



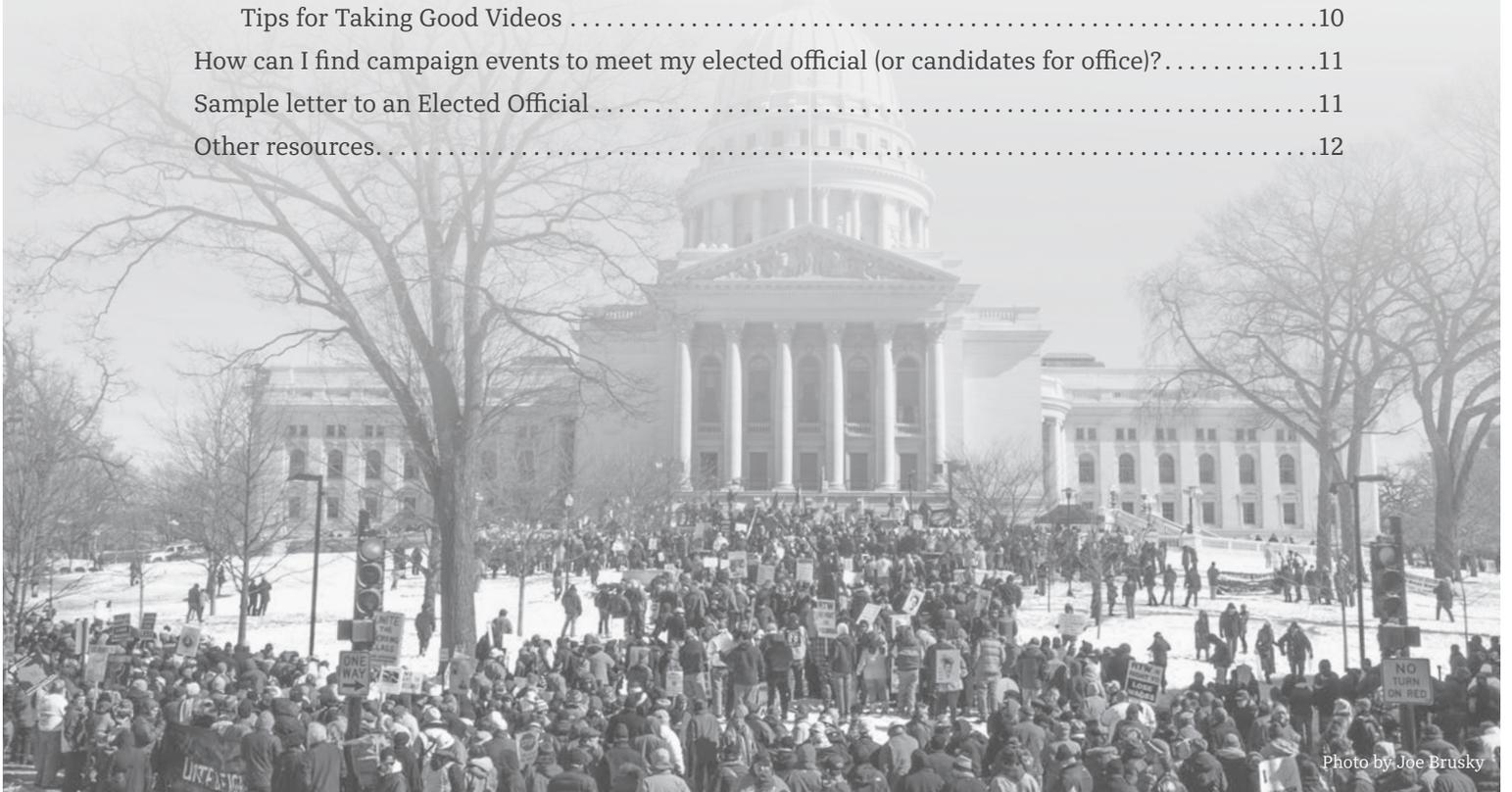
HOW TO ENGAGE
ELECTED OFFICIALS

ACLU
Wisconsin



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Getting Involved: 10 Tips for Becoming an Effective Advocate

The ACLU of Wisconsin needs your help in advocating for civil rights and civil liberties. You can get involved as an advocate by monitoring legislative activities and speaking to federal, state, and local legislators and officials about pending legislation and administrative policies.

Being an advocate for causes you care about can sometimes be overwhelming. Learning to use your time and resources effectively will make for a more rewarding and more productive experience. Here are ten tips that will help you be a better advocate, whether your focus is on issues pending in Congress, the Wisconsin legislature, or before a local governing body or school board:

1. LEARN THE CULTURE – STAFF VS. LEGISLATOR.

In state and federal legislatures, you have to build good relationships with legislative staff before you get to see the legislator. In local governing bodies, this is less likely to be true. Finding time to meet with legislators and officials in their home offices and in the “off season” when they are not in session will help you cut through some of that bureaucratic red tape.

2. LEARN THE PROCEDURAL RULES – FORMAL AND INFORMAL.

If you want to make something happen, you need to know what process you must follow to get it done. Is there a particular subcommittee or committee that will hear an issue first? How is a piece of legislation or an ordinance introduced? You need to know how the game is played before you take the field.

3. BE FEARLESS, BE COURTEOUS, BUT NEVER BE INTIMIDATED.

It is your right to lobby your elected official on issues that are important to you. Don't hesitate to be assertive.

4. RECOGNIZE YOUR LIMITS. Don't make promises you can't keep. Admit when you don't know something. If you're asked a question and you don't know the answer, say you don't know. Then, offer to get the information, and do it! Be sure to follow up promptly with the information you promised.

5. FIND YOUR ALLIES. Don't burn bridges. Build coalitions with other organizations and people who share the ACLU's and your goals and objectives. It is easy to get emotional over strongly felt issues. That said, it is far more important to maintain good relationships. Remember that your strongest opponent on one issue may be your greatest supporter on another!

6. IDENTIFY YOUR OPPOSITION. Find out who's likely to be against you on an issue, and determine whether there is any common ground.

7. PREPARE, PREPARE, PREPARE. You are presenting a case to a difficult “jury”. If you don't know your stuff, no one will pay any attention to what you say. Do your homework. Research policymaker's positions on your issues by looking at their voting records, speeches, newspaper articles, debates, and/or the policymaker's website.

8. PAY ATTENTION TO HOW YOU ARE MARKETING YOURSELF. Show respect for the institution and people you want to influence. Don't take yourself too seriously. Use humor to diffuse difficult situations. Be gracious. Always begin meetings by thanking the policy maker or staff member for the opportunity to share your ideas and opinions.

9. KEEP THINGS PROFESSIONAL. Develop relationships by providing information and opportunities and making yourself indispensable. Be professional in both dress and manner. Don't say negative things about other policymakers or public figures. Doing so will make the person you're speaking with wonder what you say when they aren't in the room.

10. UNDERSTAND THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST YOUR POSITION.

Be sure to disclose that there is another side and what it is. Don't put the person you are seeking to influence in the position of finding out about the opposition from someone else. Tell the truth. There is no faster way to lose credibility than to give false or misleading information.

If you follow these tips, you'll be on your way to becoming an effective advocate for the ACLU of Wisconsin and for the causes we care about.

One last thing! Be sure to sign up as an advocate on our website, www.aclu-wi.org, so that you'll receive alerts and information about issues on which we need your help and advocacy!



How to Influence Your Elected Officials

Your elected officials have the authority to enact policies that affect everyone in Wisconsin. However, they might need some encouraging and advocacy from members of their own community to persuade them to implement policy changes. Below we've outlined the steps you can take to advocate with your elected officials for changes.

STEP 1: Determine which changes you want to advocate for

What issues do you care about? What policies or trends in our community are you concerned about? Excited about? If you think laws need to change or public funding of resources needs to be reallocated, how do you think we can best implement these changes?

Being an effective advocate isn't just about caring passionately about something. It is about caring passionately about something AND having well-founded and well-researched suggestions for ways to improve the problems you identify. Decision-makers will take you more seriously if you are well-informed, well-prepared, and able to offer concrete solutions to problems.

STEP 2: Find out who the decision makers are on the issue you care about

Once you have identified which issues you want to advocate for and how you want to approach the issue, you will need to determine who holds the power over that issue.

For example, if you are interested in policing reform, the control of that usually rests with your municipal government. Look at the municipal website to understand how the police department oversight is structured. Is there a public safety committee or a police and fire commission? Once you identify the structure, you can next identify who the members of that oversight group are and then contact them. In addition to sending individual communications, there are sometimes opportunities for public comment. If you are interested in reforming the criminal legal system, you can address that at many levels, including talking to your State Representative, State Senator, County Sheriff, and/or District Attorney.

Different levels of government have control over different issues and policies. The first step is to find out who these people are and their contact information.

Mayor & City Council

There are 1,851 municipalities in Wisconsin; 1,259 towns, 402 villages, 190 cities. Your mayor and city council (also known as the municipal government) control property taxes, policing, local ordinances, fines, and fees.

School Board

There are 446 school districts in Wisconsin, which have about 880,000 students. School boards are elected officials who control significant aspects of students' lives, including dress code, class offerings, bathroom & locker room access, school equity goals, and grievance process if a student has been bullied or discriminated against by a teacher, coach, administrator, or other authority figure.

County Government

There are 72 counties in Wisconsin. County government controls some roads and highways, register of deeds, state court system, parks, airports, zoos, and administers state and federal aid programs.

Sheriff

Sheriffs oversee the law enforcement at the county level and administer the jails in each of Wisconsin's 72 counties.

State Legislature

The Wisconsin State Legislature is made up of the State Senate and the Wisconsin State Assembly, which combined have 132 members. Each person in Wisconsin has a State Representative and a State Senator. State Representatives are elected for a two year term and State Senators are elected for four year terms. Together, they make state laws, which are written in one of the houses but must be passed by both houses and signed by the Governor to become a law.

Governor

The Governor is elected every four years and appoints the head of most state agencies (subject to Senate approval). The Governor proposes a budget and can propose legislation to the State Legislature, which they can amend, ignore, or pass. The Governor has the power to sign or veto legislation passed by the Legislature.

U.S. Congress

The United States Congress is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate, and is the lawmaking body of the federal government. Congress allocates federal funds through the budget and appropriation bills. Like the Wisconsin legislature, bills can start in either house but must be passed by both houses and signed by the President to become laws. Each state elects two Senators, who serve six year terms. The House of Representatives currently has 435 members, and the number of districts in each state depend on the population (determined by the census). Wisconsin has eight representatives, who serve two year terms.

President

The President is the highest office in the federal government's executive branch and serves a four year term. The Constitution limits an elected president to two terms in office. The President may propose laws and legislation to Congress, which they can amend, ignore, or pass. The President can sign or veto legislation passed by Congress. The president appoints federal judges, cabinet officials, and diplomats (subject to Senate approval).

Find your elected officials here:

<https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/MyElectedOfficials>

STEP 3: Write a statement to your elected official about the changes you want

Once you have determined what policies you are advocating for, you should outline your advocacy policies in a simple one page letter, co-signed by other community organizations in your municipality, that you can send to your official before you set up a meeting.

STEP 4: Set up advocacy meetings with your elected official

Meetings are an essential tactic for influencing an elected official. They give you an opportunity to make your case directly to your elected official or their staff and signal that this is an issue that's important to you and your community. Most importantly, these meetings get results – elected officials want to hear what their constituents think, and a face-to-face conversation (even over Zoom!) can be especially powerful.

Setting up meetings

Try to find a time as soon as possible to meet with your elected official. It may take more than one call and even some emails to secure a time – persistence is key! Ask for times that will work for most of your group and if you need help with Zoom or a conference call number, ask the official if they have an account to use.

Recruit attendees for meetings

There is power in groups! Figure out who already might be doing work in your community on the issues you're advocating for. Try to work in partnership with other organizations and activists from your community to form a coalition that supports your shared goals. Ask your friends, family, and neighbors who live in the elected official's district to join the meeting. The night before the meeting, call everyone who has signed up to attend and remind them of the time and how to access the meeting.

If you can, schedule a planning session with your team in advance of your meeting to ensure that everyone feels confident about the goals and agenda for the meeting. You should run through the agenda, practice making the "asks" for support, and give an overview of who you're meeting with.

Prepare for the meeting

Be prepared with knowledge about the policies you want to discuss in the meeting by studying the issue. Prepare stories about how these policies affect you and others in your community.

Assign a different member of your group to prepare and address each talking point or story. Also assign a timekeeper and a notetaker. Divvying up roles helps make the meeting flow smoothly and involve everyone who has made the effort to attend. Plan in advance who is going to make the "hard asks" about which of these procedures your elected official will commit to.

Send your statement letter to the official and their staff ahead of your meeting.

Hold the meeting

Have everyone introduce themselves. Each attendee should give their name, their neighborhood and profession (if they are comfortable sharing), as well as a brief (1-2 sentences) on why the issue you're discussing is important to them.

Once you've introduced yourselves, get directly into the substance of the meeting. Make sure you and your other advocates can clearly and concisely identify the issue you care about, including 3-5 key talking points about why it is important and why the official you are talking with should care about it, too. It is particularly effective when you can tie the issue directly to something in the official's district, experience, or their previously expressed policy interests. After describing the issue, provide a few possible solutions or steps for moving forward. Identify in advance who in your group will take on which part of the conversation. For each policy, you should talk about why it is important and then make a specific "ask." If your group has personal stories related to these policies, make sure to talk about those as well! Determine in advance who will make the hard "ask" for the official's support.

When you have made your case, invite questions from the official and their staff. Do your best to answer them directly and concisely. But don't worry if you don't have all the answers. It is better to say "I don't know, but I will get you an answer" than to give incorrect information.

When the conversation has ended or slowed, wrap the meeting up by thanking the official for their time and consideration and encouraging them to support your issue. Both your time and the official's time is valuable.

Follow up after the meeting

After the meeting, make sure to take at least 15 minutes with your team to talk about what you learned from the meeting. Take note of anything new or surprising, and then report back on your meeting.

Send a quick thank you note to your meeting attendees.

You should also send a follow up to the elected official or staffers who you met with. Include recap of your “asks,” the relevant fact sheets for the policies you are advocating for, and answers to any questions you might not have been able to respond to during your meeting. Thank them again for their time.

STEP 5: Get media for your efforts

A great way to get the attention of elected officials is to get press coverage of your advocacy efforts. A couple of good tools we can use to get media: letters to the editor and op-eds. Both can help you convince election officials in your own words, but they do so in different ways.

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor, or LTEs, are short persuasive pieces that respond to a news or opinion article that a newspaper has printed. They usually cover one central point, either in contrast to the original article or highlighting an issue that was overlooked. These short articles are generally between 250 words or less, they’re personal and local. LTEs can be written by anyone, but they need to be submitted quickly, ideally within 24 hours of an article or op-ed getting published.

Do an internet search for “Letter to the Editor” + the name of your local paper (e.g. “Letter to the Editor Milwaukee Journal Sentinel”). Generally the first response will take you to a page with submission guidelines as well as a form to submit directly or an appropriate email address. Be sure to read the instructions carefully and include any necessary information such as address or phone number.

Op-eds

Op-eds are shorthand for “opposite the editorial page.” These are longer-form pieces, usually between 500 and 800 words. They run in the opinion section of the newspaper, but they are written by individuals who are not a part of the newspaper’s staff. Op-eds are a great way to make an in-depth argument, give a personal perspective, or present new information. The most compelling op-eds have one core message that is clearly outlined at the beginning of the article with a supporting narrative. Op-eds don’t need to be written by someone famous or powerful to get published, someone with unique expertise or firsthand experience can be particularly compelling and convincing.

You can find the correct contact and the submission guidelines for most papers at the Op-ed Project. If that list doesn’t have the information you’re looking for, do an internet search for the name of your paper and “editorial page editor” (e.g. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel editorial page editor) for the appropriate person to email.

While most opinions run between 500 and 800 words, you should check with your paper’s submission instructions for the best length. Reading through recently published op-eds is also a great way to learn what your local paper is looking for. You can also see if your issue has recently been covered. Your opinion piece should be just that – yours! It needs to be in your own voice and include anything you find important.

If you are emailing your opinion piece, don’t attach it! Cut and paste the op-ed text directly into the email after a brief note.

STEP 6: Use social media to your advantage

You can use social media to bring additional attention to your advocacy efforts. Share a photo or infographic to increase the likelihood of post visibility. Look up the twitter handles of your elected officials and make sure you tag them in your posts. Send some sample posts and graphics to your friends and allies to encourage them to post as well. Use the hashtag of the movements or work you are connecting to. Try to be positive – negative posts are less relatable to the general public and more likely to turn people off from your cause. Bring more people along by being relatable. Retweet or share posts from your elected officials and comment thoughtfully.

STEP 7: Drive calls and emails to your elected officials

Keep the pressure on your elected officials by asking members of your organization, friends, neighbors, and other community groups to sign an email petition and to call your elected officials office.

STEP 8: Continue following up

Check in with your elected official regularly (every couple of weeks) with more phone calls or virtual meetings to gauge their progress on your policy asks. Continue to emphasize the importance of these changes. If they have technical questions that you can’t answer, try to direct them to state or national experts who might be able to help.

Getting Help From the ACLU

ACLU of Wisconsin staff would love to work in all the communities where local advocates want to take on civil liberties advocacy. Unfortunately, due to limited resources and staffing, we cannot make that commitment. If you decide to build a local campaign, please realize that the ACLU will not be able to help manage the work or coordinate logistics.

When possible, we may be able answer specific questions, consult with you on strategy, or promote your local efforts through social media and other communications. Please contact liberty@aclu-wi.org for more information.

Sample Meeting Agenda

Meeting with <official name>

Date of meeting:

Attendees:

Roles: Facilitator Time keeper Note taker

Agenda

- Thank the official and/or their staff for making the time to talk to your group (facilitator)
- Introductions
 - Name
 - Neighborhood
 - Profession
 - Short summary of why the issue you're meeting about is important to you
- Why we care about this issue specifically in this moment (speaker)
- Feedback on the elected's current plans if known (speaker)
- Policy request (speaker)
 - Why the policy is important
 - Story about personal impact (if available)
 - Hard ask - Will you commit to ____
- Wrap up & hard asks (facilitator)
 - To summarize, we want to work with you to ____
 - Can you commit to <policy hard asks>?
 - Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us! We will follow up with some more information and hope to continue these conversations.



Participating in Public Events

Attending town hall meetings or other events held by public officials is a great way to stay informed about what's happening in your community. They can also be a golden opportunity for you to engage with decision makers directly and ask them important questions. In-person (or direct virtual) communication forces representatives to address an issue they may have otherwise avoided.

If you're planning to go to an event where candidates will be present, it helps to have a few questions for them that you prepare in advance. Direct interactions with an official or political candidate can provide you with a more accurate sense of what your representatives genuinely believe, and offer you clearer insight into whether or not your concerns or issues are important to the official or candidate. Asking questions yourself at an event also means you don't have to rely on the media to ask questions on your behalf.



Photo by Joe Brusky

Tips for Taking Good Photos:

A simple cell phone photo can be a terrific way to showcase the work being done on the ground. Photos help to tell the story of the work. Below are a few tips and guidelines for collecting the best photos for use on social media.

1. LANDSCAPE – Take all photos in landscape/horizontally. We can always crop a photo down smaller to fit certain size requirements, but we can't blow things up to make them bigger with the same quality.

2. RULE OF THIRDS – The rule of thirds is to break down an image and visualize it in thirds, both with horizontal and vertical lines. This gives you 9 imaginary boxes on your proposed photo. The 4 most inner lines on your grid are your guides for placing focal points in your photo. Most smartphones have a grid tool you can add to your

camera while taking a photo. By placing the focal point along those inner lines, you can compose a more visually appealing photo.

Keep in mind that oftentimes virtual events are recorded and posted online, which means your engagement will be seen by a wider audience. Use this to your advantage. If you ask a candidate to state their position on a particular policy or issue, you can share their response on social media and other digital platforms. This not only helps other people get informed, but also holds the candidate even more accountable to the public.

At events held in physical spaces, you can record your interactions with candidates on your phone or other recording device. Below are some tips for taking photos and recording video.

3. BACKGROUND – Before taking a photo, check out the background behind your subject. Are there distracting objects or people? You might need to wait a moment for those to move or change the direction of your photo.

4. LIGHTING – Don't be afraid to ask folks to move around a room to find the best light. We want to make folks look their absolute best, but we can't do that if they are in a dark corner with shadows across their face. **No Flash!** Using a flash rarely improves a photo. It's much better to move to a well-lit area instead of turning on the flash.

5. TELL THE STORY – We want to have all types of photos to share: headshots to accompany quotes, people holding supportive or meaningful signs, people deeply engaged in conversation, people shaking hands or clapping during a meeting, group photos at meetings or events. You want the photo to be able to speak for itself and tell someone what's happening without a caption. A photo of a group (not looking at the camera) standing in a hallway doesn't tell the audience what is going on. A photo of a group smiling under a City Hall sign wearing ACLU or Smart Justice buttons speaks volumes.

6. TAKE A LOT OF PHOTOS – One of the most powerful tools is having more photos than you need. Don't just take one photo and walk away. Take multiple photos, use different angles, find a new light. Too many photos is always better than too few.

Tips for Taking Good Videos:

Similar to photos, you do not always need produced, high-quality videos to make an impact on social media. Audiences like seeing real people talking about things that are important to them.



1. VERTICAL – Unlike photos, you want to take cell phone video with the camera held vertically. This will allow the video to take up more space on a person’s phone screen (where the majority of social media content is consumed).

2. BACKGROUND NOISE – You want to be sure to film in a quiet, indoor location. If you are at an event, you may need to ask someone to step out of the room or to the other side to ensure you can hear them clearly. Backup Audio – If you cannot find a quiet environment, having a second person record the audio on their phone (Voice Memos is a great tool for this). It can be very helpful to have a backup.

3. BACKGROUND – Before starting the video, check out the background behind your subject. Are there distracting objects or people? You might need to wait a moment for those to move or change the direction you’re filming.

4. LENGTH – The longer a video is, the less likely someone is to watch in full. Feel free to ask your subject multiple questions in one filming session, but you want them to keep answers/responses to 30-45 seconds, because if you are sharing it on Instagram, it should be less than a minute. For Facebook or Twitter try to keep videos to 3-5 minutes maximum.

5. WHO? – It’s always best to start a video by asking your subject to give their name (have them spell it) and tell you where they work/what business they own/run. This allows us to have a record of who they are and proper spelling for compiling and posting later.

6. WHAT TO ASK – Think through a couple of questions that might help people tell a compelling story.

How can I find campaign events to meet my elected official (or candidates)?

The easiest way to find out what campaign events, public debates, or candidate forums are happening is just to Google it! Type in the name of your current elected official and add other key words like your city name, candidate, debate, election, etc. If you like their Facebook page, follow them on Twitter, and get on your current legislator’s mailing list (whether you agree with them or not), they’ll often send out notifications with event information. Keep in mind that this will only give you the incumbent perspective, so try to also find out where their challenger stands on different issues. Getting people to talk about your issue during the election can be particularly powerful. If they don’t hear about it when they are running for office they may feel that the people who vote for them don’t really care about it.

Sample letter to an elected official

Writing a letter to your elected official is one of the most impactful steps you can take. Remember a few basic tips:

- ✓ Be courteous and informative
- ✓ State the purpose of the letter and focus on that message
- ✓ Restate your request
- ✓ Refrain from exaggeration
- ✓ Avoid insults, jargon, and acronyms
- ✓ If you receive a response, follow up.

Dear [Title Full Name],

State the reason for your letter in the first sentence, and the bill number or legislation you would like them to support accompanied by a brief description. Mention that you are a voter in their district and why you feel it is necessary that they understand why this issue is important to you.

State reasons why they should support your position. Use facts and references when appropriate to strengthen your argument. Use citations when necessary to enhance your letter's credibility. Most importantly, if you have been impacted by an issue and feel comfortable sharing your story, please share your personal experience.

Be brief, specific, and concise. It is strongly recommended you limit your letter to one page. Keep the tone of your letter positive, and never threaten political or other consequences.

Thank them for considering your request. Lastly, tell them you look forward to their response on this issue.

Sign your name (and if appropriate, share your title/position and affiliations)

More Resources

Find more information about different issues on the ACLU National website: aclu.org or the ACLU Wisconsin website: aclu-wi.org

Locate your elected officials:
www.myvote.wi.gov/en-us/MyElectedOfficials

Register and vote: www.myvote.wi.gov/en-us/

For a comprehensive almanac of information regarding state and local government in Wisconsin, see the *Wisconsin Blue Book*. Hard copies of this nearly 1,000-page book can be obtained from your Representative or Senator or at your local library. It can also be accessed on the Legislature's website at <https://legis.wisconsin.gov/lrb/blue-book/>

To learn more about the Wisconsin State Legislature, check out their *Citizen's Guide to the State Legislature*: <http://lc.legis.wisconsin.gov/publications/citizensguide>

For a detailed description of the legislative process in Wisconsin, see *How a Bill Becomes Law*, published by the Assembly Chief Clerk, you can download that here: <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/assembly/acc/media/1106/howabillbecomeslaw.pdf>

ACLU

Wisconsin

207 E. Buffalo St. Suite 325
Milwaukee WI 53202
(414) 272 4032
www.ACLU-WI.org

Rights For All: How to Engage Elected Officials

This toolkit will provide you with multiple ways to get the attention of our elected officials, advocate for yourself and your community, and make your voice heard.

Another tool you have is the ability to vote! Visit myvote.wi.gov to register, request a ballot to be mailed to you, or to find out where your ballot is in the process.