



Democracy 101: Political Engagement Beyond Voting

By Erin Sullivan, Eric Lee, Christopher Jackson

After last November's elections and the past several politically tumultuous years, we hope that many residents of Berkeley and individuals around the country are more politically engaged than ever and are eager to make their voices heard. However, your civic duty doesn't stop after casting your ballot. As residents of Berkeley, with its rich history of political engagement and access to all the resources that entails, we have a unique obligation to engage with our government throughout the year, every year.

At first glance, that's easier said than done. We're on the opposite end of the country from Washington D.C., the political epicenter of the world. And at the federal level, even if you do manage to visit, the current political gridlock makes it extremely difficult to accomplish anything of substance. As members of the Science Policy Group at Berkeley, we encourage you to turn your efforts towards a different outlet: the California state government.

Last fall, members of the Science Policy Group at Berkeley took two trips to the California Capitol aiming to turn despair into hope, learning how our state government works. One surprise? *It does*. While stalemates define the federal government, the California legislature moves quickly. With over 3,000 bills introduced each year, a lot is happening every day in the halls of the California Capitol. This means that even though legislators or their staffs *want* to talk to you, their schedules are busy! Therefore, the best way to make your voice heard is to visit their office in Sacramento. We encourage anyone who cares about an issue to schedule a meeting with your representative and take a day trip to the Capitol. Guaranteed, it will have a greater impact than wearing your "Friend of the Pod" tee around Berkeley. It's easier than you think, but here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Timing is key:** The California legislature operates on a distinct calendar, which impacts the schedule of almost every office in the government. Do you want to pitch a new bill idea? *Go in the fall*. Want to use your expertise to comment on a bill being written? *Those hearings happen in the winter*. Have you heard of a new law and want to convince your representative to vote one way or another? *Schedule a springtime meeting*. Each step in the process occurs at a distinct time, and you'll be most effective if you sync your efforts with their calendar. The California government passes approximately 800 new laws each year, meaning that many legislators spend every fall looking for new ideas. That's right now!
- **Bring an agenda:** You are busy. They are busy. Come with a plan. Do you have grave concerns about the lack of boba tea shops in Berkeley? If so, do your research and practice your pitch. Create a simple, one-page document containing more information about the issue and how they can contact you to ask further questions.
- **Staffers are your friends:** Likely, you won't actually be meeting your representative - and that's to your advantage. Staffers are often young, overworked, recent graduates who are happy meeting enthusiastic constituents. Not only that, staffers are the ones

who pitch new ideas, write laws, and have connections across the Capitol. Make their lives as easy as possible and they'll love talking to you.

- **Follow up:** Business cards are the currency of the Capitol. Print a few, bring them, and pass them out at every meeting. Once you're back in Berkeley, send everyone you meet a short thank-you email. They may not be able to help you at that moment, but that relationship will be invaluable the next time they are looking for input.
- **Don't get discouraged:** While your one visit may feel like a monumental effort, keep in mind that legislators meet dozens of people per week, each bringing their own set of concerns. Find creative ways to become a more regular presence in their office. Get involved with a UC Berkeley group to coordinate messaging and visits or buy season tickets to the Sacramento River Cats so you have an excuse to be in the Capitol regularly. And if that's too much, start your efforts closer to home and stop by your representative's district office in the Bay Area to voice the same concerns.

This year, don't let your civic engagement end at the polls. Keep wearing that "Friend of the Pod" tee and "I Voted" sticker if you choose, but do so while writing an op-ed, calling your legislator, or making an appointment with the UC Berkeley Government and Community Relations office. Want to stay engaged but don't know where to start? Join the Science Policy Group at Berkeley (sciencepolicy.berkeley.edu) and join us on our quarterly trips to the California State Capitol. Local voices, like yours, are needed to propel legislation forward and help create important changes in our government.

Schematic of California legislative calendar:

