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Congress, Voices

The top 5 predictors of success when attempting to influence an undecided legislator

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June 16, 2017

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Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government

relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

When it comes to influencing members of Congress there are no “six easy steps to yes.” To increase your influence, you need a strategy.

I worked backward from the result of recent government affairs campaigns and asked representatives of national trade associations, professional societies and unions that were named to Fortune magazine’s “Power 25” list for two consecutive years to share examples of successful and unsuccessful influence strategies.

The analysis of what they shared consisted of locating significant correlations and performing a multiple regression analysis to locate variables that most strongly predict campaign success. The regression analysis found five variables that reliably predicted influence success.

1. The legislator’s margin of election victory

Legislators appear to be more amenable to influence tactics if they’ve recently won election by a large margin. They have the luxury to cast votes that may alienate certain interest groups without dooming their chances for reelection. Government relations professionals know that lawmakers who win by large margins have more flexibility, but how many integrate that characteristic when determining the legislators to target with their lobbying strategy?

2. Lobbyist similarity

One of the 70 variables focused on the political leanings of the organization’s lead lobbyist. We will be following this finding with interest as additional research projects are conducted, but for the current dataset, it appears that the lobbyist whose political predilections are similar to the uncertain legislator enjoys increased persuasion success. This correlates with the research literature which shows that similarity is a strong driver of influence success. We are more likely to say “yes” to those who are similar to us, particularly in our value system. Our value system is easily revealed by our political affiliation.

3. Number of face-to-face meetings

The influence literature is replete with evidence that face to face communication is the most influential way to persuade. In concert with the scientific evidence, our data support the finding that face-to-face meetings

increase influence success. This finding corresponds with numerous studies from the Congressional Management Foundation that reveal legislative staff cite face to face meetings and district events with constituents “very influential” to their member of Congress.

4. Number of key influentials in favor of legislation

We defined “key influentials” as personal friends, local elected officials and opinion leaders in the legislator’s district. Because legislators are subject to a plethora of influence attempts, they must naturally filter the information for veracity and credibility. The opinions of key influentials impacts influence results.

5. Maximum PAC contribution

Reciprocity is a powerful relationship driver. When asked directly, lawmakers (and their staff) routinely deny the impact of money on their decision making process. However, we found that when examining the results of influence attempts, the “maximum allowable PAC contribution” is one of the top five predictors of persuasion success. And remember, this is a contribution of the maximum amount allowed by law – given to undecided or averse legislators.

General Findings

A few other things we discovered in our research:

With the exception of two organizations, all experience a degree of organizational “knowledge blockage,” in that some members of the government relations staff are not aware of other staff members’ activities and communications on the same campaign.

The organizations that successfully influenced undecided legislators were more likely to know their opponents’ strategies and tactics.

The larger your coalition, the more likely a lawmaker is to speak out on your behalf.

The more “key influentials” who actively support your issue, the more likely the converted legislator is to speak out publicly on your behalf.

Freshman legislators are more difficult to persuade than veteran lawmakers.

Legislative districts with a high percent of unaffiliated voters requires more face to face contact with your influence prospect than those with a heavily partisan population.

Government relations staff spends an average of 17.5 hours per week meeting about and / or discussing their grassroots campaigns.

How do these findings fit with your influence tactics?



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