to run for office, make sure you research where to make the check out to and have it ready upon filing.

Step 5: Complying with campaign finance rules

By filing paperwork you are creating a campaign committee to run for a set office. This committee has rules and regulations around contributions to your campaign. Running for office requires you in nearly every state to file a record on the regular basis (usually quarterly) of your revenue and disbursements related to campaign expenses. This often includes a line item report of every transaction your campaign has made. **In other words, every donation and expenditure must be tracked.**

Helpful Tips and Next Steps:

- **Do your research:** Again, make sure you understand if there are contribution limits, when the deadlines are to file your reports, and what you are required to disclose in those reports. Many states have helpful guides to this, for example, [here](#) is a campaign finance guide from Indiana.
- Some states have penalties for not disclosing information or not filing. Make sure you are on the right side of the law, it's the easiest way to sink your run for office and

potentially get you into legal trouble if you are not in compliance.

- Make sure your treasurer, staff, and/or volunteers know these rules and you have systems in place to track all contributions and disbursements. All campaigns must keep track of their accounting.

Step 6: Accessing the ballot

This can be overlooked by candidates who are new to the electoral process. Wanting to run for office doesn't automatically equal your name appearing on the ballot. Each state has different requirements on how to get on the ballot, and some require you to submit petitions from voters before or after you file your paperwork to complete the submission.

Examples of Ballot Access

- A one time filing fee to the governing election authority.
- Collection of signatures on a petition from voters or eligible voters
 - Note: In some states you can file to run for office and submit your petitions later, check to see the deadlines for this process.
- Filing a declaration of candidacy, in some states a simple form is all you need.
- Being nominated by a major political party to appear on the ballot.

Helpful Tips:

- Again, do your research and know the process. Every election there are candidates who do not qualify for the ballot and therefore are ineligible to run for elected office because they did not follow the ballot access process correctly.
- Do not deviate from petition forms that are created by the governing election authority. In other words, if you don't have to create your own, use the ones readily available. [Here](#) is an example from Pennsylvania where you use the Secretary of State's website to create your petition.
- Collect more signatures than the minimum. Most states have a process for validating signatures. People get kicked off the ballot every year across the country for filing too few valid signatures.

Step 7: Meeting Deadlines

One of the most important things to remember is that running for office has rules and deadlines. In order to successfully run for office, each deadline must be hit--there are no extensions.

Important deadlines to keep in mind are:

- Filing to run for office
- Filing campaign finance reports
- Submitting ballot access petitions
- Primary election date (if applicable)
- General election date

This illustrates the deadlines necessary to file for a Virginia Delegate candidate:



★ VIRGINIA ★
DEPARTMENT of ELECTIONS

10 Election Calendar – November 2017 General Election

Election Type	Election Date	Deadlines for Filing			Last Day to Register to Vote	Deadline to Apply for Absentee Ballot
		Candidate Declarations/Petitions	Other Candidate Forms	Party Chairs Certify Candidates		
Party nominations may be made no earlier than April 27 and must be completed by 7:00 p.m., June 13, 2017 (§ 24.2-510)						
Primary	June 13 § 24.2-515	March 13 at 12:00 p.m. to March 30 at 5:00 p.m. § 24.2-522	March 30 at 5:00 p.m. § 24.2-503	April 4 at 5:00 p.m. § 24.2-527	May 22 § 24.2-414, 416	In Person: June 10 By Mail or Online: June 6 at 5:00 p.m. §§ 24.2-701(A), (B)(1), (B)(2)
General	November 7 § 24.2-101	Non-Party Candidates June 13 at 7:00 p.m. § 24.2-507	All Candidates June 13 at 7:00 p.m. § 24.2-503	June 19 at 5:00 p.m. § 24.2-511(B)	October 16 § 24.2-416	In Person: November 4 By Mail or Online: October 31 at 5:00 p.m. §§ 24.2-701(A), (B)(1), (B)(2)
<small>*Notification of adoption of primary must be filed with the Department of Elections by the party chair for the election district no sooner than February 8, 2017 nor later than February 28, 2017. (§ 24.2-516) *See the following pages for specifics as to forms required and where each form must be filed. The bulletin and forms are available on our website free of charge: http://elections.virginia.gov/index.php/candidatepac-info/becoming-a-candidate/ *Forms used by political party chairmen for the purpose of certifying the party's nominee to the Department of Elections will be emailed to each legislative district chairman. During any election, the polls are required to open at 6:00 a.m. and close at 7:00 p.m. (§ 24.2-603)</small>						

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voice: 804-864-8901
 voice toll-free: 800-552-9745
 Email: info@elections.virginia.gov

This illustrates the campaign finance filing deadlines for a Virginia Delegates, notice there are numerous reports that need to be filed:



Candidate Committees Whose Office is Not on the Ballot in 2017¹

Activity Beginning	Activity Ending	Report Due
January 1, 2017	June 30, 2017	July 17, 2017
July 1, 2017	December 31, 2017	January 16, 2018

Candidate Committee Whose Office is on the Ballot on November 7, 2017²

Activity Beginning	Activity Ending	Report Due
January 1, 2017	March 31, 2017	April 17, 2017
April 1, 2017	June 1, 2017	June 5, 2017
June 2, 2017	June 30, 2017	July 17, 2017
July 1, 2017	August 31, 2017	September 15, 2017
September 1, 2017	September 30, 2017	October 16, 2017
October 1, 2017	October 26, 2017	October 30, 2017
October 27, 2017	November 30, 2017	December 7, 2017
December 1, 2017	December 31, 2017	January 16, 2018

Large pre-election contribution reporting for the June primary election begins June 2, 2017.³
Large pre-election contribution reporting for the November general election begins October 27, 2017.

Candidate Committee Whose Office is on the Ballot on May 2, 2017⁴

Activity Beginning	Activity Ending	Report Due
January 1, 2017	February, 23 2017	February 27, 2017 ⁵
January 1, 2017 ⁶	March 31, 2017	April 17, 2017
April 1, 2017	April 20, 2017	April 24, 2017
April 21, 2017	June 10, 2017	June 15, 2017
June 11, 2017	June 30, 2017	July 17, 2017
July 1, 2017	December 31, 2017	January 16, 2018

Large pre-election contribution reporting for the March primary election begins February 24, 2017.
Large pre-election contribution reporting for the May general election begins April 21, 2017.

Resources

State Election Websites with Candidate Guides:

[Alabama](#)

[Alaska](#)

[Arizona](#)

[Arkansas](#)

[California](#)

[Colorado](#)

[Connecticut](#)

[Delaware](#)

[Florida](#)

[Georgia](#)

[Hawaii](#)

[Idaho](#)

[Illinois](#)

[Indiana](#)

[Iowa](#)

[Kansas](#)

[Kentucky](#)

[Louisiana](#)

[Maine](#)

[Maryland](#)

[Massachusetts](#)

[Michigan](#)

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[Mississippi](#)

[Missouri](#)

[Montana](#)

[Nebraska](#)

[Nevada](#)

[New Hampshire](#)

[New Jersey](#)

[New Mexico](#)

[New York](#)

[North Carolina](#)

[North Dakota](#)

[Ohio](#)

[Oklahoma](#)

[Oregon](#)

[Pennsylvania](#)

[Rhode Island](#)

[South Carolina](#)

[South Dakota](#)
[Tennessee](#)
[Texas](#)
[Utah](#)

[Vermont](#)
[Virginia](#)
[Washington](#)
[West Virginia](#)

[Wisconsin](#)
[Wyoming](#)

Political Parties

If you are running for a partisan office, consider reaching out to your local party organization. Most states have party organizations on the county level. Just google your state party or county party to get more information to connect with them. While every state party is different, some may be helpful resources to you.

Terminology

Running for elected office can be initially intimidating because there are many terms, forms, and processes that may be unfamiliar to new candidates. Here are a few definitions to help orient you around the process:

- **Committee:** A committee is formed to elect an individual for office. While it may be counterintuitive to think that a person running for office as a committee. A campaign files its reports, collects its checks, and uses it as a disclaimer for campaign materials as a committee, not the individual person. Think of it as forming a company.
- **Campaign Finance:** The process of transparency in candidates running for office. This is usually a division of state government that tracks, stores, publishes, and punishes delinquencies on reports on each candidate in the interest of the public information.
- **Campaign Finance Report:** A detailed and line itemed report on every individual contribution and disbursement from a campaign committee. Every state has set deadlines for these reports to be filed which cover a certain period of time since the last report.
- **Ballot Access:** The process of getting a candidate's name on the ballot. This process varies widely between states but know that having your name on the ballot is usually a separate process from filing your paperwork.
- **Declaration of Candidacy:** This is a common initial form to run for office. It generally becomes public quickly and serves as the organizational document of your committee. This is typically one of a half of dozen forms needed to run for office.
- **Nomination Petition:** A petition required in some states to gain access to the ballot. Typically a nomination petition asks registered voters in the appropriate district to sign

to agree that you should be on the ballot (not that they are committing to voting for you). States have various signature threshold requirements.