The Beginner’s Guide to Civic Activism

A Quickstart Guide to Legislative Engagement at the Local Level

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

This is a beginner’s guide to civic engagement and legislative meeting activism at the local level. It is a basic primer only, written to help shorten the learning curve as you ascertain how to navigate your own government and legislative ecosystems.

A basic understanding of the Constitution is assumed (i.e., three branches of government; separation of powers; checks & balances; The Bill of Rights; popular sovereignty; and federalism.)

If you’d like to learn more about the bones of Constitutional Law (or simply brush up if it’s been awhile), here are some resources:

https://thefoundingproject.com/six-basic-constitution-principles/
https://www.dummies.com/article/academics-the-arts/history/american/us-constitution-for-dummies-cheat-sheet-209228/

DISCLAIMER

While I have watched/attended/spoken at civic meetings and entities for various municipalities and jurisdictions, I personally have opted to focus on the San Diego County Board of Supervisors. Most of my experience is on that front, so your experiences and observations may differ and be distinct for whatever body you choose to monitor and participate in.

This guide is not all-encompassing nor is it entity specific. Instead, it was based upon my personal experiences for local conditions for the San Diego, California region. Every entity is different. Always check with your own governing body’s rules, regulations, protocols, and procedures.

I am not a lawyer! Nothing in this booklet should be construed in any manner to be legal advice. The information in this document was believed correct at time of publishing. It is provided as a courtesy, with no representation or warranty, express or implied, regarding accuracy, adequacy, or reliability. ALWAYS do your own research & due diligence YOURSELF, and verify information before acting upon any of it.
II. THE CIVIC-ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

LEARN
- Procedures & Protocols
- Legislative Lingo & Cycles
- Tactics & Trends
- Issues & Stakeholders

ACT
- Speak at Meetings
- Write/e-mail Officials
- Social Media Campaigns
- Develop Networks
- Rally/Protest/Educate

ASSESS & ADJUST
- Review issue arcs
- Track progress
- Pick Fulcrum Targets
- Research Emerging Issues
- Pivot Priorities & Make Course Adjustment As Needed

WIN & EFFECT CHANGE!!!
Much like a baseball game, you need to learn the ground rules and get familiar with the playing field as you embark upon your civic-activism journey. Here are three areas (with actionable homework items) to get you started:

**JURISDICTION & GOVERNING BODY:** Incorporated cities generally have a City Council and a Mayor. Unincorporated areas usually fall under the larger umbrella of County jurisdiction. There are also many smaller, micro-level legislative bodies (i.e. Water Boards, School Boards, Hospital Districts. etc.)

*Homework:* Learn what jurisdictions you reside in for these various entities, and then discover WHO your representatives are. You can do so via the San Diego County Registrar of Voters ‘Find Your Elected Representatives’ page here.

**CALENDAR & MEETING FREQUENCY:** Per California law, “Each legislative body, except for advisory bodies and standing committees, shall provide for the time and place for regular meetings by ordinance, resolution, or by-laws.”

And … “unless specifically exempted, all meetings must be conducted within the geographical boundaries of the body’s jurisdiction. (§ 54954(b).”

Each entity is different in determining the time, day, and location of its meetings, as well as setting the frequency. Most entities post a calendar online where you can see upcoming meetings.

*Homework:* Research the meeting schedules for your legislative bodies. Find out when, where, and how often they meet.

**MEETING AGENDA:** California law also requires entities to post an agenda for regular meetings no less than 72 hours before the meeting is to occur.

*Homework:* Search online and locate where the respective agendas (and archived ones) for YOUR various entities can be found. Open/download one to review in detail.
IV. WAYS TO ENGAGE

There are many ways to become engaged and to start making your voice heard and your viewpoints known:

1. **Write/eMail/Call Your Representatives** – This is the simplest step to take. Most emails are readily available (or have an online form to submit them.)

   This is a good way to get your feet wet via passive communication that gives you time to draft/edit your comments. I often write them the day before I want to send them, to allow time to review it again with fresh eyes and calmer head (than the passionate prose I spewed out the day prior.)

   I send my emails individually (not one mass group email, which I feel is more likely to get ignored because no one on the group list will feel personally responsible for it.)

2. **Meeting Participation & Public Comments:**

   A. **In Person:** Can be a bit intimidating at first, but gives you a ringside seat to view representative government in action. I find I get a lot more out of attending meetings in person, as you have a panoramic view of ALL of the goings on (and not just what the camera allows you to see.) This includes facial expressions, eye rolls, smirks, grimaces, or politicians ignoring the speaker to stare down at their cell phone.

   B. **Phone In & Zoom:** Many entities have embraced a hybrid format using teleconferencing, which allows people to call in by phone or participate via Zoom. This is a really great way to start if you are apprehensive of speaking in public.

   C. **eComments/eMail:** Most entities have some type of process to allow public commenting electronically.
WAYS TO ENGAGE (continued)

3. **SOCIAL MEDIA:** Social media expands your reach and allows your voice to be amplified far more than old-school methods of postcards or letter writing.

Support politicians and organizations whose views align with your own. Likes, shares, and re-tweets all have exponential value in raising awareness and promoting policies you agree with.

[CAVEAT: The internet is forever. Choose your words wisely, and do your best to stay issue-focused. Name-calling, mockery, and belittlement may feel good at the time, but do little to win hearts and minds (and can paint you in a very negative light.)

*Think twice before hitting the ‘submit’ button, and ask yourself if your post is helping or perhaps hindering the point you are hoping to make.*]

4. **BUILD NETWORKS WITH LIKE-MINDED INDIVIDUALS & GROUPS:** There is definitely power in numbers. As you get more comfortable in the civic-engagement process, you will get to know (and learn from) fellow participants who will often develop into allies.

Many grassroots organizations started out from a small cadre of concerned and dedicated individuals who created a movement (i.e., Alysson, Amy, & Diane from ReOpen San Diego.)

5. **CANVAS IN PERSON & ONLINE:** Petitions, fundraisers, and flyer distribution are just some ways to spread the word about causes near and dear to your heart.

6. **VOLUNTEER & SUPPORT CANDIDATES & OFFICE HOLDERS:** Phone banks, manning information booths & tables, and contributing monetarily can get (and keep) candidates in office whose values align with your own.

7. **VOTE!** (Like Nike – Just Do It!)
Ways to Engage
YOU ‘OTTER’ GET INVOLVED!!

Set goals; determine strategies

Email/call your representatives

Attend meetings/speak when you can
   * Show them the public is watching

Write to media with your concerns

Educate yourself on local & statewide issues

Echo & amplify your position on social media

Demonstrate numbers via rallies & messaging
V. A PRIMER ON PUBLIC MEETINGS

LEARN TO READ & UNDERSTAND AN AGENDA: Here is an abbreviated synopsis from the first page of an agenda from a past San Diego County Board of Supervisors meeting:

COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO BOARD OF SUPERVISORS,
REGULAR MEETING MEETING AGENDA
TUESDAY, APRIL 5, 2022, 9:00 AM
COUNTY ADMINISTRATION CENTER, ROOM 310 1600 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA
Order Of Business

A. Roll Call
B. Invocation
C. Pledge of Allegiance
D. Presentation or Announcement of Proclamations and Awards
E. Non-Agenda Public Communication: Opportunity for members of the public to speak to the Board on any subject matter within the Board’s jurisdiction but not an item on today’s agenda.
F. Approval of the Statement of Proceedings/Minutes for the Regular Board of Supervisors meeting of March 15, 2022; and, Special Board of Supervisors Meeting of March 22, 2022.
G. Consent Calendar
H. Discussion Items
I. Board Member Committee Updates. This is an opportunity for Members of the Board to provide informational updates on their committee assignments. No action may be taken.

Link to San Diego County Board of Supervisors documents search page

Search for agendas, supporting documents, minutes (statement of proceedings), and Board communications

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A FINAL WORD ON AGENDAS: Most entities only issue one version of their agenda.

Here is a sample one from the City of Chula Vista. It includes a listed order of business and gives brief details of each item that will come before the council that day. Most agendas usually include a short paragraph detailing recommended actions for the governing body to take.

However, some agencies are harder to navigate. The San Diego County Board of Supervisors has at least two versions of their agendas: an online abbreviated one that only lists the agenda items in numerical order, and a longer, more detailed official agenda that lays out the order of business as well as all the agenda items in numerical order (with supporting paragraphs which include: ‘Overview’, ‘Recommendations’, ‘Equity Impact Statement’, ‘Fiscal Impact’, & ‘Business Impact’ discussions.)

Sample abbreviated agenda       Sample Detailed Agenda

MEETING FORMAT & PACE: While every entity is different, there is generally a similar format, starting with a roll call to confirm attendance and assure that there is a quorum (the minimal number of officers or members of a committee or organization, usually a majority, who must be present for valid transaction of business.)

Once a quorum has been verified, next often come opening ceremonial items such as Pledge of Allegiance, Invocation, and possibly Proclamations (honoring select individuals or groups recognizing them for their contributions to the community.)

Non-agenda comments are handled differently by various entities. Some place them at the beginning, some put them at the end. At the time of this publication, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors uses a hybrid model, allowing five in-person speakers and five virtual speakers at the beginning (10 total.) Anybody after that must wait until the end of the meeting.
**SPECIAL ORDER OF BUSINESS:** Non-debatable items such as proclamations or adjournments in memory.

**CONSENT CALENDAR:** All agenda items listed under this section are considered to be routine and will be acted upon with one motion. There will be no separate discussion of these items unless a member of the Board of Supervisors or the Chief Administrative Officer so requests, in which event, the item will be considered separately in its normal sequence. Approval for such items shall be the recommendation of the Chief Administrative Officer, or, in the event the item has been filed by a Member of the Board, the recommendation of the Member of the Board.

**DISCUSSION ITEMS:** These are matters which are designated as Policy/Discussion items, or have been pulled (requested to be discussed) by the Board members.

**ORDINANCE:** Ordinances are laws adopted by the Board, and usually amend, repeal, or supplement the County Code, Administrative Code, Compensation Ordinance, or Zoning Ordinance; provide zoning specifications; or appropriate money for specific purposes. Most ordinances require two hearings: an introduction, followed at the next regular meeting by the adoption. Ordinances generally become effective 30 days after adoption, unless they are of an urgency nature.

**RESOLUTION:** Formal expressions of opinion or intention of the Board of Supervisors.

**OFF-DOCKET ITEM:** An item of emergency or time-sensitive nature that arose after posting of the agenda. The Board may take actions only after a majority vote confirming that an emergency exists, or in the case of a non-emergency matter, a two-thirds vote that the need to act arose after posting of the agenda.
Once the introductory formalities are out of the way, the meat and potatoes
of the meeting commence.  [Again, EVERY ENTITY IS DIFFERENT. Check
YOUR entity’s agenda to see in what order they conduct business.]

CONSENT AGENDA ITEMS: The Consent items are introduced by the clerk,
and then the legislative body members get a chance to comment.
Sometimes they pull the item to move it to the Discussion calendar.

Because all items will be voted on simultaneously in one group, your time to
speak is limited to talk about all of them cumulatively. For the San Diego
County Board of Supervisors, you only get two minutes TOTAL to comment
about one or all of them (depending on how many you listed on your
speaker slip), no matter how many items are on the Consent Calendar.

Public speakers get their chance to comment first, after which the Board or
Council members will have time to weigh in. [NOTE: This can be frustrating,
particularly when the public does not get a rebuttal opportunity to respond
again.]

Then, a single-round vote occurs. Again, this vote covers ALL items within
the Consent part of the agenda. [NOTE: Sometimes items are ‘pulled from
the Consent to the Discussion, or items are ‘bifurcated’ (split in two) for a
separate vote – usually if something has dissent or controversy.]

DISCUSSION AGENDA ITEMS: Each item is presented individually, and the
public gets to comment on each one. If your entity requires a speaker slip,
you will usually not be allowed to speak unless you turned it in before the
item came up as the current order of business. Public comments go first,
then response/discussion by the Board members, then a vote.

NON-AGENDA ITEMS: Varies, but often at the end of most meetings. Any
issue not on the regular agenda falls under non-agenda. No action may be
taken on it the same day. (This can be a good time to rebut/respond to
anything that was said during the meeting.) [NOTE: Some ‘representatives’
routinely leave early during this part, which is disenfranchisement. If they
leave early, state that during your speaking time to get it on formal record.
Put public pressure on them and hold them accountable!]

A PRIMER ON PUBLIC MEETINGS (continued)
VI. OPEN MEETING (SUNSHINE) LAWS:  THE BROWN ACT

The Ralph M. Brown Act, (commonly referred to as The Brown Act) is California’s version of ‘open meetings’ law for legislative bodies at the local level.

It details the rights of citizen to access and participate in public meetings in an open manner, as well as setting standards and responsibilities for local governing bodies to adhere to.

The act is found under California Government Code 54950 et seq. Enacted by the California State Legislature, it was authored by Assemblymember Ralph M. Brown and passed in 1953. The Brown Act guarantees the public's right to attend and participate in meetings of local legislative bodies.

There are several key elements to The Brown Act, including: which legislative bodies are subject to the act; the definition for different types of meetings; agenda and notice requirements; rights of the public; permissible closed sections; and penalties & remedies for violation of the Act.

Key Takeaways:

1. Agendas must be posted 72 hours in advance for regular meetings and give a general description that lets the public know what will be discussed or transacted at the meeting.

2. Most meetings must be held in open, & the public must be given a chance to comment. (Rules have been relaxed under AB 361.)

Here is link to a good synopsis of The Brown Act from the office of the CA Attorney General. And here is an article detailing changes under AB 361 (some of which are covered on the next page.)

[NOTE: The Brown Act applies to local Boards and Commissions; The Bagley-Keene Act sets the standards for State Boards and Commissions. You can learn more here at the California Office of the Attorney General’s site.}
THE BROWN ACT IN THE AGE OF COVID
Relaxing the Standards for Teleconferencing via AB 361

California Assembly Bill (AB) 361 amends The Brown Act to allow “a local agency to use teleconferencing” during a state of emergency without meeting ordinary Brown Act teleconferencing requirements. It defines “state of emergency via Government Code section 8625, which empowers the Governor to proclaim a state of emergency (not Public Health Officers or other local officials.)

Some of the differences between:

Original Brown Act
(Strict Minimum Standards)

1. Notices and agendas must be posted for each teleconference location from which members of the legislative body will be participating

2. Teleconference locations must be accessible to the public

3. Members of the public must be able to address the body at each teleconference location.

4. At least a quorum of the members participate from within the jurisdiction.

AB 361
(Relaxed Minimum Standards)

1. Post agendas at least 24 or 72 hours in advance in the usual places and online

2. Must state how members of the public can participate in a meeting and offer public comment, including by call-in option and/or internet-based service option

3. If meeting access is disrupted (e.g., by technology failures), the agency cannot act on agenda items until public access is restored

4. The legislative body need not provide a physical location for the public to attend or provide comments.

5. Must be voted on/renewed every 30 days

LEARN MORE ABOUT CHANGES TO TELECONFERENCING AT:
VII. TIPS FOR ATTENDING YOUR FIRST MEETING

The big day has arrived! Here are some pointers:

1. PLAN AHEAD: First, search the video archives and watch one or more past meetings to get a feel for how they flow.

Research the location of the meeting and find out what the parking situation is like. While some entities offer free public parking (i.e., County of San Diego), others do not (like City of San Diego.)

2. ARRIVE EARLY: Some meetings draw a packed house due to large group awards, or popular/controversial items. Plan to arrive early (I aim for 30-45 minutes) in order to get through security and have plenty of time to fill out as many speaker slips as necessary for all the items you want to comment on.

3. BE PREPARED: Because some entities require attendees to go through a metal detector, consider leaving pocket knives, personal protection devices, etc. secured elsewhere if your meeting has security checkpoints.

Meetings can run long (a few as long as 10-12 hours.) While there is usually a 45-60 minutes lunch break, there may not be a dinner break. Consider bringing any needed medications with you in case the meeting goes long.

Some entities allow you to eat and drink (coffee, beverages) in chambers; others do not. Normally I bring a small water bottle I keep in my purse (and have seen people with hydroflasks.) If in doubt, contact the clerk of the board ahead of time to find out what is allowed in the way of nutrition/hydration needs.

[I do find it quite telling that while the San Diego County Board of Supervisors themselves are allowed to eat and drink during the meeting, We the People are not (no food, or coffee/non-water beverages.))]

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4. **HAVE A COPY OF THE AGENDA ON HAND:** While a copy is usually provided somewhere in or outside of the chambers, there can be several people wanting to look at it. You will likely find yourself wanting to refer to it often, so I encourage you to either bring a printed copy with you (particularly if you’re a note-taker), or to have an online version bookmarked on your phone for quick access and reference.

5. **SPEAKER SLIPS:** Some entities require you to complete and turn in a speaker slip before the agenda item comes up. It is best to fill them out before the meeting begins. You usually need a slip for EACH item you want to speak on, and must turn it in before the item comes up.

   The slips are frequently color coded: pink for opposition to an item; green for in favor; and white for non-agenda items. [TIP: Grab a few extra to keep at your seat, in case you decide later you do want to talk on another issue. This saves you a trip down to get the slip in the middle of the meeting.]

6. **END OF MEETING SAFETY PLAN:** Some meetings are held at night; and even daytime meetings can run long and end at 10 p.m. Make a plan ahead of time to use the buddy system to walk back to your car with another attendee, or if the facility has security escorts, use them. There are also paid subscription-based services (like Citizen app) that will monitor and track your movements when you request it to make sure you arrive somewhere safely. Nobody wants to find themselves walking alone to a poorly lit, nearly empty parking lot or structure at night.

7. **REVIEW MEETING VIDEO:** Watch the meeting video afterwards. Critique yourself (gently) and note areas to work on/polish up for next time. Also make sure to note the things you did well.

8. **TRACK YOUR MEETING ATTENDANCE & COMMENTS:** I keep a spreadsheet of my meeting attendance and public comments. A sample template tracking sheet is provided for you in the appendices.
VIII. ADOPTING A HELICOPTER VIEW: TACTIC-DETECTION & DISCERNMENT

** Watch Dr. Jordan Peterson’s Interview with Joe Rogan **

This video will catapult your eyes wide open. It was the biggest catalyst for me to see things through a fresh lens on exactly how agenda-driven activist legislators operate to take territory. It is activism camouflaged as governance, and they will take as much territory as you allow them to.

After seeing the video and then attending meetings in person, I started seeing the signs of incremental territory-taking at almost every meeting. Essentially it’s ‘spaghetti governance’ – throw it at the wall and see what sticks. **Just how much will an unsuspecting public not notice?**

Here are a few frequently used tactics and patterns:

1. **AGENDA CREEP:** An initial item is placed on the agenda, but ‘amendments’ are added later to modify it (often far beyond what should be allowed under the Brown Act.)

2. **TROJAN HORSE:** (aka, Dog Pill in a Marshmallow): This involves camouflaging something within a seemingly benign and uncontroversial wrapping.

   The San Diego County Board of Supervisors “U.N.” CEDAW ordinance was a textbook example.

3. **DILUTION:** Be alert to changes that essentially dilute public input or voices. ‘Revised’ rules, procedures, or protocols may be conduits to diluting public voices and input.

4. **4-STAGE TECHNOCRATIC CYCLE:** A concept introduced by Thomas Sowell, it is a cyclical rainbow-chasing process where money & resources get thrown at problems which never seem to get any better (thereby requiring yet more money thrown at it.)

   The stages are: 1) Crisis; 2) Solution; 3) Results; & 4) Response.
IX. CASE STUDIES IN TACTIC-DETECTION & DISCERNMENT

A. AGENDA CREEP

1. **BOS Meeting on 10/5/2021** – Video link to an example of a potential Brown Act violation. Item #10 was a ‘routine’ Covid Response Update. Just as Chairman Fletcher made a motion to vote on the original agenda item, he added a second motion out of the blue to add a sweeping change to County operations ... a vaccine mandate for new hires.

   ANYTIME you see the words ‘and any other action as necessary’ – on an agenda, be VERY on guard and eagle-eyed to see if they try to slip anything else in.

   Luckily, someone noticed Chairman Fletcher’s devious maneuver and filed a Brown Act complaint. At the next meeting, the Board voted to rescind their original vote which had imposed the vaccine mandate on new-hires. They then had to re-vote to impose that mandate (which had this time been properly published and noticed with detailed wording about the action the Board intended to take.)

2. **BOS Meeting on 4/26/22** – Video link to a too-broad-in-scope “amendment.” Item #24 on the agenda, AUTHORIZATION TO ADVERTISE COMPETITIVE SOLICITATION FOR RENEWAL OF COUNTY DIRECT ACCESS CONTRACTS. Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer (after public comment period was over) tried to add a sweeping amendment that would set in motion the potential to require rooftop solar on every single County building by 2025 (within a short three-year timespan.)

   [Kudos to both the County Counsel (attorney) and the Chief Administrative Officer for reining the wayward Supervisor back into her item-specific-wording lane.]

3. **BOS Meeting on 06-14-2022** – An example of last-minute added amendment beyond what was stated in the agenda’s supporting documents (“... options for initiation of litigation against gun manufacturers ...”) where Fletcher added “distributors, marketers, or sellers” at the last minute.
B. TROJAN HORSE

The San Diego County Board of Supervisors “U.N.” CEDAW ordinance is a textbook example.

Placed on the agenda at least three times as “AN ORDINANCE TO PROVIDE FOR THE LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN (CEDAW)”, what it really did was camouflage the County’s redefining ‘women & girls’ to mean:

“...those who identify as women and girls, including transgender women and gender non-conforming, and those assigned female at birth who include non-binary, transgender men and intersex communities.”

No reasonable person would have known that such a sweeping, partisan and clearly agenda-driven item was within the confines of a benign-sounding ‘ordinance to eliminate discrimination against women’ (with the great irony being that it actually ENTRENCHES and ENABLES discrimination against women.)

C. DILUTION

Under a recent ‘Rules of Procedure’ change, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors switched to a ‘Consent Calendar’ agenda. Now, speakers are only allowed to comment on the entire Consent agenda COLLECTIVELY.

Thus, the more items placed on the Consent agenda, the less time available to speak about an individual item (i.e., with a two-minute/120 seconds time limit rule, an agenda with six items on Consent allows a speaker to touch on each item for 20 seconds. When the calendar is increased to 24 items, a speaker would only get 5 seconds per item.)
DILUTION (continued):

\[
\frac{120 \text{ seconds}}{6 \text{ items}} = 20 \text{ secs./item} \quad \text{vs.} \quad \frac{120 \text{ seconds}}{24 \text{ items}} = 5 \text{ secs./item}
\]

While Consent Agendas are common on many boards and councils, they usually entail a small number of routine items. At the BOS meeting on 4/26/22, the agenda had a whopping 27 items on the Consent Calendar (up from an average of under 12 for the past prior meetings.)

Because this governing body has an affinity for using a ‘data-driven approach’, I created the chart below to document the dilution that was occurring regarding the ability of public speakers to comment at meetings.

It lists the number of items on the regular agenda prior to the rules change, and then after the Consent Calendar format was enacted.

San Diego County Board of Supervisors
Historical Tally of Agenda Items
May 2, 2022

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D: 4-STAGE TECHNOCRATIC CYCLE:

“Crisis”: ‘The War on Poverty’ (1960’s) -- Touted as a way to reduce dependency and end the welfare state. (However, historic data shows both the poverty rate, as well as reliance on government aid, were actually both already in decline.)


Results: Number of people reliant on government assistance to keep them above the poverty line actually increased.

Response: Redefine goals after the fact to make programs seem successful. Say that more needs to be done (but the new solutions will require yet more money and spending.)

Video of Source Material

Thomas Sowell’s 4-Stage Technocratic Cycle
X. TOOLS & TACTICS TO FIGHT BACK

1. Redirect Vocabulary: Words are powerful. One key way groups shape thought is to use euphemistic and politicized language to shift perception and framing.

Some phrases – like ‘porch pirate’ – seem pretty innocuous and even pithy. But the deeper effect is to dilute the results of the behavior. Someone stealing a package of insulin delivered to a front door is potentially far more than a thief. Euphemistic and even cutesy language is not helpful – it only perpetuates the minimalization of behavior and its effects.

When you allow words like ‘tagging’ instead of ‘vandalism’ or ‘crisis’ instead of ‘problem’, you are ceding territory to make way for the furtherance of your opponent’s agenda.

Recent examples include: ‘justice-involved individuals’ instead of criminals (or criminal justice); ‘reproductive rights’ instead of abortion; ‘harm reduction’ instead of enablement of drug use; and even the growing use of ‘Minor-Attracted Persons’ (MAPS) instead of pedophile.

2. Reclaim Narrative: Conflation is a popular tool used to re-direct narratives when pesky things like facts and data get in the way. It is very common for people with weak arguments to try to force a binary choice on an adversary. Learn to recognize it, and push back.

A recent example of this was U.S. Senator Josh Hawley’s questioning of Khiara Bridges, a law professor at UC Berkeley School of Law. She asked the senator directly if he believes that men can get pregnant. “No, I don’t think men can get pregnant,” Hawley said, to which the professor replied: “So you’re denying that trans people exist.” (Source: CNN)

‘Misinformation’ is another word grenade used to exert narrative control. If it’s ever lobbed at you, you could politely remind the hurler that 2021 was rife with many things that were touted as being ‘true’ but then later emphatically proven not to be.

Time; transparency; tolerance of questions; and the ability to reproduce results – all are at the core of proving whether something is indeed True in the long run or not. Remember: Galileo faced the Inquisition, but the passage of time proved him correct.
3. **Political Jiujitsu:** Many governing bodies have started (obsessively) using language as a means to bolster, justify, and elevate their positions. I encourage you to watch, learn, and then boomerang their terms right back at them.

*Example:* At one San Diego County Board of Supervisors meeting, the three Progressive Supervisors were reluctant to support sending a letter to Governor Newsom requesting a suspension of the gas tax. I pointed out during my public comment that while the three frequently touted precepts like “equity,” THIS was their moment to actually *demonstrate* it and live out the values they claimed to uphold.

Other Progressive fan-favorite phrases include: ‘*Framework for the Future*’; ‘*Data-driven approach*’; & ‘*Sustainability*.’ They also now frequently add the word ‘Justice’ after any new Progressive agenda they want to implement (e.g., Climate Justice, Environmental Justice, etc.)

4. **Data:** If a picture is worth a thousand words, a chart is a political goldmine (particularly to entities that obsess about “data-driven approaches.”)

Observe, reflect, gather data, and then take the time to compile it into a visually-pleasing format

Like the earlier case study on the tactic of ’dilution’, taking time to compile data into an impactful chart can provide overwhelming evidence that is impossible to ignore to really drive home the point you are trying to make to your representatives and/or key stakeholders.

When evaluating data, pay attention to how it’s presented. Here are three good websites to learn how data can be manipulated (the last one is quite fun.)

https://www.shortform.com/blog/manipulated-graphs/
https://rigorousthemes.com/blog/misleading-data-visualization-examples/
http://tylervigen.com/spurious-correlations
XI. STRATEGIES FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

1. CHOOSE YOUR LENTIL FIELD: From 2 Samuel 23:11-12 Living Bible (TLB)

11-12 After him was Shammah, the son of Agee from Harar. Once during a Philistine attack, when all his men deserted him and fled, he stood alone at the center of a field of lentils and beat back the Philistines; and God gave him a great victory.

I encourage you when first starting out to select a primary governing body and/or one ‘line-in-the-sand’ issue to focus your activism on and concentrate efforts there first.

Yes, you can scatter seeds of activism across many fields ... but that then also requires far more watering, weeding, and tending ... time consuming work that can quickly lead to burnout.

For me, after attending/participating in many meetings at various entities, I strategically chose to focus on two: the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, as well as the regional governing body collective called SANDAG.

I did this because both seemed to be at the forefront of shaping the Leftist narrative arc and shifting the direction of policy and programs into driving a very Progressive agenda

2. BE A LUMBERJACK, NOT A VIKING:

By this I mean the popular Viking-style hobby of axe-throwing. The aim is simply to hurl something and hope it hits the target (whether a tree or the broad side of a barn.)

The problem with ‘Viking Activism’ however is that, while it may make you feel better afterwards, it doesn’t really do much to move the needle for change.

Lumberjacks, however, work far differently. They go in with a very specific objective – to take the tree down. They have given thought and calculation as to where to direct the strikes of their instrument for maximum efficiency.
2. (con’t) - BE A LUMBERJACK, NOT A VIKING

During the first few months of my political activism I gave passionate speeches peppered frequently with words like tyranny, freedom, and autonomy – all to deaf ears. It wasn’t until I got strategic and tactical that I actually started seeing results.

I urge you to observe things from a helicopter view, and look for weak points, chinks in their armor, and even quasi-unethical things they might be trying to slip past an unsuspecting public. THOSE are the areas where you are likely to make far more headway than a rant that leaves you feeling better afterwards, but achieves nothing in the end.

3. THINK ECOSYSTEMS, NOT JUST HABITAT:

When monitoring agendas and various governing bodies, it’s easy to get inundated by the number of issues and the bureaucratic bog that is government. I encourage you to fix your eyes on the ‘bigger picture’ and zoom out to look beyond just single issues themselves. Instead, assess how they overlap and intermingle with other issues. Look for recurring and/or emerging themes and commonalities.

One example of this was two seemingly unrelated issues at the San Diego County BOS. At first glance, the two issues appear disconnected (efforts to remove a Black pastor from the Human Relations Commission, and the Board’s push to enact the CEDAW ordinance.) Upon closer examination, however, the taproot connection for both issues revolved around two stakeholder groups with conflicting beliefs: Progressive concerns for transgenders (to define anyone who chooses to as a ‘woman’), vs. traditional beliefs to uphold privacy and protection rights for women.

4. DETERMINE YOUR PRIORITIES:

What issues are important to you? Use laser focus, and drill deep on one or two. Research, learn, and build your archival knowledge and expertise.
5. TRACK ISSUE ARCS:
When starting out, it’s easy to get tunnel vision and focus on one item or meeting at a time. But as months go by, you’ll see trends & patterns emerge – and you’ll benefit from tracking them. Some entities make this easier with a keyword search; for others, you’ll have to manually go back and research agendas, minutes, and supporting documents.

6. SLOGGING THROUGH THE MARSH:
Put your wading boots on, activists, we’re diving in to the bureaucratic boondocks. Government moves at sloth speed. It’s slow going, and “action” on an item often involves staff coming back in three to six months to report on findings, then more recommendations and a possible vote. Progress is slow. Realize you’re in it for the long-haul.

6. SPREADING THE WORD: THINK XERISCAPE, NOT FIRE HOSE:
Over time, you will develop deep archival knowledge; you will also likely want to share your findings and political passion with others. When trying to teach and convey information, it’s important to not overwhelm listeners, or you’ll likely lose them in an ‘eyes glazed over’ moment.

Here are some tips:

* Develop an outline/overview
* Layout a timeline of events
* Craft talking points
* Avoid jargon
* Explain why they should care
* End with a clear ‘call to action’

7. SELF CARE & WELLNESS:
Activism can not only be exhausting work, but sometimes lack of perceived progress brings feelings of helplessness. Design your schedule to give you balance; take breaks when needed.

Your goal as an activist is to create momentum that is SUSTAINABLE over the course of time. Be strategic, create a plan, then use a steady drip system to work the plan. Spewing all your time, energy, & resources at once will quickly lead to burnout.
XII. MORE WAYS TO LEARN

1. DEVELOP ARCHIVAL KNOWLEDGE - WATCH VIDEOS OF PAST MEETINGS YOU DIDN’T MONITOR OR ATTEND:

As you develop your knowledge, you will see trends develop as well as ‘story arcs’ similar to movie or television series plots. If there is a recurring issue of interest to you, make time to go back and research prior meetings where the issue was brought forth and discussed. You will often glean information that gives deeper insight as to how (and why) things are currently playing out.

2. READ, RESEARCH, & KNOW THE RULES: There’s an adage that states, ‘A young man knows all the rules; an old man knows all the exceptions.’ You cannot recognize when violations occur if you do not know the governing body’s rules to begin with.

Also, most clerks are very accommodating in responding to inquiries to explain things or to answer questions you might have. When in doubt, get clarification from either clerks, ombudsmen, or department heads.

3. FRESH EYES - RE-WATCH/RE-LISTEN TO MEETINGS YOU DID ATTEND:

While this can be time consuming, you will be surprised at how much you pick up on the second time around. Things you missed the first time (either from distraction, camera angle, etc.) tend to leap out at you the more you watch and learn.

4. OPPOSITION RESEARCH: Research those in opposition to you. Follow them on social media, sign up for their email updates, and perhaps even get added to candidate campaign outreach lists. Pay attention to their talking points and their tactics. What issue(s) or emotion(s) are they using to motivate their base? [NOTE: You will find that FEAR is a frequent tool used in attempts to sway behavior and influence thinking.]
XIII. TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

1. **KEEP PRIVACY & SAFETY IN MIND:** There is a wide spectrum of people who attend, speak, and follow legislative meetings. Passions can run high and tempers can flare. For many legislative entities, in-person attendees must go through a metal detector to enter, and meetings are commonly protected by armed law enforcement. That is how seriously elected officials take their own safety concerns.

   Depending on how engaged you plan to become, you may want to consider getting a P.O. Box or a virtual mailing address for a nominal charge, should you want to send correspondence or list an address on a form, in order to protect your personally private information.

2. **SPEAKER SLIPS ARE PUBLIC RECORD:** For entities that utilize speaker slips, *be mindful of the information you provide. Many items are optional!* For the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, the only item required is a name (and it doesn’t even have to be your real name.)

   While there are fields for your address and email, *be aware that most speaker slips get posted online as a matter of public record (thus making your personal info very public.)*

3. **PLAN FOR VARIOUS POSSIBILITIES:** Representatives can pull (move) items from the Consent agenda to the Discussion agenda at the last minute.

   Therefore it is prudent to either list every single item you wish to speak about on the Consent Calendar, or simply list a range (such as “All” or “1-18” or however many items are on the Consent agenda.)

   I found this out the hard way when, for expediency’s sake, I only listed the primary item I wanted to speak on (knowing that it was lumped in with a few others I planned to touch on.) When that main item was unexpectedly “pulled” (moved) to the Discussion calendar, I was essentially disenfranchised and not allowed to speak on any of the others I had wanted to.
4. **THANK THOSE THAT HELP YOU:** Make a point of following up with legislators who are responsive to you, and who vote in a like-minded way regarding your concerns. A quick “thank you for voting Yes on XYZ” goes a long way in building bridges and relationships.

I also sign off many of my emails with ‘thanks for all you do’, because so much work done by volunteers, governing-body clerks, etc. goes unacknowledged and under-appreciated.

*Be the yin for all the negative-Nelly yang in this world by taking a moment to acknowledge someone and say thanks!!!*

5. **BUILD CONNECTIVITY:** Pay attention to those orbiting in the political planetary systems you frequent. Learn their areas of concern, and what motivates them. Introduce yourself where appropriate, and develop networks, resources, and mentors.

6. **EXPAND YOUR REACH:** While you might focus at first on simply attending meetings, you’ll likely start connecting with outside organizations whose interests align with your own. That may well serve as a springboard to other similar organizations. Mindfully stretch your reach as time, energy, and resources permit (but be strategic & intentional, and don’t spread yourself too thin.)

7. **ATTEND MEETINGS, SEMINARS, TRAININGS:** Many grassroots groups offer periodic training or get-togethers. Don’t be shy – participate! You’ll find that the ‘beehive’ synergy is buzzing with new information and ways of seeing & thinking about things.

8. **DEVELOP & SHARE YOUR SKILLS:** If you have any budding skills or interests, volunteering is a great way to develop them. Grassroots groups are always looking for photographers, videographers, writers, the social-media savvy, content creators, event coordinators, etc. Volunteering is a great low-key way to build a solid portfolio with a built-in, appreciative audience.
XIV. CONCLUSION

Now more than ever, it’s imperative for concerned citizens to get involved. Yes, it’s time consuming and can be a lot (or little) work – depending on how much time, energy, and resources you choose to devote to effecting change. Here are some final thoughts to consider:

CROCKPOT GOVERNANCE: Most people want ‘set and forget’ convenience. They want to elect someone into office who they feel will work for their best interest, then go back themselves to focusing on their own lives, pastimes, and daily obligations.

Most politicians count on this. Our short memories and personal commitments keep us preoccupied, thereby minimizing legislative oversight and accountability. I encourage you to pick one entity and start monitoring it. Read news articles, and sign up to receive agendas & email updates. Email your representatives from time to time to share your concerns. Let them know you ARE watching! Ditch the crockpot, and turn up the heat!!!

CONCORD, OR THE COUCH?: There will be days – likely many of them – where you contemplate skipping a meeting, a rally, or sending an email campaign – due to the Siren’s song of comfort, convenience, or the long laundry list of other things you’d rather be doing.

I admit to frequently having days like these, but when I do, I take pause and think back to the farmers, tradesmen, and the everyday folk who fought at Lexington and Concord ... how most could have been home by the fire, boots off, feet up, enjoying a warm bowl of stew. Where would our country be (or would we even have one?) had they simply not answered the call, but instead chosen comfort over cause?

They did not let convenience nor comfort dissuade them from robust engagement and action, and I encourage YOU not to, either!

REMEMBER: WE GET THE GOVERNMENT WE TOLERATE!!!

Today’s (in)action is tomorrow’s legacy – what will YOURS be?
XV. RESOURCES

A. Local Entities:

SANDAG: Likely the most powerful entity you’ve never heard of. It’s a regional decision-making governing body, comprised of representatives from 19 local entities (plus some advisory members.) It recently went to a ‘weighted-vote’ system, tilting the balance of power even further Left.

SANDAG has lots of money, power, and control over the future direction of San Diego County.

City of Carlsbad  City of San Diego
City of Chula Vista  City of San Marcos
City of Coronado  City of Santee
City of Del Mar  City of Solana Beach
City of El Cajon  City of Vista
City of Encinitas  County of San Diego
City of Escondido  Metropolitan Transit System
City of Imperial Beach  North County Transit District
City of La Mesa  Port of San Diego
City of Lemon Grove  San Diego County Water Authority
City of National City  San Diego County Regional Airport Authority
City of Oceanside
City of Poway

There are numerous other smaller bodies, boards, commissions, committees, and groups within the County. These include school boards, planning groups, working committees, etc.

They’re a great way to get your feet wet in activism – both for speaking and participating, as well as potentially running for office one day!
B. ACTIVISM STRATEGY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. **What are my two main issues or areas of concern?**

   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

2. **Why are those issues important to me?**

   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

3. **What governing bodies legislate/regulate those issues?**

   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

4. **What is my strategy for influencing them?** *(see pp. 6-8)*

   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

5. **How will I track my activism and denote my progress?**

   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
### C. SAMPLE TEMPLATE - MEETING/SPEAKING TRACKER

**Link to online template**

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**Columns:****

- **DATE**
- **ISSUE/ITEM**
- **MINUTE/MARK**
- **VIDEO LINK**

The Beginner's Guide to Civic Activism  
Mary Davis - August 2022
First, a heartfelt thank you for downloading and reading through this guide. Now comes the homework:

**PUT WHAT YOU’VE LEARNED INTO ACTION!**

Lastly, if you have any questions (*non-legal, non-procedural*), success stories, lessons learned, or just thoughts you’d like to share, feel free to reach out to me at:

sdactivismguide@gmail.com