



K Street Café Blog Post

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Grassroots Stakeholders and Their Legislators: Who is Influencing Whom? Part 1

Our biennial Grassroots Influence Pulse (GRIP) research <http://showaltergroup.com/services-and-products/products/new-grassroots-influence-pulse-report/> was established to obtain a benchmark of current trends in grassroots influence tactics, the time and money being directed to various grassroots techniques, and most important, the trends in *how members of Congress are responding (or not) to grassroots influence strategies*. The data revealed a surprising dynamic that should change how all of us coach our grassroots stakeholders.

Legislator Openness to Communication and Influence

One finding was how grassroots professionals perceive the quality of their organizations' (advocates and staff) relationships with legislators, and if there was a connection between that and their persuasion outcomes.

We asked respondents to share how "open" lawmakers were during the last legislative session v. the previous session. Three openness questions on the survey were averaged to create a composite 'openness' variable:

- openness to communication
- openness to influence
- legislator flexibility

Respondents indicate that legislators are a little more open to communication this year than last. Approximately 27% think legislators are more open to communication, compared to 17% who think they're less communicative. Fifty-seven percent (57%) felt that there was no change in lawmaker's openness to communication.

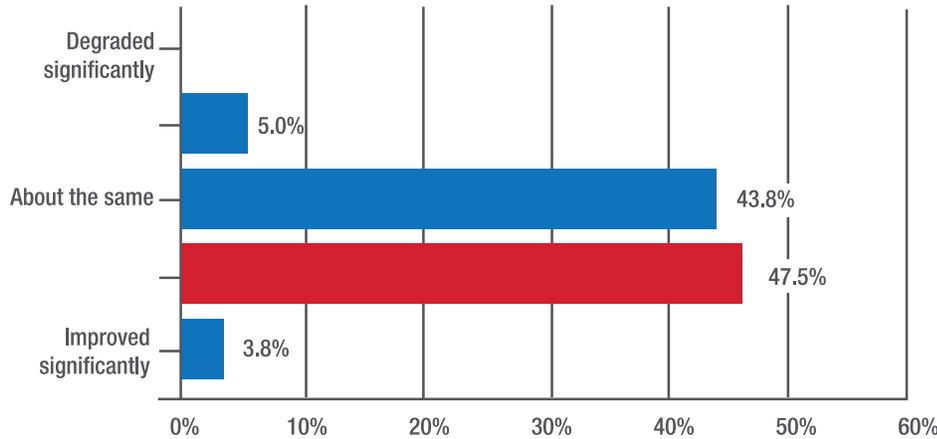
About 26% find legislators more obstinate and hostile (legislator flexibility) than previously, while 25% find legislators more flexible, open, and welcoming. So, rather evenly split.

Do "Good Relationships" = Effective Persuasion?

And, a vast majority of respondents feel the organizations' volunteers and lobbyists have improved relationships with legislators and staff compared to previous sessions. A majority of respondents (51%) feel they have improved relationships with legislators and their staff this year, compared to last year, whereas only 5% feel they have lost ground. The red bar below indicates dramatic overall perceived improvements in relationships with legislators.



Have your organizations' relationships with legislators and their staff, on the whole, degraded or improved since last year?



Yet, at the same time, 23% of respondents are finding *legislators to be more resistant to influence compared to the previous year*. Fifty-five percent (55%) felt there was no change in legislators' attitudes.

Despite the increased communication and improved relationships, respondents are not finding legislators to be easier influence targets. If anything, respondents are finding, despite their increased work and effort, no change in legislators' attitudes, and many report that they are more difficult to persuade this year, compared to last year.

The Reality: Influence Parity

If relationships are improving, if legislators are more open than in previous years, why are they more resistant to influence? This has tremendous implications for grassroots professionals who must demonstrate influence results because it raises the question: "Who is influencing whom?" Legislators are using more vehicles to communicate than ever before, many grassroots professionals perceive their relationships with legislators are improving, but at the same time, legislators are *not* becoming more persuadable. This makes us wonder who is influencing whom – we believe legislators are improving their influence skills by making organizations feel "listened to".

Influence is a two-way street. When you are attempting to persuade legislators to listen to you, they are also trying to persuade you to think you've been heard. Their lives are simpler and easier if fewer interests are adamant about trying to change their minds. This is a classic mixed motive scenario. In a republic, the legislators are supposed to broadly solicit input, but it makes their jobs more difficult and complex. This is why politicians almost always default toward restricting access, rather than encouraging it.

Most legislators engage in influence parity with you and your advocates. They're as good at persuasion as you are, and, depending on the calling of your stakeholders (sales professionals come to mind) they probably are even better at placating you than you are at motivating them. It's important that you not allow the "feel good feelings" that come from meetings with legislators to stop you from attaining your persuasion goals.

In my next post, I'll share how the most admired grassroots organizations in the country manage the influence parity environment.



This research was conducted on a sample of 80 grassroots professionals across the nation between May-October of 2013. Respondents were asked to compare their current year activities to the previous year. Descriptive statistics were performed, followed by an analysis of specific correlations of interest.

We intend to replicate the research every other year to provide a baseline of data that reflects the direction of not only grassroots techniques, but also successful grassroots influence.

Want to participate in the 2015 GRIP survey? Send Amy a note at amy@showatlergroup.com.

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