

# Basic Citizen Lobbying<sup>1</sup>

Too often people think of politics as something that happens one day every two or four years. Activists work hard to elect socially progressive, fiscally responsible government. Our leaders need to know that we can give them support – or pressure – on any given day. Even the best public officials need their constituents' support and pressure to help them make the right decisions. If grassroots groups do not engage elected officials, somebody else will – and that's the scary part.

With the right training and a little practice, you can talk to your elected officials any time and hold them accountable to how they vote on issues you care about. Your opinion should matter as much to them in an off-year as it does on Election Day. Remember, public officials work for you!

## The Citizen Lobbyist vs. the Paid Lobbyist

You don't need to be a high-powered, big name, professional lobbyist to make an impact on elected officials. It is to your advantage that you are "just your average voter" in their district.

By virtue of being a constituent (or by mobilizing other constituents you have a level of credibility that professional firms do not. No elected official can survive with a reputation for ignoring his/her constituents.

## Goals of a citizen lobby visit

**FAMILIARITY** – Elected officials need to see the human face of the issues. The citizen lobbyist is that face. Getting to know the legislator makes them more likely to meet with you in the future.

**DOING WHAT IS RIGHT** – Press your elected official to vote right on issues important to bettering society.

**ACCOUNTABILITY** – Make your elected official accountable for votes they have made already.

## Know Your Target

A significant component of lobbying is knowing whom to target and knowing about that target. You can map out who has influence over an issue, and who has influence over that decision maker.

The first critical step in pressuring public officials is finding out which official actually has the power to do what is needed. Most of the time, this is a simple matter of paying attention. Public officials, especially elected officials, will be very public on the matters people care about. When unsure of who can do what, just ask. The Secretary of State, county officials and any elected officials will be forthcoming over what lies in their purview. Even if this initial research seems at first fruitless or redundant, it is a time investment worth making. No one wants to meet with an official who simply cannot address the issue at hand.

Second, research your target. Who is important to the public official? To whom is he/she accountable? From whom does the official receive contributions? Who are the major employers and institutions in the district and would they be affected by your position? You are looking for the major influences already affecting this official. Ideally, you can get these influences to work with you.

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<sup>1</sup> *Democracy for America Campaign Academy Grassroots Campaign Training Manual, 2009.*

## **Know the Issue**

For your public official to take you seriously, the citizen lobbyist needs to know at least as much about the issue as the target does. Background research into the stakeholders on both sides of the issue will help the citizen lobbyist understand the other forces acting on the public official. Come prepared to discuss the history of that issue in the legislature. At all times, discuss the local impact of the issue. If the issue is a national or statewide issue, discuss how they issue directly affects the district which the public official represents. Obviously, only say what you know. A white lie or an exaggeration of the facts can rapidly damage a group's reputation.

## **Know the Solution**

Come prepared with a solution the target can enact. Your ask should be specific and direct. The more specific the solution, the better. For example, instead of asking a legislator to write a bill for you, write it for them and ask the legislator to introduce it. The legislator will want to edit the bill, so be prepared to work with him/her on it. If the solution is a vote on a pending bill, be prepared to discuss the specific merits or flaws of that bill as well as current sponsors and supporters. Every meeting should have one person asking the "pin-down" question.

## **Know How to Interact with Support Staff**

Many elected officials will have staff who handles specific issues areas. As a group lobbies on a particular issue, this staffer becomes a key contact within that office. Often, a group will meet with the staffer instead of the elected official. For grassroots groups, this is not unusual. The staffer can provide more in-depth insight on the issue and where the official stands politically. In the end, staffers rarely make a commitment on the elected official's behalf.

Treat every staffer with the same respect you would treat the elected official. After developing a relationship with the elected official's office, the group will find it easier to eventually meet with the elected official themselves. At some point, the organization's working relationship may include multiple contacts within the office. Meeting with the officials' staffer is the first of many relationships.

## **Know how to Follow Through**

It is unlikely that one meeting with a public official will completely persuade that official to adopt a given stance. Following up and scheduling subsequent meetings is a good way to maintain the pressure.

Send a thank-you note to the legislator memorializing the commitments you extracted in the meeting. Follow-up after an appropriate interval of time to find out if your legislator did what he/she committed to do. It's also important for you to follow through on commitments that you may have made as well like providing additional materials or contact information.

## 8 Simple Tips to Talking with your Elected Officials

Principles	Pitfalls
<p><b>Speak from the heart.</b> Tell your own story. It will be the truest, most passionate thing the elected official hears all day. It is also the easiest for you to remember</p>	<p><b>Going on too long.</b> Keep your story powerful by keeping it short. Practice telling your story in 2 minutes so that the legislator stays focused on your message.</p>
<p><b>Use the facts.</b> A small number (2 to 3) of compelling facts will help you make your case. Make sure the facts have a credible source (i.e. not a random blog comment). Use statistics in your story if you can bring a human face to the numbers. Keep the facts local or discuss the local implications</p>	<p><b>Laundry lists and irrelevant details.</b> A few facts are great but a laundry list is a bore. Only throw a few facts at a legislator in one meeting, even if you know more. Other facts and info can be left with the legislator in the form of handouts. National or statewide facts simply don't have the weight of detailed local impact.</p>
<p><b>Ask for one simple thing and stay focused.</b> Never leave without asking your public official to do something (e.g. vote for or against a bill). Whatever you need the legislator to do, make sure the request is clear and that you understand the response. Lobbying for only one issue/action at a time will keep you focused and leave little room for the public official to evade a commitment.</p>	<p><b>Getting the run-around.</b> Legislators will not want to commit to voting for or against a bill after one meeting. This is OK. They might want to read the bill or get more information before deciding, but you should make sure to set up a follow up plan to get an answer from them. If they need to read the bill first an appropriate response may be: "That's great. When can I follow up after you've read the bill?" Make sure to clarify non-specific commitments.</p>
<p><b>Prepare for the meeting.</b> The public official's job is to know the issues at hand. Citizen lobbyists come in to add to that official's knowledge and to ask for a specific commitment. Know the official's priorities, record and major supporters. Know the local impact and costs of the issue.</p>	<p><b>Acting Unprofessional.</b> Every meeting with a public official should be considered an event worthy of forethought and preparation. The citizen lobbyist competes for the attention of his or her public official with other lobbyists. Coming in prepared and organized will go a long way to impress the official.</p>