

A Lifelong Commitment to Democracy and Service

“Brain tumors have no party,” notes patient advocate and cancer blogger Adam Hayden, whose journey reflects the values of love, acceptance and civic duty.

November 11, 2024 By [Adam Hayden](#)

I voted for Bill Clinton in 1992. I was 10 or 11 years old, and it was my Elementary School’s mock election. I don’t want to attribute too much sophistication to my younger self, but I do recall having a sense that who you vote for is a step toward organizing the type of society in which you want to live.

My dad is a mainline Protestant pastor, and my childhood religious education centered around love, acceptance, and caring for others. I would have located those values in Clinton or the Democratic party. Again, I wasn’t even 12 years old, but because I recall learning about civics and discussing electoral politics, I knew this was something I was interested in.

My sister was born with degenerative physical disability and intellectual disabilities, and at some point during childhood, I recognized that some services we tapped into for her support were wrapped up in the government. Again, I don’t want to attribute too much sophistication to my younger self, and I can’t locate a specific insight or lightbulb moment that connected these dots. Still, probably by 5th or 6th grade, my values aligned toward affirming the belovedness of every person and a positive attitude toward the government that it can positively impact people’s lives.

One granddad was a farmer, and the other was a Union railroader. My grandad, the railroader, had served in the Civilian Conservation Corps after he was denied enlistment in the army for medical reasons. He was committed to serving in some way. My other grandad, the farmer, was a dairy farmer who contributed to rations during World War II if I have the story right.

I had several public school educators in my family, and by virtue of my dad’s job, I learned lessons about the fragile nature of life and also its beauty. My dad would be called at midnight to support families after a terrible car accident, but he also welcomed new life and presided over marriages marking new love. Community building, positive attitude toward government, and serving others were core commitments of our family.

In high school, in the late 1990s, we discovered my mom’s family was Jewish, which I embraced. It turns out my values of social justice were affirmed by the tradition I had just learned about, which helped me make sense of my felt identity. Around 2012 or so, I joined the local chapter of J Street,

an organization that continues to advocate for a pro-democracy, two-state solution to work politically toward a peaceful outcome in Israel and Palestine. Yes, that work has been going on that long—even longer. We began meeting with Andre Carson, a House member from Indiana, and then I began traveling to DC on this issue—my first authentic political advocacy.

When I was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2016, I joined a nonpartisan, nonprofit patient organization that works on government relations to advocate for policies that benefit the brain tumor community. My political advocacy shifted toward increased medical research funding. I've joked that I went from the Israel-Palestine guy to the increased government spending guy. When your elected officials are primarily Republican from the deeply red state of Indiana, you'll see how popular I am with the Indiana delegation!

Among other commitments, I currently serve the Department of Defense on a medical research program funding brain cancer research. This disease has a higher incidence rate compared to the general population for service members in our armed forces. I am proud of my nearly five years of service to our country in this way.

My values have not changed much over the last thirty years. I continue to hold a positive attitude toward government, affirm each person's worth, value, and belovedness, and prioritize service to others. I've always taken very seriously my involvement in the tools and systems of democracy, and I am proud of the legislative wins that I've been a part of. Living with a terminal illness with a devastating impact on people and their families, I also see the urgency and need for federal government spending because the market is hesitant to invest in research for a disease with only a 5% five-year survival rate.

One of the things we say in patient advocacy is that "Brain tumors have no party." Shit, I've spoken at an event with Lindsay Graham! I've spoken at an event with Megan McCain, where I spent at least 30 minutes with her and my wife, Whitney, in Megan McCain's green room talking about her dad's, Senator John McCain's, life and death with brain cancer. President Joe Biden's son, Beau, died from brain cancer, and I was invited to speak at a White House event that was part of Biden's Cancer Moonshot program. I've sat in the offices of Democratic Senator Joe Donnelly and Republican Mike Braun, who beat him for a Senate seat.

It's been very disappointing to see the majority of the electorate move away from democratic norms and political civility. The positive attitude toward electoral politics and the government's role in positively impacting people's lives and a commitment to respecting and serving others feels at risk on a broad scale. All I can commit to is continuing to do my part, as I have done since my first trip to DC in 2012/2013.

Democracy is not something to be disdained. We are stronger together, and democracy thrives in diversity. I'll continue to show up, and I hope you will, too.

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