

# RUN FOR SOMETHING ACTION FUND

## **Running for Office: Phase 1 Beginner's Guide** **What office should I run for?**

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

## 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? ([click here for more info](#))
  - (a) 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 spending a bit of time doing some online Google searches and speaking with RFS alumni or others in your area locally who can help guide you on the specifics for your campaign. Search for RFS alumni and candidates using the [RFS Candidate Map](#).

## Step 1: Choosing Which Office

Last updated September 2, 2021

**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 what office you want to run for.

## 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 good examples of a reason to get started – and any is a very solid reason to run!):

Protecting all students right to a quality education in your local schools

- Housing affordability and access
- Open carry and gun registration laws
- Access to affordable healthcare
- Funding of police programs
- Protecting immigrants and vulnerable communities
- Voting access and protection in your state
- Your state laws around reproductive rights
- Zoning laws in your city
- Corruption or lack of transparency in city government
- Climate change and environmental impacts governed by local laws or policies
- Protecting trans kids' rights and access to education and health care
- The pothole in front of your house
- The lack of a 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?

Check out the RFS overview of [what different elected officials do](#).

Take a piece of paper and start brainstorming into two lists: “things I hate about/struggle with 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.)

Yes, it seems cheesy to start with this kind of question. But this matters.

If you're approaching this decision to run from the perspective of **“what office lets me solve my problem”** instead of **“what office I can win,”** everything else gets easier.

With a strong “why,” your campaign message will become 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. And “Why are you running?” is a question you’ll get asked over and over again during your campaign. If you start there, 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 *really* hard. Focusing back on this 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 popular and well-loved member of the city council who has been in office for 12 years may be much harder than running for a seat on a vacant school board with a retiring incumbent. We’re not saying that you should avoid the hard elections – we’re saying it is something to take into consideration.

Finding which office is right for you may also depend on your background. Are you an educator who wants to be on the school board or a tenants’ rights expert running for a city council that governs zoning laws? ? These and other factors can help you decide which office is best for you – but you need to start by researching which offices your specific community governs which work. .

Here are some factors you should assess (but note: none are disqualifying!):

- Which local offices are on the ballot in the upcoming cycle?
  - How to find this: [runforwhat.net](http://runforwhat.net) using your home address
  - For other election dates beyond the upcoming election cycle:
    - Check your state on [Ballotpedia.org](http://Ballotpedia.org) to find out how long election terms last and discover which offices will be open
    - Look at your state/county/local government’s board of election page (there is no one simple way to find this information – it may take a bit of internet sleuthing or an ask to your local elected officials!)
- 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](http://Wikipedia) or your local government’s website can help. You should also consult RFS’s [Local Office Guide](#), which

Last updated September 2, 2021

outlines commonly elected positions in jurisdictions across the country and are a good starting point when considering running for local office..

- Who are your current elected officials? Unless it's an “at-large” position, meaning it spans the particular jurisdiction, you typically can only run for offices in your district based on where you live.
  - Are your local and state elected officials running again? Google it to find out. Talk to people in your community to find out if others are talking about running. Use the [RFS Candidate Map](#) to reach out to someone local to learn more.
- Is your elected representative particularly controversial in the community, perhaps because they have been unresponsive to constituents or because they have supported views that are not in line with the community's views? Would a challenger be welcomed?
- What is like being an elected official in office you have in mind? ?
  - What are the requirements for the role (for instance, some offices like coroner or tax assessor require a specific skill set or educational background)?
  - Is this office full-time or part-time? Paid or unpaid? Can it be done from your home, or would you have to travel to another city (i.e., the state capital for state legislative positions)? Check out [runforwhat.net](#) for some of these answers.

One fact of many elected roles is that they have not been particularly accessible to younger people because the requirements are in conflict with your personal and professional realities (like paying your housing/school loans, having a full-time job, caregiving responsibilities for children or parents). Find out before you win your election if holding the office will work with your life!
  - Have there been any recent issues that have arisen in this office? For instance, is the County Board currently embroiled in a corruption scandal? This research can be done by talking to neighbors or others involved in local politics, by reading the local news, or by attending meetings or reading the publicly available minutes from the office. Need help? Check out the [RFS Candidate Map](#) to see if there is someone in your area who could help.
- 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 of a large city when you've never held office or never managed a budget or team of employees?
  - What leadership roles have you taken on in your community, and how do those relate to the office you want to pursue? Are you involved in the PTA, a local labor union, or have you organized rallies or petitions? Think about how these skills can translate to a campaign.

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 should I run for?” may be easily answered.

In some cases, RFS potential candidates find that the offices they are most interested in are already filled by great people -- congratulations! While that may mean you aren't going to run this election cycle for that particular seat, plan to take the time to get involved in local politics -- serving on an appointed committee, working with your local Democratic organization, volunteering for a candidate you support, and/or becoming a leader in an activist cause. Because while your current elected leaders may be amazing right now, that may not be so true in a year or two, and you'll be prepared to run when the situation calls for you to step up.

- To learn more about **volunteering on a political campaign**, check out [this guide](#).
- To learn more about other **progressive organizations** where you can get involved, check out [this guide](#).

## 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. However, Georgia Senators Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock buck that trend!

Running for office is available to everyone – and is your own person decision – and that fact is part of what makes our democracy great. We encourage you to start with your community first -- and hey, if you want to run for U.S. Senate, rock on (and note that RFS guides are prepared

specifically for local and state office – so there may be completely different rules and guidelines for federal office).

Running for office also takes a lot of planning and coordination and doesn't happen quickly or without a lot of work. Give yourself some time to organize and plan by planning to start early! However, most RFS candidates find that the experience of meeting their constituents and learning ways to improve their communities is worth all the work. Run for Something is here to help you on your path!

If/when you have questions, reach out to us at [campaigns@runforsomething.net](mailto:campaigns@runforsomething.net).

**Ready to learn the next steps? [Continue to Phase 2 here.](#)**