

6 Ways to Keep Doing Effective Advocacy When Congress is in Gridlock

Diana Manos

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Everyone knows how locked up legislation can get leading up to and during an election season. Add in some fundamental party-line differences regarding sequestration, such as they are, and legislative progress becomes glacial.

But all hope is not lost. There are still plenty of ways to keep your momentum going with lawmakers. We talked to three advocacy experts who can give you some ideas—and even hope—for doing a killer job, even when it appears for all practical purposes that political wrangling has ground progress on your issue to a halt.

1. Make the budget count: Use the budget to measure, and make, progress. Joseph Antos, Wilson H. Taylor Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a nationally recognized expert on policy and federal budgets, says even though legislative activity slows down, there are always ongoing budget battles. Which means there are always opportunities to advocate for your line item.

In fact, he anticipates a federal budget battle for fiscal year 2016 that will heat up this fall, with a possible federal shutdown in October. “The budget is a good place to push for desired policy,” Antos says.

The past few years have seen their fair share of Omnibuses. During such melees, the window of opportunity is small and the pace frenetic, but, heck, it gives lawmakers a chance to at least try to slip anything in there. Lay the right groundwork throughout the year and it might just work in your favor.

2. Participate in hearings: Keep your ear to the ground on hearings. Even if Congress isn't always passing legislation, they're always holding hearings. Check the congressional hearing calendars found online separately for both the U.S. [Senate](#) and the [House](#) (for a more automated approach, CQ Roll Call subscribers enjoy [comprehensive hearings schedules](#) that sent via alerts). Plan to attend some of the hearings on the Hill, where you can also network. Separately, most hearings can also be viewed [online](#), or via an archive of hearings, usually found on a committee's website.

Where possible, Antos says, offer testimony at the hearings. “Hearings provide a platform for shaping public opinion or at least for creating quotes that can be used with the public and with policymakers during the election season,” he says.

3. Work the regs: Don't forget you can win battles through regulatory agencies. Often when Congress passes a law, they leave much of the actual meat of implementation to the regulatory agencies to hash out with the public through the public comment period.

According to the [Congressional Research Service](#), a research and analysis service that works exclusively for Congress, 3,554 final regulations were published in the Federal Register in 2014. That provides a lot of fertile ground for government relations advocates to interject on behalf of their issues.

"The main arena for the next year-and-a-half is regulatory, and every association is acutely aware that the details in the regs really matter—and can be influenced by vigorous informed responses to proposed rules," Antos says.

4. Water the grassroots: Use your home field advantage. Leslie Krigstein, interim vice president of public policy at the College of Healthcare Information Management Executives (CHIME) says in the months leading up to an election, members of Congress spend more time in their districts than usual, creating a good opportunity for meet-and-greets and town halls to build grass roots.

Use this time to meet in person with staffers and lawmakers. Go prepared, though. If you do regular Hill or Lobby Days, then you're well equipped. If not, [read this post](#) and [this post](#) to get you started.

5. Steer clear of party lines: Avoid the more controversial issues, which only tend to become more heated as elections approach. Focus on the ones that have the most bipartisan support, instead. Many issues transcend political parties, and quite frankly, most legislation that passes must have a great deal of support from both sides of the aisle. "As an election approaches, find something that is not going to be contentious," Krigstein says. "Be cognizant of political biases on either side."

6. Watch your timing: Sometimes it all comes down to timing, says Joan Bowman, senior director of public affairs and communication at the Michigan Nonprofit Association. It's important to know what politicians want to be seen by voters as supporting, especially during election season.

The best way to do this? Build relationships with them. "Relationship-building is so important leading up to an election," Bowman says. "With the right relationships built with lawmakers and their staff, getting things passed doesn't necessarily have to be harder during election season, depending on the issue."

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