Mental Health and Wellness Through Civic Participation: Why Your Opinion Matters
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This report discusses civic engagement as a form of community participation for people with psychiatric disabilities.

If you wish to use any material from this document, we recommend the following citation:

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What is Civic Engagement?

Civic engagement is about being involved in your community and wanting it to be a better place for all the people that live there. There are lots of ways to get involved; you can help clean up a local park, organize a community picnic, or vote for mayor. Although many things are considered ‘civic engagement,’ this document focuses primarily on political engagement. This means expressing your political opinions and trying to have an impact on local, state, and federal government decisions, whether that means writing letters, running for office or dedicating time to a cause you believe in.

Being involved politically could mean volunteering at a polling place, attending a political rally or casting a vote. Anyone can be politically engaged, whether their community includes a few hundred people in a small town or a few hundred million in a nation. When citizens are engaged, communities become better places to live. Civic engagement gives you the opportunity to act on your views and values, dedicating time and resources to a cause that is important to you.

Having a mental illness does not limit your ability to be actively involved in government. In fact, research shows that people with mental illnesses participate in government the same ways all other citizens do. For example, researchers at the Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in New York compared voters with and without mental illnesses and found that both groups were able to cast intelligent and thoughtful votes based on their own self-interest [7].

The Temple University Collaborative is dedicated to community participation in all its forms, including civic activity. We believe that people with serious mental illnesses should be able to do anything and everything they want, including working to change the world around them. Some people with mental health issues are understandably focused on issues related to mental illness, but we also understand that you have opinions on issues that are unrelated to mental health [1].

Our center has several products available that make it easier to become engaged in civics. These products are all available on our website. Under the website’s ‘Community Inclusion Topics and Resources’ section, there are many resources available, including a guide that will explain the voting rights of people with disabilities, a document that answers some of the most common questions regarding voters’ rights, and a resource that provides some fun examples of ways to get involved in your community [1].

Take a First Step

Check out our civic engagement resources at tucollaborative.org.
Why You Should Get Involved

Anyone getting involved in their government is likely to experience benefits for both themselves and the community around them. Some examples of these benefits are listed below.

**Improve Your Community**

Though some people wrongly believe that the mentally ill are not able to vote effectively, this is not true. One study shows that voting patterns of people with mental illnesses are the same as the general population [6]. Participating in your government by voting can make you feel more connected with your community and, it means that more citizens are contributing to their government, so decisions will be more representative of what the public wants. The result of this is a more effective system, and a better nation overall.

**Make New Friends**

Volunteering for an organization, attending a campaign event, or going to the polls can help create connections that become friendships. This can be particularly helpful for older adults, as it has been found that volunteering helps them stay socially involved after retirement, but persons of all ages can benefit from getting involved [4]. Increasing social connections is one of the most important aspects of civic engagement and can aid in increasing self-efficacy.

**Become Healthier**

Research suggests that persons who are more engaged in their community, including government, have better physical health [4]. People who volunteer tend to have lower disability rates and live longer and happier lives. This relationship between volunteering and health includes both physical and mental health.

**Increase Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem is someone’s confidence in their abilities and belief that they are able to succeed in whatever goals they set for themselves. Political engagement can not only increase this feeling but it can also increase awareness of personal values and the world as a whole [17]. It increases self-esteem and life satisfaction while allowing you to form new friendships and make a change in the community along the way [18].

**Feel Better Long Term**

Political engagement is not a cure for any type of mental illness, but it can help you feel better long term. Volunteering for a campaign or voting cannot replace mental health care, but it can certainly help overall wellbeing, as well as prevent possible issues in the future [18].
Make a Difference

Persons with mental illnesses have used civic engagement to accomplish great things for their community in the past. The successes of the disability community cannot be attributed to one person or group of people, but rather a large community of disabled persons, advocates and caretakers. Collectively, they held sit-ins, sent letters, called representatives and told their stories to secure disability rights in the United States [8]. The disability movement began with the Rehabilitation Act of 1974, saw great success with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1989 and continues to this day [9].

Remember: Your Voice Matters

The most important part of civic engagement is recognizing the power that you have when you share your thoughts. This document will outline how to identify your views and begin to work towards the world that you want to live in. We will focus on government engagement via voting, political activism, raising consciousness around an issue and the work that goes into actually making change happen.

Identify Your Views

Identifying your own views on important topics is a crucial first step when getting involved in government. Learn what the issues are and consider your opinions on them. Make sure that you focus on the facts and are open to hearing the opinions of others; as you learn more about an issue, you may change your mind about it. Most political issues are complicated and have many possible solutions. Consider a few of the questions below as a start.

Take a First Step

Talk to someone who is involved in their government. This could be a friend of yours who votes regularly or a family member who volunteers for a political organization. Ask them why they do what they do and what it means to them.
These are just a few questions that represent large issues in American politics right now; there are many other issues that you may be interested in. It’s also possible that you do not have an opinion on some of these topics, and that is also fine; there are many issues constantly being debated within our government, and some of them may not interest or affect you. Consider each of the questions above thoroughly, then ask your friends and family what they think, or read an article about the topic. Learning more about an issue may change your opinion; try to focus more on facts than opinions when forming your views [10].

No matter what your opinion on something is, it is important to remember that someone may disagree with you. Remember that everyone is entitled to their own opinion and that part of being a respectful citizen means accepting when someone disagrees with you.

**Choosing your Party**

Joining a political party is another way to get involved in politics. A political party is a group of people who generally share the same views on issues facing the nation, and have similar ideas on how to achieve their common goals. A political party chooses candidates to run for elected office who promise to uphold their ideals if they win. In order to vote in the United States you must register to be part of a political party. When choosing a party, consider your views as well as the views of the party and make sure they generally line up. Below is a list of some political parties in the United States. If none of the parties below interest you, **there are plenty of other options**!
Political Parties in the United States

American Independent Party
The American Independent Party believes in liberty and justice for all under God. This party strives to keep the United States safe and independent while focusing on family, marriage and work. The party seeks to follow the Constitution as originally written and uphold the principles of the Declaration of Independence.

For more information: 707-359-4884 or www.independentamericanparty.org

Democratic Party
The Democratic Party believes that it is the role of the government to protect the rights of citizens, provide quality education for all, respect a woman’s right to choose, ensure a stable and safe nation and solidify a strong and expanding economy that all Americans can benefit from.

For more information: 202-863-8000 or www.democrats.org

Green Party
The Green Party believes in peace, social justice, economic justice, nonviolence, grassroots democracy, respect for diversity, women’s rights and protection of the environment. They advocate for promotion of peace and protecting the planet and its people.

For more information: 202-319-7191 or www.gp.org

Libertarian Party
The Libertarian Party believes that each citizen, not the government, should decide how to run their life. This means that everyone makes their own decisions about their finances, family and education. Ideally, the government does not regulate or mandate anything.

For more information: 800-353-2867 or www.lp.org

Peace and Freedom Party
The Peace and Freedom party stands for equal rights, protection of the earth, peace promotion, a good standard of living for all and defense of citizens’ rights. They seek to use the wealth of the country to make life better for everyone.

For more information: 951-787-0318 or www.peaceandfreedom.org

Republican Party
The Republican party believes that our military must be strong, taxation should be simple and fair and that government should be smaller and more efficient. Republicans want to honor the Constitution as written and give power to citizens to make their own decisions about education and healthcare.

For more information: 202-863-8500 or www.gop.com

Don’t see a party that’s right for you? Don’t worry, there are plenty more to choose from!

Staying Informed

Staying up-to-date on current events is another important part of engaging with your government and community. This is how you keep up with topics that you think are important. You can get your news from the television, radio, newspaper or internet-whichever is easiest for you! However, it is important to understand how to identify a reliable news source. Some sources are known for publishing stories that have little evidence, stretch the truth, or even print lies. Check out these tips for finding a great source:

Detecting a Good News Source

Pay attention to the URL of an online news source, if a site ends in “.com” it is likely a good source, but if it ends in something like “.com.co” you should be more skeptical.

The headline of an article should be short and to the point; also, it should accurately reflect what the article is about.

If an article has pictures included in it, they should be relevant to the story and taken by a photographer at the newspaper.

Pay attention to the number of quotes an article has. Most articles should have at least one outside source to quote.

The person being quoted in an article is important. For example, In an article about a sale at a department store, the store manager would be a good source to hear from.

Be on the lookout for satire; these articles use humor, irony and sarcasm to make their point. As a result, they can be confusing sources of news.

If you come across an article that seems questionable, do not share it with other people. Once you find a news source you like, continue to use it. If you are able, consider donating to the news sources you believe are doing valuable work. This could mean many things, including getting a subscription to your local paper, buying a copy of a magazine you enjoy or donating to your public radio [11].

Be sure to consume news from several different sources so that your views are not affected by reporting bias. Reporting bias is when a news source includes an opinion in their reporting. There are many news sources that have no reporting bias, but there are also many who will clearly lean in one political direction over another. For example, if a
liberal president is in office, a liberal-leaning paper will be more likely to praise the president and a conservative-leaning paper is more likely to criticize them.

Sources without bias are typically reliable places to get news; however, news sources with bias can still produce reputable news. It is important to remember that even though a source is trustworthy, not every article will be without error; make sure to think carefully about your news sources. Ask yourself, “Do I think the person who is telling this story is giving a fair perspective?” Reading news from a variety of sources and from a variety of viewpoints will make you a more informed citizen [20].

Take a First Step

Pick up a copy of your local newspaper or go online and check out a few articles. Take note of papers that you enjoy and try to identify bias in the articles you read.

Where to Start

Now that you have well established views and are aware of what is going on in the news, it’s time to think about how you can get involved in your government! The first step is deciding whether you want to get involved in federal, state or local government. Each level of government offers unique opportunities to make different kinds of impacts.

Federal Government

The federal government has power over the entire nation and is comprised of three branches: the executive, legislative and judicial. Each branch holds a different set of responsibilities; the three must work together to create and uphold laws as well as pass yearly budgets. The president, vice president and cabinet comprise the executive branch [12]. The legislative branch, also known as Congress, has two parts: the Senate and the House of Representatives. The number of representatives each state sends to the House is dependent on population, but each state gets to send two representatives to the Senate, no matter their population [13]. The nine judges currently serving on the Supreme Court comprise the judicial branch; each judge is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate [14]. Together, these three branches are responsible for the entire nation and any powers they don’t have belong to state and local governments.

State Government

The tenth amendment to the Constitution says that all powers not granted to the federal government are left to the states. The state government oversees things such as public schools, police departments and the DMV. State governments are typically
organized similarly to the federal government. Each state has its own constitution; to create laws they have a legislature and to deal with legal issues they have a state Supreme Court. The leader of each state is the Governor, this person has similar powers in each state that the president does in the nation [15]. State governments can also lend some of their powers to local governments.

**Local Government**

The definition of local government is a bit loose; it can include an entire county or just be within the limits of a city or town. Also called municipal governments, they are any area defined as a city, town, borough, village or township. These municipalities can vary greatly in size, from a few hundred people to a few million. Local governments are typically responsible for parks and recreation, police and fire departments, housing services, emergency medical services, municipal courts and transportation services. These governments must be granted power by the state before they begin work [15].

**Why Level of Engagement Matters**

Different levels of government provide different opportunities. Local governments usually work with smaller groups of people; this means that creating real change is simpler, but the impact of that change is not as large. Getting involved in state government provides the opportunity to create bigger change, but it may be more difficult to have your individual voice heard. At the federal level it will be very difficult to have your ideas heard and acted on, but the work you do may contribute to an issue that affects the entire nation. There are upsides and downsides to each level of engagement, but all are equally as meaningful.

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**Take a First Step**

Figure out who is representing you in government. Make a list of your Congressmen/women, State representatives and local officials to refer to when it comes time to vote or share your opinion.

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**Connecting with the Right People**

Knowing what you want to do to be involved in government is a great first step, but knowing who to contact and what your options are can be difficult. There are millions of opportunities available and it can be tricky to figure out just what you want to do. Here’s a simple list that will get you started:
Contact your Representative

One way to get involved in any government is by forming a relationship with your elected officials. If you have an opinion about an issue being discussed in Washington D.C., it is your right to reach out and share it with your representative. You can do this by calling their office or by sending a thoughtful and respectful letter or email. If enough people are reaching out to a representative, their vote may be swayed in favor of what citizens are asking for [16].

A great place to start is by figuring out who your representatives are and how to contact them. Read up on your representative and their views; reach out to them about the issues that you think are important. Keep in mind that representatives get a lot of messages and that they may not be able to get back to you directly, instead having someone on their staff take your message or read your letter. Even if your representative is not directly getting your message, it does not mean they do not hear you. Make sure to keep interactions professional, focus on facts and make your argument about what you believe the right thing to do is.

Sign a Petition

Signing a petition is one of the simplest ways to be involved in your government and one of the best ways to bring attention to topics that are important to citizens. Petitions are successful in getting the attention of elected officials [16]. Visit the White House petition website to create or sign petitions that are relevant to the federal government. There, you can find popular petitions or create your own. If a petition gets 100,000 signatures within 30 days after creation, the White House has pledged to respond to it. This is a wonderful and simple way to have your voice heard and to learn more about the opinions of other citizens [20].

Go to an Organized Protest or March

Attending a protest or march for something can be another fun and easy way to support a cause that is important to you. These should be peaceful and organized; remember to stay respectful while protesting or marching. If a march becomes violent, does not seem legal or you feel unsafe, leave the event and go somewhere you feel more comfortable. Attending a march or protest can help you meet other people with similar views as you and provides an opportunity to express your thoughts. Protests and marches do not occur regularly so it can be difficult to hear about them. Large cities typically have protest calendars online that you can check to see if anything is coming up. You can also keep up with this on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which often have information about upcoming events. If you do not have access to those resources or are interested in a particular subject you can find the local chapter of an activist group and they will be able to inform you of any upcoming events [21].

Attend a Speech or Political Rally

Going to a speech, town hall meeting, or rally is a great way to learn more about a political party, candidate and the people who share your views. These events are
typically held by candidates running for office and are free to the public. Candidates running for local, state or federal office will hold these rallies and make speeches so you can get exposure to all levels of government by attending them. These events are usually held in public places: government buildings, schools or religious centers and anyone is welcome to attend and listen to what the candidate has to say. They are usually announced online, either via social media or on a candidate’s website. If you are interested in seeing a particular candidate, you could reach out to their office or your party to see if they have any events coming up near you.

**Contribute Time or Money to a Candidate**

Another way to involve yourself is to join a campaign; all candidates need help with getting the word out. This could mean making calls, putting up flyers or going door to door and talking to voters about issues that matter to you. If you don’t want to support a particular candidate, you can volunteer to help register voters or help out at your local polling place to ensure that everyone gets their voice heard. You can also run for office yourself if you wish to take a leadership role in your community.

**Donate Time or Money to a Political Organization**

If you are interested in supporting a cause that means a lot to you, there are many different political organizations that you can join, work, or volunteer for. These organizations have a wide variety of missions and are always looking for support. There are hundreds of political organizations in the United States and internationally and, if you look around, you’ll be able to find the one that supports a cause you feel passionately about.

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**Take a First Step**

Research the local chapter of a political organization you are interested in or find the phone number of one of your representatives you may want to reach out to.

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**Voting**

Our nation was created with a vision that citizens should have the ability to have an input in their government, so all citizens were granted the right to vote. However, there were limitations on that right in 1776 that excluded many people from voting. Since then, non-land owners, African-Americans and women have gained the right to vote. Being able to vote is a privilege that many people have fought for throughout history, and voting is among the best ways to have your individual voice heard. Before you go to the polls on Election Day, review the checklist below to get ready.
Eligibility

You are eligible to vote in any local, state or federal election if you are a US citizen and are at least eighteen years old. If you live in a US territory you can vote in local elections, but you cannot vote in presidential elections. Also, if you are not a US citizen, or if you live in certain states and you are mentally incapacitated or have been convicted of a felony, you cannot vote. Stick to these simple eligibility guidelines to find out if you can vote and, if you are eligible, get yourself registered!

Register to Vote

Once you are sure that you are eligible to vote, the first step is to register. Many states will allow you to register online, but you can also register in person at your local election office. An election office can include the DMV, armed service recruitment centers and state or public assistance offices as well as any government centers near your home. At the election office you can fill out the national voter registration form, which can also be downloaded offline and mailed in to your local election office. Once you have submitted the form it should take a few weeks to process and then you will be mailed your voter registration certificate. Also, if you are a US citizen but you are not going to be home for Election Day, you can register to vote absentee or to vote early. This applies most often to students who attend school out of the state or country, soldiers and citizens who live overseas.

When to Vote

Knowing when to vote is incredibly important: the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November is Election Day in the United States. Every four years we elect a new President, every two years we elect representatives for the House of Representatives and every two years we elect one third of the Senate. These are not the only elections to pay attention to; state or local elections can be held in any year, regardless of where the federal government is in its cycle. Also, if an elected official leaves office for any reason, a special election will be held to replace them. There are often several opportunities to vote per year.

Choosing a Candidate

Before you go to cast your vote, think about who you want to elect to office. Before the election, you can download a sample ballot from an election website, this way you know what your options are and you can research the candidates before going to the polls. Many ballots will also have questions on them about governmental issues that officials have decided to take to the people – for example, you may be asked to vote on whether the local parks and recreation department should dedicate funds to build a new park in your community.

Leading up to Election Day, there are many opportunities to get to know the candidates. All candidates have to write an official platform where they outline their views on important issues and explain what they would like to do if elected. This is a great place to start when learning about a candidate. Other ways to get information
include watching interviews, reviewing the candidate’s website or attending campaign rallies to see the candidate speak.

**Preparing to Vote**

The next step is figuring out where and how you can vote once Election Day comes. The address of your polling place should be printed on your voter registration, but if you are unsure check online call your local election office. Typically, polling places are community areas such as schools or religious centers.

**Going to the Polls**

It is important to know whether or not you will need to bring an ID to your polling place; these laws vary from state to state; you can check online, your local election office, or at the library to see if you need an ID in your state. Even if your state does not require you to show an ID to vote, you may still have to sign a sheet of paper confirming your identity. These precautions are put in place so voting stays fair. If you live in a state that requires an ID to vote, be sure that the name and information on that ID match the information on your voter registration.

If someone at the polls tries to keep you from voting it is called voter intimidation. This could mean spreading incorrect information, posing as an election official or questioning someone’s ability to vote, even if they are registered. If you get to the polls and feel as though someone is trying to keep you or anyone else from voting you can contact the Election Protection Hotline at 1-866-687-8683 or contact your local or state officials [23].

Once you are registered, know when to vote, where to vote and what to bring to the polls, you can cast your vote! Remember that your voice is just as important as every other American and that putting in the effort to get registered and research candidates is all worth it when you finally go to the polls.

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**Take a First Step**

Call your local election office to find out how to register to vote. If you are already registered, check to make sure that all of your information is up to date.

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**What’s the Big Idea?**

Being engaged in your community and your government is incredibly important. Not only is it mentally and physically healthy, but the more citizens who are engaged in their community, the better the community becomes as a whole. By knowing what your views are and how to stay informed and engaged, you become far more powerful as a
citizen, and the nation is strengthened as a result. However, the most important thing to remember when it comes to civic engagement is that your voice matters. Having a mental illness does not diminish your opinions or make your concerns less important. What you think truly matters and when you tell a friend, call a senator, attend a protest or cast your vote, your voice is being heard.
## Resources for Further Engagement

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><a href="http://political-party.net/">http://political-party.net/</a></td>
<td>This is a full list of all the registered political parties in the United States, it goes beyond the list provided within the document.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><a href="http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/">www.house.gov/representatives/find/</a></td>
<td>This site allows you to find your elected representatives. All you have to do is enter your zip code or full home address and it will give you an accurate list of your officials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><a href="http://www.volunteer.gov">www.volunteer.gov</a></td>
<td>This site can direct you towards millions of different volunteer opportunities. They have a calendar of events that displays events, but you can also search by state or by keywords.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><a href="http://www.usa.gov/elected-officials">www.usa.gov/elected-officials</a></td>
<td>This site tells you exactly how to contact government officials at all levels. There’s contact information for the president, info on how to find your congressperson and ways to get in touch with state and local representatives as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><a href="http://www.canivote.org">www.canivote.org</a></td>
<td>This site allows you to look up your current voter registration status. If you simply enter your name and address it will tell you if your registration is active and what party you are registered for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id">www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id</a></td>
<td>This site shows which states you need an ID to vote in and how strict the rules are in each place. This is something you have to check out before the election to make sure that you are fully prepared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>gttp.votinginfoproject.org</td>
<td>If you aren’t sure where to go to cast your vote, check this site. When you enter your street address, it will show you the address of your polling place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><a href="http://www.usvotefoundation.org/vote/state-elections/state-election-dates-deadlines.htm">www.usvotefoundation.org/vote/state-elections/state-election-dates-deadlines.htm</a></td>
<td>This website lists upcoming elections by state so you will never miss a chance to vote. It includes local, state AND federal elections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><a href="https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/">https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/</a></td>
<td>This site has all the information you need to know about petitioning the white house for something. Here, you can sign and create petitions as well as explore the topics people are fighting for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><a href="http://eventful.com/politics">http://eventful.com/politics</a></td>
<td>This site allows you to find political events near you. Just enter the town where you live or your zip code and meetings, rallies, speeches and protests will show up with event details.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


15. Willingham, A., & CNN. (2017, January 23). 25 ways to be politically active (whether you lean left or right). Retrieved May 18, 2017


