

## Before the Campaign

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**B**y the time the campaign starts, some candidates will already have a significant advantage. Candidates with high name recognition among voters, especially those who have developed a reputation as a leader in the community, are much more likely to be elected. You can work hard to improve your image during the campaign, but laying the groundwork in advance will make your task much easier. Take the time to get involved, informed, and well known in your community before the campaign begins; it will pay valuable dividends once you decide to run.

Candidates who become involved in local politics before the campaign have several advantages.

1. They can develop relationships with local leaders, including political party central committee members, community and civic group directors, and local public officials and ask for their endorsements.
2. They may be able to discourage challengers by establishing themselves as the clear front-runner for an office.
3. They can acquire knowledge and experience that will prepare them to discuss local issues and work with local government.
4. They can develop important contacts and supporters who are likely to offer help once the campaign is underway. Experience shows that people are more likely to offer help, including organizational and financial support, if they have a relationship with the candidate before the campaign.

## Learning about the Needs and Concerns of Your Constituency

To successfully campaign for local office, you will need to convince voters that you are prepared to address their concerns and that you have the skills, knowledge, and experience to be an effective advocate for their interests. There are many ways to become familiar with the workings of local government so you are prepared when the campaign begins.

- **Keep up with local news, controversies, and concerns.**

Be on the lookout for any reports of local problems and proposals for possible solutions. Read editorials and letters to the editor in the local papers, listen to local talk radio, and attend local political meetings. When controversies arise over local issues, pay attention to the different policy solutions proposed by local leaders, including their costs and benefits, and their supporters and opponents.

- **Get involved with local governance.**

Attend meetings of the school board, the city council, the county board of supervisors, and local government agencies like the city planning and zoning commissions. In most cities, there are opportunities to participate on advisory panels or citizen review boards. Make it known that you would like to contribute to local decision making through these venues.

- **Join community organizations.**

Civic groups such as the League of Women's Voters, the Kiwanis Club, and Rotary International provide opportunities to network with active, local community members. Helping with local charities can connect you to local problems and concerned individuals. Boards of local charities like the United Way provide experience with fundraising and connections with local benefactors. Neighborhood and religious associations can offer early leadership positions and committee responsibilities. Participation in organizations like the Chamber of Commerce and local unions can build ties for future organizing. Local ideological, partisan, and single-issue groups provide opportunities to learn and practice social advocacy.

- **Talk with civic leaders.**

Before deciding to run for local office, make sure you get a broad sense of the problems and debates in your community by talking to a diverse group of stakeholders. These might include local government administrators, teachers, police officers, religious leaders, developers, businesspeople, activists, and union leaders. Build contacts with people who are knowledgeable in the local policy areas that you think are important.

- **Learn about the concerns of voters.**

Meet with representative groups of local voters. Regularly talk about local issues with people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, people from different neighborhoods and age groups, and people with different political opinions. It is always better to know the range of opinions in your community.

## Learning about the Demands of the Office

Before you run for office, be sure that you truly want to win. Read the description of the office you are seeking and review the history of those who have held the office before you. Talk with current and former office holders and their staffs about the responsibilities and demands of the job. Attend relevant meetings, read news articles, and talk to public officials in offices that work with the one you are interested in assuming.

■ **BRIGHT IDEA: Identify Opportunities to Organize Coalitions**

Coalitions can be valuable sources of volunteers and financial support for your campaign. Consider approaching neighborhood associations, nonprofit advocacy groups, local businesses, church groups, labor groups, and service clubs with a request to support your candidacy. Form coalitions around issues that are central to your campaign, such as development (people interested in environmental or planning issues), crime (parents, business owners, youth organizations), or any other key local issue. You can also build coalitions regionally (by neighborhood) or by trade and profession.

## Learning about What It Takes to Win

Putting your name before the voters as a candidate for local office is a worthwhile endeavor that contributes to the success of democracy—but it is not an easy task. If you are thinking of running, make sure you know what you are getting into. The first thing to remember is that most candidates lose in any given election. Even

those who win usually make large sacrifices to succeed. Here are some of the requirements:

- **Time and Effort**

Running for office requires a significant amount of time and effort. Campaigning will take time away from your family, your work, and your

social life. You will enjoy many parts of the campaign, but others may seem tedious (though necessary) and time-consuming.

- **Money**

Most people who run for office use at least some of their own money to campaign. Some candidates even acquire significant debt in an effort to win. One immediate expense is the cost of not working or working less during the campaign. Even if you do not use your own money, remember that asking for donations can be difficult. It takes persistence and a willingness to ask friends for money.

- **Organization**

Successful campaigns involve lots of people. You will need the help of many volunteers to get your message out and mobilize voters. As a candidate, you will be the leader of an organization for which you are legally responsible. You will have to rely on others and guide their activities, keep track of details, and respond to the concerns of many people.

- **Skills**

Being a candidate requires skills that may be different from those required for success in public governance or private life. Good campaigners can apply their skills to the different demands of the campaign, including public relations, financial and personnel management, research, and communication.

- **A Thick Skin**

As a candidate, you should expect to be asked about things you might consider private, including your education and employment history, business contacts, financial dealings, and family life. Your opponent(s) may say negative things about you. The scrutiny that candidates are frequently subjected to is unavoidable. To withstand the rigors of campaigning, you will need to develop a thick skin.

Do not let this list deter you from pursuing your goal of elected office. Instead, be aware of the demands involved in running for office, weigh them accordingly when you decide to run, and prepare to deal with them when they arise.

## Assessing Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Every public official has strengths and weaknesses. Before you become a candidate, assess your strengths and weaknesses both as a candidate and as an officeholder. Think about how others perceive you and how they might respond to your candidacy. Start by asking yourself what your friends like and dislike about you. Then think about any positive or negative comments that strangers sometimes make about you and how they might be relevant in the political arena.

When assessing your strengths, think about your political, interpersonal, and work-related skills, your background and experience, and any areas of expertise that you have developed that can be related to the office that you are seeking. How might your past experiences help you to be a strong candidate or officeholder? Think broadly and remember that being an effective public official requires a diverse set of skills. You should assess your strengths for your own benefit, so that you can rely upon them while you campaign, but also think about how you might describe them to others.

It is even more important to know your weaknesses. Everyone has weaknesses. Make sure that you are aware of yours so that you can address them before and, if necessary, during the campaign. If you lack experience or skills in particular areas that you will need to draw upon during the campaign, try to gain experience in these areas or develop new skills before the campaign begins. Identify other strengths that might allow you to work around your weaknesses. Think of ways to answer criticisms that might be raised about your weaknesses, and how you might recast them as strengths.

## Deciding Whether or Not to Run for Office

After you have finished determining what is involved in running for office and assessing your strengths and weaknesses, take time to decide whether or not to run for office. Talk to everyone you trust about your decision and make sure you get a diverse range of views. Remember that your candidacy will impact your family, business associates, and friends; make sure you get the opinions of anyone who might be adversely affected.

Try to accurately assess the challenges involved in winning and your likelihood of victory. Talking to someone who has held office or run for office many times should give you a good sense of the difficulties, but you should also be attentive to the particular characteristics of the office for which you may run and the opponent(s) you may face.

## Conclusion: Five Things to Know before You Start

### 1. Local involvement should not start with the campaign.

Before you start, get involved with local politics and local organizations to learn more about and establish yourself in your community.

### 2. Learn about the people of your community and their concerns.

Before the campaign, find out more about the characteristics of the community, local problems, and proposed solutions. Make sure the perspectives you hear reflect the differences of opinion and the controversies in your community.

### 3. Start to build a base of support.

Identify individuals and groups who are likely to support your candidacy. Tell them you are thinking of running and involve them in your decision-making process.

### 4. Know the difficulties before you enter the race.

Be aware of the difficult tasks that all candidates face and how your specific weaknesses might affect your candidacy.

#### ■ BRIGHT IDEA: Approach Potential Supporters Early

Ideally, potential coalition members should be approached before you announce your candidacy or shortly thereafter. This can give you a sense of your support base before you commit to a full campaign. Early coalition-building efforts make groups feel involved in your decision-making process and more committed to the campaign. Research the interests and concerns of groups in your community; remember, the outreach process is about identifying and responding to people's concerns.

**5. Take your decision to be a candidate seriously.**

Instead of deciding to run for office on a whim, be realistic about the challenges and rewards of running and involve others when making your decision.