



# Chapter 13

## **Citizen Lobbying: Holding Public Officials Accountable**



# Every Day Is a Good Day for Democracy

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 constituent’s support and pressure to help them make the right decisions. If the grassroots 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. It is to your advantage that you are ‘just your average voter’ in their district. By virtue of being a constituent (or by mobilizing 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

1. 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.
2. Press them to vote right on issues important to bettering society.
3. Make them accountable for votes they have made already.

<b>Principles</b>	<b>Pitfalls</b>
<p><b>1) Speak from the heart.</b> - Tell your 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>2) Use the facts</b> - A small number (2-3) 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>3) 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>4) 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>1) Going on too long</b> - Keep your story powerful by keeping it short. Practice telling your story in two minutes so that the legislator stays focused on your message.</p> <p><b>2) Laundry lists and irrelevant details</b> - A few facts are great, 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 state wide facts simply don’t have the weight of detailed local impact.</p> <p><b>3) 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: “That’s great. When can I follow up after you’ve read the bill?” Clarify non-specific commitments.</p> <p><b>4) 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>

## Know the Target

A significant component of lobbying is knowing whom to target and knowing about that target. Discussed in more detail in another section of this manual, Power Mapping, 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 an investment in time 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 s/he accountable? Does the official receive contributions, and if so, from whom? 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.

## 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 legislature. At all times, discuss the local impact of the issue. If the issue is a national or statewide issue, discuss how the 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.

### If at first...

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 keep up the pressure.

Many elected officials will have staff who handle specific issue 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.

### Follow up. Follow Through.

Send a thank-you note to the legislator memorializing the commitments you extracted in the meeting. Follow-up after an appropriate interval to find out if your legislator did what s/he committed to do. It's also important for you to follow through on commitments that you've made.

Treat every staffer with the same respect you would with 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. At some point, the organization's working relationship may include multiple contacts within the office. Meeting with the official's staffer is the first of many relationships.

## Incorporating Citizen Lobbying In Your Groups' Strategy:

### 1. Strength In Numbers.

When a person meets with a legislator, it has an effect. When a group meets with a legislator, this effect increases exponentially. You are no longer a gadfly, but a concerned group of citizens calling on their elected representative. Let the official know that the individuals with whom s/he is meeting are part of a citizen group and show your public official that the group represents an important, informed, and influential constituency. The constituent meeting is an excellent way to build your group's credibility.

**Recruiting constituents** – The composition of the citizen lobbyists meeting with the elected official is important. If the lobbying organization meets with an elected official, but can not bring any of that official's actual constituents to the meeting, it indicates that the groups does not have much of a presence in the district. Be sure to bring constituents to the meeting. If you do not have many constituents, start recruiting!

- **Internal lists/external networking** – Figure out who in your group lives in which districts. Collect each member's zip (preferably zip+4) or each members' precinct number (information you should have anyway). This will be useful for lobbying and for campaigns. Ask other groups who have a stake in the issue if they would like to join you, and find out who among them would make good advocates. Having many groups shows the targeted official how powerful your group is and how important the issue is.
- **Door and phone canvass** – Knock on every door in the district and see who cares about the issue. A coordinated canvass may take a lot of time, but you will almost certainly find the people who you need. If your target legislator asks you how you all know each other, let them know. A phone bank through the district is a less time intensive way to contact a number of people. The success rate for this kind of blanket phone canvass will be lower than the door canvass. Either canvassing method can be effective, not only at educating and engaging the district, but also at generating additional pressure on the official.

### 2. Focus the Group's Message

This is especially important if the constituents at the meeting don't already know each other or are not from the same group. Have a meeting beforehand so that everyone is clear on the message and the task at hand. Make sure everyone involved understands all the principles and pitfalls of citizen lobbying.

### 3. Roleplay the Constituent Meeting Beforehand

This is a must. Everyone involved in the meeting needs to meet each other and have an explicit understanding of their role and the group's message. Determine who will speak and when. Go through expected questions and responses, anticipate roadblocks, and get familiar with the overall feel you want your meeting to have. If it begins to feel a little choreographed, that's fine.

## Coordinate: Communications, Field, and Political.

In any good, professional advocacy organization, your components work seamlessly together and in support of each other. The same is true of grassroots efforts.

Before a scheduled legislative meeting is to take place, the group's communications team could plan a barrage of letters to the editor published right before the meeting. Having a full article highlighting your issue in the major media outlets is even more potent. If you have difficulty scheduling the meeting, these 'spontaneous' LTE and media hits can be used beforehand to build pressure on the target. Mentioning your targeted official(s) **by name** in your media will get their attention.

The group's grassroots activists can also organize call-ins and letter-writing campaigns preceding the meeting. Once the public official sees your issue as something that engages his or her constituents, the official will become more receptive to proposed solutions. Whether this coordination comes off as orchestrated or spontaneous doesn't matter much to your public official. Either they're responding to the needs of their constituents or responding to a group effective at mobilizing their constituents.

## Possible Tactics to Increase Pressure

Generally, the more personal the contact, the better the response.

### Direct Contact Tactics:

- Meetings (either in-district or at the capitol) are most effective.
- Personal letters can make an impact when more than a few on the same subject arrive in the office.
- Phone calls have an effect in large numbers at critical times.
- Form letters/faxes and paper petitions can demonstrate broad support/opposition on key issues when the constituent response is extremely high.
- Email petitions are the weakest tactic. These are notable only with the response is dramatically high (organizations use this more to mobilize their members than influence a decision-maker).

**Indirect Contact tactics:** Sometimes you want to pressure your elected official in less direct, more public ways. Mentioning the legislator's name in an LTE or other media hit will get his or her attention. Tying your issue to his or her name, "Clean water is an important issue for this country and State Senator X needs to support our community by keeping our water safe," will raise the profile of your issue in the official's office. Some ideas:

- Issue-based LTE campaign.
- "Open letter to our public officials" as an Op-ed in the major papers.
- Issue-based signage placed where official can see (near home, work, target's children's schools, target's neighborhood grocery store, etc.).
- Town Hall meeting where target receives an invitation.
- Direct contact with target's major donors and institutional supporters.

## Tips For Lobbying

- 1. Identify everyone in the room.** It is important for the legislator to know exactly who you represent, where your organization is based and how many members your group has. Be sure to point out which advocates are constituents of the legislator. Legislators and their staff love when you wear name tags.
- 2. Briefing materials should be just that – brief.** Legislative staff only skim through thick packets of information. Legislators will read a well-assembled one-page fact sheet, usually not much more.
- 3. Anticipate the arguments of your opponent.** It is better to address your opponent's arguments early in the dialogue. Do so directly and openly, without a hint of defensiveness.

### A Sample Citizen Lobbying Agenda

- 1. Introductions: make sure you get everyone's name, and where they're from.**
  - Legislators will want to know that they're only talking to their own constituents. Bringing too many outsiders shows lack of support.
- 2. Agenda and time check**
  - Go over the agenda so everyone knows what's coming.
  - Your time is valuable and so is your legislator's. You should set a length of time for your meeting and stick to it.
- 3. Your story, your neighborhoods' story**
  - Short, but powerful.
- 4. Deliver your facts and ask for one simple thing.**
- 5. Ask for questions.**
  - Your legislator will ask questions. This shows that he or she has been listening, and that you know what you are talking about.
- 6. Set up a follow up time.**
  - If you can't nail down a commitment from your legislator on your first ask, establish a solid, specific follow-up plan, and then actually follow-up.