

Democracy Hubs

So, you're frustrated by politics, and you want to do something?

Here's how...

A step-by-step guide to making a difference in five parts



Part 1 – Some advice before you begin

Social media has brought clear advantages in drawing together those who want to change the world. Or at least it has appeared to. In some ways, though, it's been a disaster.

It gives the impression of action, whereas too often, it provides just another opportunity to whine and do nothing. Complaining on Twitter about the state of the world isn't politics. It's self-indulgence.

So, for those who are chewing the carpet for ways of acting on climate change, overhauling the planning laws or getting a lollypop lady for the local primary school, here's how to do it.

Because politics is about informing and persuading people and coordinating support to achieve your goals. It doesn't really matter at

what level you're pitching your project - your neighbourhood, the country, the world – the steps towards doing so are much the same.

So let's start with the depressing bit. De-construct the well-worn attempts at politics which so often pre-occupy local groups.

Do you want to win or just make a noise?

This is the crucial first question, and you have to be honest with yourself. Winning is going to take discipline and commitment and will probably take you out of your comfort zone.

Making a noise is easy, and you can wave banners and shout slogans and feel smug about yourself. But that's no help if you actually want to achieve your goal. You need entirely different strategies for winning or making a noise. Winning can mean keeping your mouth shut when you really want to let rip. There is a time and place. Making a noise may provide your opponents with the opportunity to paint you as extremists or fantasists and so influence the public against you.

Or you may be just wasting your time.

Demonstrations? A lot of organization, and to what end? The bigger the rally, the more difficult it is to keep control and discipline – you have no way of keeping out those with whom you don't want to be associated. If a shop window is broken, that act will get the headlines, not your cause, and you will be held responsible.

Petitions? A lot of organization again, and the recipient – probably an MP - has to do nothing except perhaps accept it. If he's not so inclined, then your effort has been wasted. If he does, he will probably invite along a press photographer, and he will appear to readers as the man of the people. Congratulations. You've just provided him with lots of positive publicity and so made your attempts to unseat him more difficult.

So how about stern **letters to the MP?** He will almost certainly never read them. His staff will skim through them and, at best, offer up a brief summary, with advice to ignore them.

Letters to the press may well be published. But don't assume this is a great triumph, believing that the force of your argument has won over the letters' editor. It's his or her job to make sure there is controversy. So for every pro-Brexit letter, an opposing view is needed. Your letter is published not for its news value or the shrewdness of your arguments, but as cannon fodder, it's something to keep the debate going.

Be honest with yourself

Whatever your project, this is always the hardest part. 'Are you with me?' you cry - '100 per cent!' they shouted. But, if you have 20 people who are backing you, then if you can get two or three who really are committed and realize the need to be canny, then you're lucky. But that's all it needs at the beginning. And at the beginning, you need to be clear about how you're going to gain the influence you need to succeed and who it is you need to influence.

Winning requires an entirely different approach to making a noise, a different strategy. Be clear about what you're trying to achieve, chart the steps from here to there and be disciplined. Don't take your eyes off that goal. Besting your opponent in the letters' column of the local paper will gratify you and please your supporters while infuriating your opponents. But they have already made up their minds. Empty newspaper arguments are unlikely to change many others.

The long road to gaining influence

Everything you do has to be focused on **influencing your opponents** to act in the way you want or coordinate your forces. And you need a step-by-step plan that will explain how it will be achieved—no wishful thinking. Doing something in the vague and unexplained hope that it will work is not only a waste of time, but it's going back to just making a noise. We're past that.

Imagine you have a big red shiny button marked 'influence'. You press it, and all the things you've planned happen just as you've expected. Your opponents (or perhaps others you're trying to bring on board or the journalists who you want to report your project) sit up and take notice.

Sadly, that button doesn't exist, so you have to work towards finding its equivalent. We cover how to do this in Part 2-5.

