



## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEWLY ELECTED POLICYMAKERS**

With the hectic pace of a campaign behind them, recently elected policymakers will quickly need to turn their attention to their policy agendas. For those who have secured re-election, it is a time to consider which unfinished priorities to revive in their next term. Those coming into office for the first time must turn their campaign themes into an agenda and assemble both their formal staff and informal “kitchen cabinet” of advisors.

**Above all, it is important to remember that policymakers are people.** Just like with anyone else, a good relationship is built on shared interests, trust, and repeated interactions.

### **I. REACH OUT AT THE RIGHT TIME**

With few exceptions, elections in the US are held on the first Tuesday of November. Policymakers who win in November, however, will not begin their terms for another two months or more. The sooner you can reach out to these elected officials the better, with mid-November through mid-December being a key window of opportunity. Here are some more specifics, given the nuances of different elected offices:

#### **Members of Congress**

*It will be most effective to reach out to incoming members of Congress in-district, before the holidays and before they head to DC.*

- The Constitution mandates that Congress convene at noon on January 3rd the year after an election. This is when incoming members of Congress will be sworn in.
- The Democratic and Republican caucuses host “orientation” for incoming members sometime in November and December. This is also when they begin to hire their staff. At the end of orientation, the caucuses will vote on new party leadership.
- During this interim period, incoming members will also bargain with leadership about their committee placements. Committee assignments occur towards the end of December. A member’s committee assignments will largely determine the issue areas they will focus on.

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEWLY ELECTED POLICYMAKERS**

### **Governors**

*It will be most effective to reach out to incoming governors, their staff, or newly appointed agency heads during either the transition period or in the first few months of an administration.*

- Most governors are sworn in during the first or second week in January.
- Newly elected governors go through an official transition process, starting right after the election and lasting through the beginning of their new term. This is when most of the crucial personnel, cabinet and agency appointments, decision-making processes, program development, and communications processes are put in place.
- Most cabinet and agency positions will be announced in the first few months of a governor's term. Those chosen to fill these roles will often reflect the governor's priorities and be responsible for overseeing major state government programs.

### **State Legislators**

*It will be most effective to reach out to incoming state legislators well in advance of the beginning of the legislative session.*

- Most state legislative sessions begin between January and March after an election year, with the majority gaveling-in the second week of January.
- The length of legislative sessions varies dramatically from 2 months to, most commonly, 2-years with bills carrying over from the first year to the second. Find the specifics of your state legislature's beginning and end dates here: [www.statescape.com/resources/legislative/session-schedules.aspx](http://www.statescape.com/resources/legislative/session-schedules.aspx)
- The timeline for committee assignments varies significantly, but these will generally occur shortly after the session begins. A state legislator's committee assignments will largely determine the issue areas they focus on.
- Junior members decide what bills they will file well in advance of the session. This is also when legislative leadership will set the priorities for the legislature as a whole.
- For states with short sessions, reaching out well ahead of the session is critical, given how quickly things need to proceed once the session begins.
- For states with 2-year sessions, there is a bit more leeway and an ability for new ideas to be taken up once the session is under way.

## **II. BUILD ON SHARED INTERESTS**

**Shared subject matter interests:** The policymakers who are most likely to want your input are those who share an active interest in your subject matter expertise. The best places to look for shared interests are with:

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEWLY ELECTED POLICYMAKERS**

- **Policymakers whose constituencies are particularly affected by your area of focus:** If your area of research or other interest disproportionately impacts certain parts of the state, you can build shared interest by pointing this out to the policymakers representing those areas and constituencies. District-specific information can illustrate the importance of an issue and help make the case to policymakers about why they should care.
- **Sponsors of relevant legislation:** For policymakers returning to elected office, you should look to their previous legislative record.
  - If a policymaker has repeatedly sponsored legislation on the same subject, this is a good indicator that they truly care about it, or at least believe their constituents do, and that they will be interested in talking with you about it.
  - Repeated co-sponsorship is a less reliable signal of shared interest. Policymakers co-sponsor bills for lots of reasons – friendship with the sponsor, requests from leadership, low-cost position taking – that may not always mean they have individual interest in or passion for the subject.
- **Policymakers with relevant campaign platforms:** For newly elected officials, a close parallel would be to look at their campaign platforms, which can give you a sense of what their legislative agendas will be in office.
- **Policymakers in relevant committees or agencies:** Legislators in committees where bills on your issue of interest are regularly assigned are most likely to have to make detailed decisions about it on a regular basis. In the executive branch, seek appointees and career staff that oversee priorities and programs relevant to your areas of interest.
  - Build relationships with members of these committees and agencies by showing them how you can make their job easier. Can you give feedback on a specific proposal? Can you provide general background that will make them more comfortable in dealing with new questions or challenges?
  - New members of a committee may be particularly eager to build a relationship with someone who can help them get up to speed, particularly if they do not have other background in the area. This may not hold true in the case of agency staff, who are more likely to be issue area experts and, therefore, more eager to get in the weeds. In either case, you can build a relationship by meeting people where they're at.

**Other shared interests:** Policymakers are people who have rich lives outside of legislating and governing. Read their bios, usually found on their legislative profile pages, to see if you share background or family experiences that you could talk about to build your relationship.

### **III. BUILD TRUST**

**Be truthful and complete:** Don't hide the downsides of your issue – instead, give policymakers tools to deal with them.

- Is the policy or program your talking about partisan? Help the policymaker see the ways in which it fits with the relevant party's interests and values.
- Is the proposal you're interested in untested? Help the policymaker see how existing evidence supports it as an approach.
- Is the evidence for something mixed? Give the policymaker the total picture, and then help them understand how you analyze which evidence is strongest or most persuasive.

**Be reliable:** Do what you say you are going to do, by when you say you are going to do it.

- Be clear about what you are and are not committing to follow up on.
- Don't make promises if you are not sure you can deliver.
- Be clear about timelines as well as deliverables.
- Remember that many legislative sessions are short and fast-paced. What may be a reasonable turn-around in academia may not be in legislating.

**Keep confidences:** If you are told something is not for public consumption, keep it to yourself. If there's a specific person you'd really like to share the information with, ask permission.

**Don't talk trash about other policymakers:** Don't make the person you are talking to wonder what you say when they are not there.

### **IV. HAVE REPEATED INTERACTIONS**

The "three-touch" rule for policymaker contact:

- **When a bill, policy, or program is introduced or being considered in a committee or agency,** let policymakers know that you are interested in it and provide relevant information.
- **When a bill is up for a vote,** contact policymakers to offer relevant research-based information and ask if there are any questions they have that you, as a researcher of this subject matter, might be able to help clarify.
- **When a bill has passed or failed,** follow up. If the policymaker with whom you've been building a relationship was highly invested in a bill and it passed, offer your

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEWLY ELECTED POLICYMAKERS**

congrats. If it did not pass, ask if the policy is likely to come back up later on, and what were some of the hang-ups that held others from supporting it.

**Attend events:** Go where the policymakers are, say hello, and remind them who you are. This can be a speaking event, a town hall, or even a campaign event. Many state legislators, for example, will hold regular office hours to connect with constituents somewhere in the community. Use a light touch at these. The goal is not to take over the policymaker's attention at an event that is about something else, it is just to remind them that you are an engaged member of their community.