



The Anatomy of a Super Advocate

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Each day seems to bring with it news of yet another protest in America, with people taking to the streets both in support of and in opposition to new policy proposals. Some choose to make their voices heard through marches and rallies. Others prefer to use digital and social media to share information with their networks. As some have observed, “this is what democracy looks like.”

When it comes to affecting true change, the vast majority of Americans are doing it wrong. Advancing a specific policy position is hard work. It requires far more than shouting into the digital echo chamber or chanting slogans. These activities might soothe the soul but they don’t do anything to advance a piece of legislation on Capitol Hill. Depending on your position, these tactics might make things even worse.

So what works? What can you do to advance a policy conversation or secure support from your lawmakers on a piece of legislation?

We get this question frequently at the National Journal Leadership Council. Our research team spent countless hours looking into what best-in-class advocates do to have impact on public policy, building out the anatomy of a “super advocate.” What we can tell you is that super advocates do three things: they show up, they are visible and they are prepared.

They Show Up

There are dozens of adages about the importance of participating, or “showing up.” After all, you can’t win the game if you don’t show up to play. This is absolutely true when it comes to advocacy, and is perhaps best summed up in a quote often — and erroneously — attributed to Thomas Jefferson, “We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.”

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While our elected representatives may have opinions on how to run the government and what policies to support, those opinions are formed by listening to the people in their districts. Those lawmakers who don’t take the time to listen to the electorate often have very short and unpleasant terms in office.

That’s important to keep in mind. Lawmakers don’t wake up in the morning and ask themselves, “What can I do for the good of the American people?” Instead, they ask themselves, “What do the people in my district want me to do on this issue?”

High-impact advocates know this and so they show up — early and often. Your lawmakers won’t know how you want them to act on an issue unless you tell them. In fact, a 2013 report by the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) found that lawmakers ranked “staying in touch with constituents” as the job aspect most critical to their effectiveness.

So how do super advocates communicate with lawmakers? Once again, they show up — in person. Super advocates know that in-person visits with lawmakers or staff are the most effective way to influence their thinking on an issue, with *individualized* emails and letters following not far behind. A 2010 CMF survey of congressional staff, among other surveys, consistently backs this up.

Of course, in-person visits don’t have to take place in Washington, D.C. The best place to

visit your lawmaker is in the district or state itself. Every lawmaker has a calendar of public events — town halls, constituent meetings, office hours and so on. Sign up for your lawmaker's e-mail newsletter or visit their website to find these events.

If you are unable to attend an event, then sending an *individualized* letter or email is also effective to let your lawmaker know a constituent in the district cares about an issue.

Above all, be an active and engaged participant. That's how super advocates show up.

They Are Visible

When super advocates do show up, they make sure they're visible. That doesn't mean wearing bright clothing or carrying signs. It means getting noticed in a way that allows them to begin building a relationship with the lawmaker and staff. Building that relationship means finding a way to engage with the lawmaker's office on a quarterly basis, if not more frequently.

Super advocates do this by asking questions at town hall meetings, making appointments to speak with staff in the district office and attending other constituent events such as community meetings, task force meetings and other public events. Super advocates find ways to make themselves heard in public forums. They politely introduce themselves to congressional staffers, and some even buttonhole reporters in attendance to make their case.

More ambitious super advocates will work to organize others who will also speak out on issues. In some cases, this is nothing more than inviting a friend or colleague along to a town hall meeting. In other cases, it means taking on a leadership role and organizing a large group of friends and colleagues to attend a town hall or even creating an event (e.g., a chapter meeting of a club or membership organization) where the lawmaker could serve as a speaker.

The key to becoming visible is repetition. Super advocates plan out a series of interactions with the lawmaker's office across the year in a way that allows them to build credibility as a trusted constituent voice on the issue.

They Are Prepared

In addition to showing up and being visible, super advocates are prepared. They've thought through what they're going to say when they step up to the microphone or into the district office. They know the lawmaker's history on the issue at hand and how it affects the district or state. They've thought through how they're going to enter the conversation. For a conservative lawmaker, frame the argument or "the ask" in economic terms. For a liberal lawmaker, enter the conversation from a more social or community-oriented position.

Beyond having a specific argument or an “ask,” super advocates support their position with a brief but well-told story. And by brief, this means the length of an “elevator pitch.” It’s not easy and it takes practice, but research shows that a well-told story makes an argument more powerful and more memorable. After the meeting is over, the lawmaker may forget the specific data points you mentioned ... but they’ll remember your story.

Super advocates know this and so they work to hone and rehearse their stories. The stories don’t have to be perfect, but they do need to stay on message and they should be structured in a way that allows the lawmaker to be the hero. Super advocates also know a well-crafted story becomes a tool for the lawmaker to use in justifying a vote to the local newspaper, at a town hall meeting or while speaking out on a piece of legislation.

Above all, the story powerfully and memorably communicates that a constituent in the district that cares about an issue.

That’s ultimately what super advocates do. They communicate with the lawmaker’s office to remind them their constituents want a specific action on an important issue. They do this by showing up, being visible and being prepared.

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