

“If I could just get these people to listen to me, they would do the right thing!”

Conservatives are frequently frustrated when our elected representatives, particularly those who identify themselves as conservatives as well, fail to live up to our expectations on specific policy issues.

Convinced of the correctness of our position, we’re sometimes at a loss to explain why a legislator “goes south,” or “sells out.” This is often the result when conservatives waging public policy battles forget that they are not just advocating for a free market, but they are operating in a free market—of ideas.

That means there’s competition—and lots of it. With the size and scope of government at historic levels, legislators are expected to act on and keep abreast of dozens or hundreds of issues simultaneously. An issue that may be

How do we maximize the number of activists engaged on an issue of importance to conservatives? The answer lies in political technology: the ability to organize and to communicate.

Conservatives shift the odds of victory in their favor if their efforts are highly organized and they communicate effectively with their own people, the media, other groups, the public, and legislators

Liberals understand this all too well, and are practiced in organizing their people and communicating persuasively. So effective can their techniques be that they can often create an environment where the battle for a new program, tax, or regulation is won before their conservative opponents are engaged.

What can conservatives do to become more effective at organizing and communicating?

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COMMUNICATING IDEAS

APPLYING POLITICAL TECHNOLOGY TO WIN PUBLIC POLICY BATTLES

by Ron Nebring

critical to one of us personally is just but one item on a long list of “critical” issues before any legislator.

Some conservatives believe that being right, in the sense of being philosophically correct, is enough to win in the long term. But while the validity of free market principles are vindicated regularly—the fall of the Soviet Union, for example—the victory in today’s public policy battles often goes not to the side which is philosophically correct, but rather to the side that proves itself better able to compete on the public policy battlefield.

Morton Blackwell of the Leadership Institute is fond of pointing out that, over time, the winner in a political struggle is determined by the number, and effectiveness, of the activists on each side. The abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, the women’s suffrage movement, all provide examples of this fact of political life.

A marketplace of ideas. Recognize that you are competing in a marketplace of ideas and you have a narrow window of opportunity to obtain and hold a legislator’s attention before he or she moves on to some other issue. Effective voter contact mailers are designed to get a specific message across to the reader in less than 30 seconds. Consequently, they are heavy on photographs, light on text, make effective use of white space, and contain an emotional appeal. Yet when conservative activists make the rounds to members of Congress, they routinely bring with them heavy briefing books, long wordy articles and other materials that are almost completely ineffective at communicating a message. They’re ineffective not because they are not well-written, but rather because the recipient will never have the time to read the material. A solid “one-pager” that gets read is infinitely more effective than a 100-page briefing book that will do nothing more than make a

handsome doorstep for some congressional staff member.

Emotion is a powerful motivator. Richard Wirthlin, President Reagan’s pollster, often notes that in politics, one should “persuade through reason, but motivate through emotion.” Conservatives often shy away from making emotional appeals, or conveying a sense of urgency. Liberals, on the other hand, use these techniques with military precision. Consider the role of “victims.” Rarely is a liberal cause discussed on Capitol Hill without some child, senior citizen, or other individual cited as a victim who would not need to suffer if only a certain liberal proposal were enacted. The victim effectively puts a human face on what might otherwise be a dry, dull Beltway policy issue of interest to only a few actuaries or bureaucrats. Because no one wants to see an innocent person suffer needlessly, the victim adds an emotional dimension and a sense of urgency to the cause. Senator William Roth’s hearings on IRS abuses in 1999 were an excellent example of conservatives using this technique because real life victims with whom “the folks back home” helped to define the debate and place conservatives squarely on the side of the victims.

Your primary mission is not to educate, but to persuade. In campaign school we teach that the average American spends less than 7 minutes a week thinking about politics. Although no one can remember where the statistic comes from, it’s useful in conveying to campaign managers that the average voter does not have the time to delve into the details of a range of candidates or issues before voting. Americans living outside of the 202 area code are more focused on little league, grocery shopping, going to church, and living their lives than becoming ad hoc policy analysts. Similarly, legislators also do not have the bandwidth available to become experts on every issue a conservative activist brings before them. Consequently, the activist’s primary mission must be to persuade, and to educate the legislator fairly and only to the extent necessary to persuade effectively. Persuading involves a different skill set than educating: a premium is placed on understanding the listener’s pre-existing motives and interests, and on conveying a sense of urgency.

Presentation does matter. The extent to which others adopt new ideas depends in large part on the credibility of the presenter. Conservatives must place a premium on how their ideas are presented, whether in written or verbal form. Corporations spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year establishing a corporate identity that, in part, conveys a certain level of credibility to investors, vendors, employees, and consumers. Especially in cases when the lawmaker or staff member with whom you are dealing has never heard of your group before, the listener will look to the written materials and the presenter for clues as to whether the messenger, and therefore the message, is credible and worthy of expending further attention. In verbal presentations, the confidence and comfort level of the speaker is critical. In written materials, style and design matter as much as the substance conveyed.

Understand the value of incremental gain. Over time, the direction of policy is usually more important than where public policy is at any given moment. If government is “big” today, and “small” government is the goal, then the test of progress is whether government is increasing or decreasing in size. Any move that changes the direction of policy toward smaller government should be viewed as a victory: an incremental gain. Similarly, if public school vouchers are the goal, then new charter school legislation that opens the door to options and alternatives is a victory. The democratic process is one designed to restrain sudden action on the part of government, thus serving as a barrier to dictatorship. Consequently, effective legislative campaigns must be sustained over a period of time. We fail when we give up and go home because we didn’t get everything we wanted. We create the conditions for victory when we accept incremental gains as victories, stay engaged, and set the stage for the next incremental gain.

Benefits, not features. Conservative policy proposals are more likely to be taken up by lawmakers when they can see real benefits for their constituents in the proposal. How will real people benefit in tangible ways from the idea? For example, proposals to privatize social security go further when lawmakers are convinced their constituents will retire with more money under the plan (a benefit), rather

· than being told they should do so because it
· gets the government out of running pension
· systems (a feature). It's the difference between
· trying to sell a car by saying it has an airbag,
· a powerful engine, and gets good gas mileage
· (all features) versus saying the car is safer in
· an accident, safer on the freeway, and saves
· money (all benefits).

· Conservative ideas in economic and social
· policy produce a stronger and more just
· society. But we cannot rely upon the
· correctness of our ideas in order to win the
· policy battles of the new century. To win, we
· must place new emphasis on organizing
· ourselves and persuasively communicating
· our proposals in a competitive marketplace of
· ideas.

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