

## How to Change Things When You Have No Energy, Money, or Time



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Overwhelming care responsibilities. Economic stress. A healthcare system that underserves us. Millennial women have learned, especially over the last three years, that the long-promised societal support we need is nowhere close to materializing. In theSkimm's 2023 State of Women study, conducted by The Harris Poll, only 16% of women said they feel control over legislation that affects them. 65% agreed, "New legislation and policies that are being passed do not advance women's rights," and 66% said, "The social systems of society do not adequately support women's needs." A full 74% of women surveyed agreed: "Society treats women like second-class citizens."

In the face of this inequity, women haven't surrendered. According to the State of Women data, they are instead restructuring their personal lives — their careers, finances, and family plans — to prioritize themselves when no one else will. But we all know this won't fix the systemic problems that got us here. The question is: With women so overburdened, where do we find the energy, time, money to also fix society? And especially in our current political environment, is it even really possible — as just one person — to impact the issues that matter to you?

“It is absolutely possible,” says Na’ilah Amaru, a longtime political organizer and now a national trainer for VoteRunLead, a nonprofit organization that trains women to run for public office. “I absolutely understand that feeling of exhaustion and that question of what can I do and will it make a difference?” she concedes. Fortunately, the most effective tactics for bringing about big societal change are small — really. “When we begin to kind of break down how change happens, whether it’s policy changes, structural changes, institutional changes, those changes always start in small ways,” Amaru says. They also take time, she adds: “Or it should take time, if you want to build change that’s sustainable.”

Given their obligations to their children and/or aging parents, millennial women have particular barriers to activism. “The stress and the overwhelm is well placed and completely warranted,” says Vicki Shabo, a Senior Fellow for Paid Leave Policy and Strategy, Better Life Lab at New America, a D.C.-based public policy think tank, of millennial women. But there is power in our pooled frustration, she argues. “This is a huge opportunity to try to take each person’s individual struggle and build our way towards collective change.”

Hmm, OK, but how?

## Spend 30 minutes reading up on an issue that matters to you.

“One of your most powerful weapons as a citizen is your education as a voter,” says Amaru. “When people — whether it’s the general public or your elected officials — are saying, ‘This is the issue that is most important and here is the solution to fixing it,’ you should have enough information ... to be like, ‘Yes, I agree, that’s the issue and that’s the solution.’ Or, ‘I don’t necessarily agree with that; I think that there are other, alternative solutions to resolving this particular social issue.’” Getting informed will help you see where best to use your limited time.

## Consume reliable information.

In the era of mis- and dis-information, how do you know that what you’re reading and watching is factual and unbiased? One route is to rely on primary sources: Government agencies publish reports on a variety of issues, as do universities, think tanks, etc. To get a sense of the ideas and basic competence of your elected representatives, watch clips of them debating the issues, preferably at constituent-facing events like a school board hearing or a town hall.

When it comes to media, Amaru says, “It’s most important to practice consuming your news from a variety of different sources, so you don’t learn about issues from only one particular angle.” LexisNexis also offers a guide for fact-checking the source of your information and determining whether or not something is fake news.

## Contact your representatives. They're listening.

Elected officials in smaller cities and towns — from city council members to the school board — receive remarkably little input from the people they represent, says Amaru. As a result, the input they do receive has more impact than you might think. Whether you write or call, she offers these guidelines:

1. Keep it brief.
2. State your relationship to the official (i.e., constituent) and what you want (or don't want) them to do (i.e., vote yes/no on a bill/budget item).
3. Share why it matters to you — how does this issue or vote impact you or your community?

Having worked as both a legislative staffer and a lobbyist, Amaru acknowledges that certain political players (aka, special interest groups with big money) have outsized influence, but that's in part because “constituents are not reaching out to their representatives in the way that they could,” she argues. As a staffer, Amaru has been in the position of tracking every single phone call and email that comes in, and she says your reps are paying attention. “I can tell you I that I have never met an elected official that would choose what a lobbyist is pushing for if it's going to cost them votes.”

## Write an old school letter to the editor — of your local news outlet.

You might think it only matters to get an op-ed placed in a national publication such as the New York Times, Amaru says, but local and state elected officials pay much more attention to the local rag they know their constituents are reading. “They have an incentive to solve problems that people are complaining about — so be sure to leverage the power of local media!”

This is especially true if an elected official is facing a contested race. “The more competitive a district is — that is when you really see engagement really making an impact, because an elected official has to make that decision: ‘If vote yes or if I vote no,’ the calculation is, ‘what is this going to cost me in votes when I run for reelection?’”

## Support female candidates.

“If women are not really being centered in legislative conversations, then it's very easy to understand why women don't feel like they have control over legislation that affects them,” says Amaru. Studies have shown that women change legislative conversations when they are elected officials, because they center issues often written off as “women's issues” in the legislation.

A 2020 report out of King's College, London found that in the previous decade, more than “131 countries had passed 274 legal reforms in support of gender equality,” including laws addressing violence against women, childcare, and universal healthcare. How? They put women in positions of legislative power.

# Have 30 mins or an hour next month? Canvassing, phone banking, text banking, and letter writing really do make a difference.

“Two things from an electoral perspective that are most impactful — more than TV ads, more than mailers: it’s door to door knocking and it’s phone calls,” Amaru says — and yes, text banking is also effective. It’s because of “that human connection,” she says.

There are tons of opportunities to do this during election season — just go to your candidate’s website, and you’ll find a way to help. Postcards To Voters runs small postcard writing initiatives through the year. If you want to support a specific cause when it’s not election season, your best bet is to identify the cause (what are you most concerned about right now? Gun control? Reproductive rights? Mental health access?), find an organization supporting that cause, and sign up for their emails and texts – usually found on their “volunteer” or “get involved” pages. Follow these organizations on social media to hear about upcoming events and volunteer opportunities.

## Money helps.

If you don’t have time, but you do have a little money, give it. Small donations really do make a difference – and if you can’t give much, you’re not alone: a Pew survey from 2017 found that most Americans donate less than \$100 to political campaigns. Only 13% donate more than \$250! (If you want to learn more about how the money in politics works, check out this primer from the League of Women Voters.) You can also consider giving to organizations that are working to create the change you want to see, such as Everytown or the Clean Air Task Force. There’s power in numbers, in more ways than one.

## Find an organization that’s already doing the work, and join them.

Say homelessness is the issue that’s been really weighing on you, but you have no idea how to even think about helping address it. Should you volunteer? Where? But does that impact root causes? There are already people thinking about all of this.

“The first thing I would do is contact an organization in your community that works on this issue,” says Shabo. “These are the people whose professional role it is to figure out how to help, and what kind of advocacy you can do. They’ll be able to direct your efforts if you are time-limited.”

To get started, you can just do a quick Google of “your town + homelessness” — for example. Charity Navigator is an excellent resource for both finding and vetting organizations, and it’s also worth asking for recommendations on social media, whether in your IG story or in your local Facebook groups.

## Make this all easier — and more impactful — by doing it with a friend.

“I know that millennial women in particular are strapped for time and it may be difficult to show up and participate in city council meetings or school board meetings, or groups that help people testify in the state legislature,” Shabo says. “But it’s really critically important. The way that we make change is for people to get involved. And if you do that with your friends, you build community, have a social event, and make change at the same time.”

## Commiserate, loudly.

“Millennial women are good at speaking with their friends and sharing their struggles on social media, and... we need to do more of that,” Shabo says. “We need to make clear that this isn’t just every person’s individual struggle, but that there are systemic solutions that are missing.”

Shabo points to Chamber of Mothers, which formed after paid leave was dropped initially from the Build Back Better Framework, as an example of what happens when people bond over a shared frustration and join together to take action. But action as simple talking to neighbors or other parents at your kid’s sports games helps build a coalition.

## Remember: It all adds up.

Policy progress moves slowly, until it accelerates — often due to what Shabo calls “a catalytic event.” Shabo gives the example of Delaware passing paid family and medical leave legislation in May 2022 after the Delaware Cares Coalition worked for years to get it passed. By laying bare the costs of forcing working women to also be full-time caregivers, the pandemic provided the catalyst. A transgender woman legislator, Delaware State Senator Sarah McBride, introduced the legislation; she knew the difference paid leave makes because it had enabled her to care for her late husband after he was diagnosed with cancer. The bill passed.

“It’s so important for regular people to speak up and take even small actions,” Shabo stresses. “Each story, every outreach, and each rally is kindling that leads to the big explosive and important changes that we need.”