



Powerful Citizen Roles: Political Party Leader – Part One

You've learned about the powerful role of Political Party Representative and now you are ready to join the party and get in the game! Using New Jersey as an example, here's what you could do! [Note: You can register as a member of the Democrat or Republican Party in all 50 states.]

STEP 1: Research Your Local & County Committees

STEP 2: Know the Qualifications & Legal Rights

STEP 3: Become a Committee Person

STEP 4: Know Your Power

Becoming a Political Party County Committee Member

Many citizens know very little about their local political parties. Of those who are aware, most lack an understanding about how powerful these parties are, and how they can access this power.

STEP 1: Research Your Local & County Committees.

- ✓ **The first step is to request a list of the current county committee members in your party within your municipality.** By N. J. state law, every county committee member is automatically a member of their municipal committee, making this the only statutorily mandated dual office. You should be able to find this list on your county clerk's website. Both the municipal clerk and county clerk should be maintaining a list of members and vacancies.
- ✓ **Find out which election district you live in from the municipal clerk.** Your town is divided into election districts, made up of approximately 700-1000 voters. But in some cases (i.e. Camden County Democratic Committee), the election district is citywide instead. State Statute allows the municipal chairs to draw the election district map as they see fit. So we suggest that you call your clerk to find out the details of your election district.



REFRESHER:

In New Jersey, of the 25,000 neighborhood-level committee seats that are elected each June Primary Election, 50% of them are reserved for women.

What an accessible way for women to get involved in politics!

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- ✓ **Find your opportunity.** After finding out your election district and obtaining a list of the current county committee, see if there is a vacancy in your election district, or when the county committee will next be up for election. In most county committees, the elections are held every two years.

STEP 2: Know the Qualifications & Legal Rights



- ✓ **Qualifications for Serving on the County Committee**
 - Ⓢ 18 years of age or older
 - Ⓢ A resident of the election district
 - Ⓢ A registered voter of the political party you are seeking to join (Democrat or Republican)
- ✓ **Legal Rights of a County Committeeperson**
 - Ⓢ The right to view municipal party financial records
 - Ⓢ Access to a copy of the party bylaws within 48 hours of being elected to the position. Committee members have the right to propose and vote on the adoption or amendment of a party constitution and by-laws. (Party Democracy Act. P.L. 2009 c. 135)
 - Ⓢ The right to propose and review the candidates who will run on the party's ticket
 - Ⓢ The right to vote for candidates to fill vacancies in elected offices

STEP 3: Become a Committee Person

Taking a seat on your county committee can happen at various times throughout the year. Just because you missed the Primary Election season doesn't mean you cannot get involved!

- ✓ **Election season? Run for a seat.** Check your list of committee seats to see if your election district is filled. If someone is already serving, talk to them and see if they'd be willing to step down. Many times people are often serving as a duty to their Party because there is no one else to do the job! You can also try speaking with your municipal chair or elected officials and let them know if your interest. Make sure you turn in your nominating petition by the filing deadline. If someone is already serving in your election district, mark your calendar for March 1st of the next committee seat election year. This way you won't forget to get your nominating petition completed in time to make the next election. You can find the election years from your municipal or county clerks.

Download our *How to Run for a County Committee Seat* step-by-step guide at thecitizenscampaign.org.



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- ✓ **Miss the filing deadline? Run a write in campaign.** If you missed the deadline for filing a nominating petition, you can still run a write in campaign for the seat. If no one has filed to run, this can be very easy. It usually only takes 1 to 10 votes to win a seat. Download our “How to Run a Write In Campaign for County Committee” step-by-step guide on our website.
- ✓ **It’s not election time, and there’s a vacancy?** If you’ve reviewed the list of committee people in your election district, and there is currently a vacancy, and the next election is not for another year ... you don’t have to wait that long! Contact your party’s municipal chair and express your interest in getting involved and serving on the county committee. To be appointed to the county committee, the municipal committee can vote you in at a regular meeting with a quorum of the members.
- ✓ **No election, no vacancy, what can you do?** To better leverage yourself for the next election, start volunteering today. Volunteer on a subcommittee, for events, and local campaigns. It’s a great way to network with party leaders and let them know that you are committed to the party!

STEP 4: Know Your Power

Serving on the county committee can offer you a lot of power for very little of your time. It is a position where you can either show up a few times a year as required, or you can take an active role and be an agent of change within your community.

Some of the many powerful decisions the county and municipal committees make:

- ✓ **Screen and Choose Candidates.** The political parties control the “party line,” this is a slate of candidates bracketed together on the ballot under the unified title of the Democrat or Republican. In most cases, people vote the party line of their political party without knowing anything about the individual candidates. In certain areas of New Jersey, having the “party line” in the June Primary is tantamount to winning the primary and ultimately the general election. The screening process in each local party varies depending on the municipal and county bylaws.
- ✓ **Decide who gets funding.** The political party organizations typically raise millions of dollars and have control over the amount of money spent in campaigns, including how much goes to each candidate. And as we know in N.J., advertisement and mailings cost a lot of money.



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Unfortunately, we also know that the candidates who spend the most money typically win elections. So we can see how important the funding of candidates is in determining the outcome of elections. Note: In most cases, the county party chair's signature is required on all transactions.

- ✓ **Elect the Party Leadership.** The County Committee Members elect their municipal and county chair. Deciding who to put in charge can be instrumental in determining the direction of the party – its platform or where it stands on certain issues.

TIP: By NJ state law, the political party constitutions and bylaws must be made available to county committee members by request. It is important to remember as a county committee member, if you think the process for making decisions is undemocratic, you can always make a motion for a vote to change the bylaws and create a more democratic process.

- ✓ **Adopt a Constitution and Bylaws.** The constitution and bylaws are the governing documents for your political party. They establish the rules of the game (i.e. how important decisions are made, such as the election of the chair, membership duties, officer selection, and candidate screening procedures).

- ✓ **Fill Vacancies in County and Legislative Office Vacancies.** If a state legislator or county freeholder steps down during a certain window of the year, the decision of who will replace them does not go to their constituents, but rather is made by a vote of the party county

committee people within their legislative district or county. Currently, 1/3 of the NJ Legislature (Senate & Assembly) was originally put in office through this process. That means they have the incumbent title when the official vote comes up in the November general election for the permanent replacement of the seat they've been filling. Being an incumbent is an advantage, as it brings more notoriety and exposure than that of a challenger.

NEED MORE HELP?

If you run in to any roadblocks on your way, you take a Power Civics© video training any time at thecitizenscampaign.org.