How to Run for Elected Office: A Practical Guide for First-Time Candidates

American Academy of Physician Associates

Running for elected office can feel overwhelming at first but, at its core, it's about stepping up to serve your community - and the PA profession - with purpose and preparation. Whether you're considering a local school board seat, a state-level position, or even Congress, building a thoughtful, solid foundation is key to running a credible and impactful campaign.

Here's how to get started:

1 Research positions and offices that will allow you to make a difference.

As trusted healthcare providers, PAs have the opportunity to affect positive change in their communities on a myriad of issues – not just healthcare. But you want to start your political journey in public service in a position where you can make the biggest impact. The right office for you depends on your experience level and on the specific issues you want to address, in addition to attainability. Consider starting locally: school board, town/city/county council, state representative. Those offices are more attainable for first-time candidates than aiming for a seat in Congress. And keep in mind that running for an open seat is easier than running for one held by a strong incumbent.

2 Know your community and/or district inside and out.

Before you file any paperwork or send that first fundraising email, there are foundational steps every candidate needs to take seriously.

Start by researching the top issues affecting your community and district. What are people talking about at town halls? What concerns come up repeatedly? Healthcare and PA practice issues may be priorities of yours, but what's top of mind for your neighbors? Education, the economy, and public safety are frequent issues appearing in public polling these days, in addition to healthcare.

Next, understand the voter profile. Look at demographics such as age, income levels, education, and voting patterns. Would your community's voters be described as conservative or progressive? Are you in a high-turnout area? Is it politically competitive or dominated by one party?

Finally, study the history of the seat. Who has held the position before? How long did they serve? Why did they leave? Understanding past elections and past candidates' messaging can give you insight into what resonates with voters.

The more informed you are, the more credible and strategic your campaign will be.

3 Know your "why" and own it authentically.

Voters connect with people, not just policies. Before you can ask others to believe in your campaign, you need to be clear on your own story, your values, and your "why."

Ask yourself: Why am I running? Your answer should go beyond "change" or ambition and instead reflect a genuine commitment to serving others. Maybe you've seen a gap in leadership, experienced a problem or issue firsthand, or want to bring a fresh perspective to your community.

Whatever your reason, make sure it's clear, honest, and consistent. Your "why" will shape your messaging, guide your decisions, and help voters understand what you stand for, and eventually will form the backbone of every speech, every door-knock conversation, and every fundraising ask you'll make.

4 Check your eligibility and filing requirements.

Every office comes with specific legal requirements and overlooking them can derail your campaign before it even begins. Confirm that you meet the basic eligibility criteria, such as age, residency, and voter registration status. Then, depending on the office, you likely need to submit an application or nominating petition, get it notarized, obtain signatures, or pay a fee.

Determine the appropriate state or local election authority, and research their guidelines for:

- Filing deadlines
- Required paperwork and applications
- Petition signatures (if applicable)
- Campaign finance registration

It's also important to understand fundraising rules and reporting requirements early on. Compliance isn't just a technicality; it builds trust and protects your campaign down the road.

5 Build a foundation of community involvement.

Strong campaigns are rooted in real relationships. If you're not already active in your community, start now. Take every opportunity to interact with your neighbors, local officials, philanthropic leaders, and civic groups. Attend local meetings, volunteer with organizations, support local events, and listen to residents. This isn't just about visibility, it's about showing your community roots, building trust, and fostering a reputation for engagement.

Consider joining civic groups like Rotary or your local Chamber of Commerce. Find a local Toastmasters and brush up on your public speaking while expanding your network. Volunteer for a community task force or committee. Be an active partner with your state PA chapter. All of this community involvement helps you:

- Establish credibility
- Expand your network
- Stay informed on local concerns
- Demonstrate commitment beyond election season

Voters are far more likely to support someone they've seen consistently showing up.

6 Assemble a campaign team and platform.

And finally, after all that foundational work, you're ready to launch – and you can't run a successful campaign alone.

Start by building a core team, even if it's small. Key roles might include:

- Campaign manager
- Treasurer (especially important for compliance)
- Communications or social media lead
- Volunteer coordinator

As your campaign grows, so can your team. If you are running for a legislative seat, consider reaching out to your state or county political party committee for assistance and recommendations.

At the same time, develop your platform. This should outline your position on key issues and your vision for the community. Keep it authentic, focused, realistic, and aligned with what voters care about. A strong platform shows that you've listened, thought critically, and are ready to lead.

Final Thoughts

Running for office is a significant commitment, but it's also one of the most direct ways to create change. PAs are primed for success, given the skills you've honed over years of working with patients and being a compassionate, persuasive, and trustworthy healthcare professional. With the right preparation, including understanding your district, meeting administrative and legal requirements, leading with purpose, engaging your community, and building a capable team, you can launch a campaign that is both credible and compelling.

Don't hesitate to reach out to AAPA – we can assist with finding a mentor, putting you in touch with constituent organization leaders in your state, and providing other resources. Contact advocacy@aapa.org with any questions.

Thank you for your political advocacy! And best of luck with your campaign and public service journey!