By Marc Porter Magee, Ph.D.   July 2020

Experiments in Advocacy: What Works and Why

Advocacy
Labs_

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A collaboration between

50CAN   FutureEd
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

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About AdvocacyLabs
AdvocacyLabs is an initiative of 50CAN and FutureEd
that provides fresh thinking and rigorous insight
into how change happens in education policy, using
reports, briefs, interviews and events grounded in
both academic research and exclusive data from
the field. Follow us on Twitter at @AdvocacyLabs.

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Foreword

The goal of AdvocacyLabs is to help advocates tap into the rich trove of insights from academia and apply research to the real-world questions they are asking themselves every day.

Our inaugural report focused on a comprehensive review of the academic literature. Our second report featured a dozen interviews with leading academics about what they have learned in studying advocacy.

In this third report, we focus on the growing field of experimental studies of advocacy campaigns. By leveraging the power of randomized studies that isolate treatments from controls, this research cuts through the noise to provide clear answers on which advocacy tactics get proven results.

We hope this latest report helps you craft more powerful campaigns for the communities, families and students you serve.

Marc Porter Magee, Ph.D.
CEO and Founder, 50CAN

Thomas Toch
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Preface

How do you really know?

That's the big question lurking below the surface in conversations about effective advocacy. Even the most probing discussions concerning social change run the risk of falling into speculation. How can we separate causation from correlation to make better choices with our limited resources?

Experimental studies provide a way forward.

By carefully setting up control groups with which to compare treatments, we can isolate the potential effects of an advocacy tactic from all the other sources of influence in a complex and ever-changing environment. This won't allow us to settle all the debates in the field of advocacy, but it can provide specific answers to concrete, tactical questions.

In this report, we marshal the best experimental research of the past decade to help answer eight questions at the heart of long-standing debates among advocates in the field. Each chapter in this report opens with a specific question, moves on to experiments, delves into key lessons and closes with suggestions for further reading. The results challenge conventional wisdom and provide clarity often missing from advocacy how-to guides.

1   *Which calls to action work best?* The three keys to success are self-disclosure, personalization and feedback.

2   *How do you craft more powerful messages?* Focus on the future, the inclusion of details and the recruitment of unexpected spokespeople.

3   *Can persuasive arguments backfire?* Yes. While negative framing can help shift public opinion, it also drives down collective action.

4   *How do you create momentum?* Make your early supporters more visible, secure positive news stories about your cause and showcase the way public officials are listening and responding.

5   *Does grassroots lobbying work?* It does and small numbers of people can make a big difference.

6   *Who gets access?* Being a constituent or donor makes a difference in securing meetings with elected officials but racial discrimination can get in the way.

7   *Are elected officials good messengers?* Yes and they can shift public opinion simply by staking out positions.

8   *Which inside tactics get results?* Using surveys of constituents, fact-checking campaigns, highlighting policy examples from other communities and citing academic sources to maximize your credibility.

We hope the report provides you with the firm ground on which to build an advocacy movement that will make a difference in your world.

Marc Porter Magee, Ph.D.
CEO and Founder, 50CAN

Question 1   Which calls to action work best?

Effective engagement tactics can make the difference between a thriving movement and an afterthought. Experiments can help advocates better understand how to connect with both new recruits and veteran members. The three keys to success are self-disclosure, personalization and feedback.

Methodology

We profile two experiments that can help determine which calls to action work best. One is a field experiment with the general public and one is a field experiment with members of a nonprofit. In the first study, published in 2009, research assistants stopped 166 pedestrians on the street and tracked responses to different recruitment pitches to understand whether adding personal details to a pitch can improve the results. In the second study, published in 2016, the 3,750 members of a nonprofit advocacy organization were randomly sorted into control and treatment groups. Different types of messages for emails and phone calls were used, with varying levels of personalization. Members were asked to take advocacy actions, such as signing a petition, recruiting others and attending meetings.

Results

Most advocacy efforts start with the simple act of recruitment. This invitation to take action in a cause is a critical first step. Yet, as Johns Hopkins political scientist Hahrie Han notes in her 2009 article in the journal *Political Behavior*, "research provides little guidance as to what kinds of appeals may be more motivating than others."

To help provide stronger empirical guidance to advocates, Han set out to test whether recruitment appeals with "self-disclosure" could be the key to jump-starting a growing movement. Previous social psychology research demonstrated that "acts of disclosure are viewed positively because they communicate the discloser's liking for the target. Because people tend to like people who like them, the target views disclosure as a positive social outcome."

Could calls to action that include self-disclosure result in a significant increase in action-takers? To find out, Han recruited four research assistants and had them memorize two different appeals: one with self-disclosure and one without. The research assistants then "stood in a busy pedestrian area in a major

metropolitan city asking adult pedestrians to stop." Using a standard appeal taken from the environmental organization Clean Water Action, the research assistants randomly varied their appeals and tracked the results.

The standard appeal focused on the facts: "218 million people still live within 10 miles of waters that are damaged by pollution." The alternative appeal added in a personalized self-disclosure: "I grew up in [insert interviewer's home state] near a lake where I frequently played with my siblings and learned to swim and canoe. I have seen this lake, and many other lakes and rivers in America, become endangered."

The results show that the appeal with a personal disclosure "was statistically significantly more likely to motivate participation than the control condition." Specifically, Han found that 68 percent of the people who received a disclosure appeal donated to the cause, compared to just 49 percent who received the standard appeal. At the same time, respondents were more likely to say they found the person requesting support "likeable" when they were using the disclosure appeal.

Han concludes: "As a field experiment, this study examined targets in a natural environment that mirrored the kind of work political canvassers actually must do...the results highlight the importance of relational goals in participation—appeals that cause targets to feel more affiliation with the requester are more effective than appeals that are primarily focused on conveying information about general policy change."

But what about calls to action after these initial interactions between advocacy leaders and their supporters? In a 2016 follow-up study published in the journal *American Political Science Review*, Han used data from three field experiments conducted in partnership with a healthcare reform organization to understand whether a similar approach of personal messages could result in more members signing petitions, recruiting others and attending in-person meetings.

To test different approaches to securing petition signers in support of healthcare reform legislation, Han divided the organization's 3,750 members into three groups. One group got an email with a standard appeal: "Do we stand by and lose an unprecedented opportunity to transform the way we care for our patients?"

A second group received the standard appeal with an additional paragraph added in that referenced their past interactions with the group: "I've appreciated how you've shared your thoughts on the health system with us in the past...Signing this pledge gives you the chance to stand up for your values."

A third group received a message that included the respondent's own words repeated back to them from past survey responses.

The results? Han found that 3.7 percent of members receiving the standard message signed the pledge, compared to 8.9 percent of members receiving the message mentioning past interactions and 11.0 percent receiving the message personalized with their own words. Han found a similar gain with messages that specifically mentioned the new membership of recruits compared to a standard message. Finally, Han found that in phone calls asking members to show up for an in-person event, adding details about members' past participation and questions requesting their feedback on how to improve the organization's events led to a significant improvement in turnout. Only 1.4 percent of the group receiving the standard message showed up at the next event, compared to 11.0 percent of the group receiving the more individualized message.

Key Lessons

1   Have recruiters disclose personal details during recruitment pitches.
2   Include details of past conversations when making asks of members.
3   Solicit feedback from members on how to improve events.

Research Cited

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Question 2   How do you craft more powerful messages?

Advocates face difficult decisions on what to prioritize in their messages and whom to recruit as messengers. Experiments can help shed light on these choices by testing out competing options. Better results come from a focus on the future, the inclusion of details and the recruitment of unexpected spokespeople.

Methodology

We profile three experiments that can help advocates craft powerful messages: two are field experiments in partnership with a nonprofit healthcare group and one is a laboratory experiment on an internet panel of recruits. In the first study, published in 2016, researchers sent mailings to 11,895 potential supporters to test whether retrospective messaging or prospective messaging is more likely to enhance the credibility of an organization. In the second study, published in 2019, researchers used direct mail outreach to 7,731 people to test how the use of evidence and stories in outreach messages can drive support for a cause. The third study, published in 2017, explores how to effectively combat rumors in policy debate through a laboratory experiment on a panel of 1,596 recruits.

Results

When seeking to build credibility for their cause, advocates face the dilemma of which information to prioritize. Is it better to focus on what their group has accomplished in the past or what they plan to do in the future? Many advocates fear that prospective communications on what they plan to do can come across to potential supporters as just cheap talk. Yet other advocates assert that while supporters may applaud past accomplishments, they are more animated by future needs. Who is right?

To find out, Cornell University political scientists Adam Seth Levine and Cindy Kam set out to test these different approaches in the field through partnership with a nonprofit organization focused on expanding access to healthcare. Published in 2017 in the journal *Political Communication*, their study examines "the effectiveness of two informational strategies that groups may use to communicate credibility to potential supporters: providing reports of the past or highlighting plans for the future."

Levine and Kam segmented their nonprofit partner's list of 11,895 potential supporters into three

groups: a control group with a simple appeal letter asking for a donation and containing a discussion of the group's general goals, a "retrospective success" treatment group that added a paragraph to the letter detailing the group's accomplishments, and a "prospective success" treatment group that added a paragraph to the letter detailing the group's future plans. The results? "Including information about the group's past successes failed to increase donations relative to the control group," they write. "In contrast, we do see a positive and significant treatment effect for the prospective success condition relative to the control."

Levine and Kam surveyed the respondents to explore why a prospective appeal increased donations while a retrospective appeal fell flat. They found that "mentions of past success raise questions about the marginal impact of a given individual's contribution...Prospective information, by contrast, is motivational."

Another big question facing advocates when they craft a message is whether to make an evidence-based argument or tell the compelling story of an individual. To answer this question, Adam Seth Levine teamed up with Stony Brook University political scientist Yanna Krupnikov on a study exploring different uses of evidence through a direct mail experiment sent out to 7,731 likely new donors of a partner nonprofit organization.

Their study, published in *The Journal of Politics* in 2019, divided potential supporters into three groups. The control group received a standard letter that briefly mentioned the problem of healthcare affordability and the group's goals. The first treatment group received the standard letter with an additional paragraph citing specific evidence of these problems. The second treatment group received the standard letter with a paragraph detailing how the problem affected one uninsured individual. The results? Each of the two treatments worked. Looking at both the number of donations and the total amount donated, the inclusion of either detailed evidence or a story of an individual "led to a significantly higher level of donations than the control group."

Finally, in a third study published in the *British Journal of Political Science* in 2017, Massachusetts Institute of Technology political scientist Adam Berinsky set out to understand how to effectively correct rumors in the context of a policy debate and the relative power of both messages and messengers. To do so, he recruited 1,597 people to take part in a series

of online experiments in the months after the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The subjects were separated into five groups: a control group, a group given a rumor that the ACA could lead to "death panels," a group given both the rumor and a nonpartisan correction, a group given the rumor and a correction from a prominent Democrat, and a group given the rumor and a correction from a prominent Republican.

Berinsky found that support for ACA dropped from 51 percent in the control to 42 percent for the group that read about the rumor. While support recovered somewhat for the group given the nonpartisan correction (46 percent of whom then supported the plan) and the Republican correction (48 percent), it actually dropped further for the group given the Democratic correction (to just 37 percent).

Messages help, but advocates can't afford to ignore messengers when aiming to shift public opinion in a contentious environment. Berinsky concludes that "corrections acquire credibility when politicians make statements that run counter to their personal and political interests."

Key Lessons

1   Focus your communications on future plans
    rather than past accomplishments.
2   Add evidence and stories to your messages;
    don't just state your goals.
3   Seek out messengers who can add credibility
    to your messages by playing against their
    perceived self-interest.

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Question 3 Can persuasive arguments backfire?

The most common way to choose a message is to focus on what moves public opinion. But what if those messages don't actually move people to action, or even work against your effort to mobilize supporters? Experiments can help tease out the complex interaction between messages, opinions and actions. While negative framing can help shift public opinion, it also drives down collective action.

Methodology

We profile three experiments that can help advocates understand whether persuasive arguments can backfire: two field experiments involving email communications to potential supporters and one survey experiment. In the first study, published in 2017, researchers emailed 101,451 people to test whether messages that heighten people's concerns about climate change are also the messages that motivate people to take political action. In the second study, published in 2018, researchers used a survey experiment involving 1,200 respondents to explore the same question in the context of public transportation policy. In the third study, published in 2019, researchers partnered with an environmental group and sent emails to 100,708 people to test whether framing an argument in terms of losses or gains worked best in mobilization efforts.

Results

All advocates want to craft the most persuasive message possible for their cause, but what if the words and phrases that win the broadest appeal with the public aren't the ones that will actually get people off the sidelines and actively working for change? To make the smartest choices possible in an advocacy campaign, leaders need to understand which messages change minds, which messages change behavior and when to trade one kind of message for the other.

To help untangle this complex relationship between words and deeds, Cornell University political scientist Adam Seth Levine and Stony Brook University political scientist Reuben Kline teamed up to run an experiment on how people react to different messages around climate change. Published in 2017 in the journal *Climate Change*, the study aimed to put public opinion and collective political action on equal footing by exploring potential climate messages against both goals.

To do so, they ran two experiments with a group of 101,451 people. In the first experiment, half of the list was put into a control group, which received a short

message modeled on typical communications from their partner organization. The other half of the list was put into the treatment group, which received the same message with an additional paragraph on how climate change would threaten the foods they are able to purchase. In the second experiment, the treatment group received an email with a different paragraph that said climate change would threaten their personal health.

What Levine and Kline discovered when comparing these two treatment messages to the control message was that both treatment messages were more effective in shifting the opinions of the recipients towards a pro-environmental position. However, they both also significantly decreased the number of people willing to sign a petition compared to the control. There was a 13 percent drop in petitions signed by the group that received the message about a threat to their personal health and a 15 percent drop by the group that received the message about threats to the food supply. If the climate change group had selected a message solely based on the extent to which it shifted public opinion, they would have done serious harm to their turnout operations.

How could this be? By using a frame that caused people to think about how they would be hurt in the future, Levine and Kline found that while these messages reinforced the seriousness of climate change, they also frightened people into adopting a scarcity mindset. Once in this mindset, the potential supporters were less generous with their time, money and resources.

Adam Seth Levine teamed up with UCLA urban planning professor Michael Manville to explore how these same dynamics might play out in advocacy around public transportation. Published in 2018 in the journal *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, their study used a survey experiment involving 1,200 people to explore whether common messages used by public transportation advocates were actually making it harder to secure political engagement on the issue.

In the experiment, they compared people's concern over an issue and their willingness to volunteer when receiving a control message against the results for five common arguments used by advocates: 1) that public transportation investments reduce congestion, 2) that these investments are popular, 3) that they provide people with a convenient way to get around, 4) that they help the poor, and 5) that they are good for the environment.

The results confirm that different messages can have either a positive or negative effect depending on whether your goal is moving public opinion or moving people to action. While both the congestion frame and the environmental frame led to significant increases in support for an investment in public transportation, they also found that the congestion frame led to an 8 percent decrease in the number of people willing to volunteer for the cause. Levine and Manville conclude that "people are less willing to spend time volunteering when political rhetoric reminds them about constraints on their time."

Finally, Levine and Kline returned to this question in an article published in 2019 in the *Journal of Experimental Political Science* that sought to test how two common ways to try and shift public opinion on an issue would fare when tested against a willingness to take action. In the experiment, the researchers separated a list of 100,708 people into three groups: a control group that received a standard message about the need for clean energy, a "losses" treatment group that received additional information on the current harms to public health, and a "gains" treatment group that received additional information on the health benefits of taking action.

They found that the group that received the losses frame was significantly less likely to sign a petition compared to the control. By contrast, the group that received the gains message was significantly more likely to sign a petition than the control. Levine and Klein conclude that the most commonly used justification for carbon reduction policies "may unintentionally make policy change less likely."

Key Lessons

1   Consider the trade-offs between messages that move public opinion and those that move people to action.
2   Avoid rhetoric that may be paralyzing as well as persuasive.
3   Don't use a scarcity frame in your messages when you need people to take action and don't use a losses frame if you want people to be generous with their time.

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Question 4   How do you create momentum?

Most advocates want to grow the number of supporters for their cause because they see that growth as the surest path to a larger impact. Ideally that growth would be powered by momentum, with the same amount of effort producing ever greater returns. Three levers can help create this momentum: making your early supporters more visible, securing positive news stories about your cause and showcasing the way public officials are listening and responding.

Methodology

We profile three experiments that can help advocates understand how to create momentum. Two studies are field experiments and one is a survey experiment. In the first study, published in 2016, researchers varied the number of signatures displayed on 400 separate petition drives to test for a bandwagon effect, where success leads to further success. In the second study, published in 2016, researchers used a national survey experiment involving 1,426 people to explore whether reading positive or negative news stories about the success of an advocacy campaign affected people's willingness to participate in the campaign. In the third study, published in 2019, researchers recruited 1,905 citizen reporters to explore what kind of feedback encouraged them to stick with the work.

Results

Once an advocacy campaign is off the ground, advocacy leaders are often faced with the question of how to increase participation. Is there any proven way to create momentum?

One common belief among advocates is that success breeds success. By focusing on securing a small number of early, avid supporters, the argument goes, you can create a bandwagon effect that makes it more likely that others will want join in. Sounds plausible, but does this approach actually work in the real world?

To put this idea to the test, sociologists Arnout van de Rijt, Idil Afife Akin, Robb Willer and Matthew Feinberg teamed up to run a field experiment that varied the number of signatures visible on a petition drive. Published in *Sociological Science* in 2016, the experiment used 400 different petitions that were randomly assigned to display either 5, 23, 41 or 59 signatures on the online petition website Change.org.

They found the number of signatures on a petition had a significant and positive effect on the number of additional signatures during the observation period,

although a relatively modest one. They concluded that the results provide "clear evidence that on a popular platform for political mobilization, the social influence exerted by large numbers of prior signatures significantly impacts followers' subsequent propensities to also sign." In other words, the hardest signatures to secure are the initial ones. As your list of signatures grows, the work required for each additional signature decreases.

Another potential way to create a bandwagon effect is through positive media stories. If the press says you are succeeding, the theory goes, people reading those stories will be more likely to join in. To test this idea, University of Michigan communications professor P. Sol Hart and Rutgers University professor of journalism and media studies Lauren Feldman conducted an online survey experiment where 1,426 respondents were assigned to either a control group with no news stories or one of six treatment groups. These treatments provided respondents with an AP story about climate change with paragraphs adjusted to either suggest that climate change interventions were likely to succeed or likely to fail. The participants were then asked a series of questions to assess how likely they were to get involved by contacting a government official, participating in a rally, signing a petition, volunteering or donating to the cause.

Published in the journal *PLoS ONE* in 2016, the study produced mixed results. Hart and Feldman found that "overall there was a limited effect of the media messages" on people's perceptions of whether taking action could help as "only two of the six experimental conditions, as compared with the control, significantly shifted efficacy perceptions." However, where this positive relationship was present, they found it did result in a greater propensity to take part in the cause.

Finally, UC Santa Barbara's Mark T. Buntaine and Jacob T. Skaggs worked with Brigham Young University's Daniel L. Nielson to understand how different types of recruitment procedures, recognition, and responsiveness by the government might motivate people to continue to do work in the public interest. Their research, published in the *British Journal of Political Science* in 2019, looked at how a sample of 1,905 citizens responded to a nomination to be a reporter by a neighbor, a nomination to be a reporter by a local political leader, an announcement of praise from a local political leader, and evidence that their reporting was reaching government officials.

The results show that only one of these four interventions led to statistically significant changes in the behavior of citizen reporters. "We find that citizens nominated by neighbors and local leaders did not report more frequently," Buntaine and Skaggs write in their conclusion. "Nor did local leaders' announcements of citizen participation increase reporting…In contrast, this study produced strong evidence that government responsiveness can help sustain citizen reporting."

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Key Lessons

1   Create a bandwagon effect by making your early supporters visible to recruits.
2   Focus on positive news stories to help potential supporters see that they would be joining a successful movement.
3   Leverage evidence that public officials are responding to your work to increase the motivation to sustain your efforts.

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Question 5   Does grassroots lobbying work?

Grassroots lobbying is often how social movements aim to turn their membership numbers into results. Yet concrete evidence that these tactics actually shift legislative votes can be hard to come by. Carefully designed experiments show that investment in grassroots lobbying does matter, and that small numbers of people can make a big difference.

Methodology

We profile four field experiments that can help advocates understand whether grassroots lobbying works. In the first experiment, published in 1999, researchers explored the impact of community organizing on policy change across 15 communities over two and a half years. In the second experiment, published in 2017, this study of community organizing was replicated in an additional five communities. In the third experiment, published in 2009, a grassroots email campaign was evaluated by randomly assigning 120 state legislators to either a control group or treatment group and tracking their subsequent votes. In the fourth experiment, published in 2015, a grassroots phone campaign was evaluated by randomly assigning 148 state legislators to a similar system of control and treatment groups and tracking their votes.

Results

Does all the work to help people connect with policymakers add up to concrete policy wins? This is such a basic question, yet those seeking change in the world often operate without a firm answer. Reaching that answer requires isolating the act of grassroots lobbying from all other factors that might influence a policy outcome. Fortunately, we have four high-quality experimental studies that do just that.

To understand whether advocacy campaigns grounded in community organizing tactics are more effective than traditional alcohol and drug prevention programs, a team of seven social scientists led by the University of Florida's Alexander Wagenaar organized a 15-community randomized trial of Communities Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol (CMCA) in rural Minnesota and Wisconsin. The organizing model involved assessing community needs, creating a core leadership team, recruiting members, identifying decision-makers in the community and mobilizing supporters to speak out in favor of policies, regulations and cultural shifts to reduce the sale of alcohol to young people.

Organizers completed 1,518 one-on-one meetings over two and a half years, recruiting 2,415 residents to the cause, including 141 members who met monthly to provide grassroots leadership for the effort. Collectively they made 333 presentations to spread the word about the need for change and secured 101 news articles about their cause.

Published in the *Journal of Community Psychology* in 1999, the study found that all this grassroots effort "changed policies and practices of community institutions such as law enforcement agencies, alcohol merchants, and sponsors of community events, leading to significant changes in alcohol-related behaviors among 18- to 20-year-olds, and significant reductions in the propensity of alcohol establishments to serve alcohol to youth."

Wagenaar organized an additional 5-community randomized trial of the CMCA, this time focused on Cherokee Nation in northeastern Oklahoma. A similar community organizing effort was undertaken and tracked, with independent citizen action teams used to "advance policies, procedures and practices of local institutions in ways to reduce youth access to alcohol and foster community norms opposed to teen drinking." Published in the journal *Addiction* in 2017, the results show that alcohol purchases by "young-appearing buyers declined significantly, an 18 percentage-point reduction over the intervention period."

Since the publication of those initial studies, two other studies have sought to isolate the impact of two common grassroots lobbying tactics: emails and phone calls. To understand how a wave of email outreach influences the legislative process, Michigan State University's Daniel Bergan organized an experiment in partnership with the Clean Air Works for New Hampshire coalition, which was advocating for policies to promote a smoke-free workplace in the state.

Published in the journal *American Politics Research* in 2009, the study tested the power of grassroots outreach via email by randomly assigning New Hampshire's 120 state legislators to either a control group or treatment group. Using email software that allowed them to focus the email calls-to-action on the legislators in the treatment group, they were able to isolate the effects of this grassroots tactic on that group of elected officials.

Bergan found that the grassroots email campaign had a significant and positive effect on the results of two pivotal votes on the policy. "The results from this experiment suggest that outside lobbying has a large effect on legislative voting," Bergan concludes.

Daniel Bergan teamed up with fellow Michigan State University professor Richard Cole for a follow-up study that sought to understand whether there was a similar impact from grassroots phone calls. Published in the journal *Political Behavior* in 2015, the experiment followed a similar design as the previous email study, with Michigan's 148 state legislators randomly assigned to either a control or one of three treatment groups (in which they would receive either 22, 33, or 65 calls from constituents on the issue). The researchers partnered with an anti-bullying advocacy group that was working in support of a piece of legislation called "Matt's Safe School Law."

As with the study of grassroots emails, the researchers found that grassroots phone calls work. "The estimated effect is substantial," Bergan and Cole conclude. "Being contacted by constituents increases the probability of supporting the relevant legislation by about 12 percentage points." This effect did not increase with an increase in the number of phone calls received. In their analysis they conclude that in the context of state legislation on a relatively low-profile issue like bullying, "receiving any phone calls may be a much more important indicator of public opinion than the number of calls received."

Key Lessons

1   Make the time to build grassroots relationships when your goal is community-level change.
2   Invest in mobilization efforts that ensure constituents make their voices heard with public officials.
3   Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Even small numbers of contacts per elected official can have a big impact.

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Question 6 Who gets access?

Getting a foot in the door is often thought to be key to a successful advocacy campaign. So how can advocates increase their access to the halls of power? Experiments show that mobilizing constituents and donors makes a difference, but also highlight the ways racial discrimination distorts the responsiveness of elected officials.

Methodology

We profile five experiments that explore who gets access to elected officials. In the first experiment, published in 2000, 69 congressional staffers participated in a laboratory experiment where they made scheduling decisions informed by factors like PAC contributions. In the second experiment, published in 2005, 96 congressional staffers participated in a follow-up laboratory experiment where factors like campaign contributions were included. The third experiment, published in 2016, extends this investigation with a field experiment in which an organization sought meetings with 191 congressional offices. The fourth experiment, published in 2011, explores the racial dimensions of legislative responsiveness through 4,859 email requests for information from a constituent using either a typically white-sounding or typically Black-sounding name. The fifth experiment, published in 2018, uses a similar research design to understand the effect of a Latino-sounding name on requests for information through outreach to 1,871 legislators across 14 states.

Results

It's hard to make the case for your cause when you can't get a meeting. This makes the question of who gets access to elected officials a particularly important one. What does it take to successfully navigate the gatekeepers to our elected representatives?

To help answer this question, in the 1996 political scientist Michelle Chin, then at Texas A&M University, teamed up with colleagues Jon R. Bond and Nehemia Geva to conduct an experiment on the role that PAC contributions and being a constituent play in getting access to elected officials. They recruited "69 congressional schedulers and senior staffers employed by members of the U.S. House of Representatives" to participate in a laboratory experiment to test how scheduling decisions are made.

Chin gave the participants a set of appointment requests and asked them to create a mock schedule for their representative. Among the information they were given about the people requesting appointments was whether they were constituents and whether they were affiliated with a Political Action Committee (PAC).

Published in 2000 in *The Journal of Politics*, the study "reveals a significant constituency main effect, but no significant PAC main effect. That is, requests associated with a PAC are not significantly more likely to be granted access than those not associated with a PAC, whereas requests from constituents do have a significant advantage in gaining access."

In a follow up study, Chin recruited 96 congressional staffers to participate in another laboratory experiment. This time, the participants were given information about whether the people requesting meetings were constituents, how much they had personally contributed to their boss' previous campaigns and whether they were affiliated with a PAC.

Published in *American Politics Research* in 2005, Chin's results show that whether the person requesting an appointment was a constituent was the main factor in determining whether that person was added to the schedule. "It appears in the search for political access," Chin concludes, "being a constituent is clearly more beneficial to obtaining face-to-face meetings with members of Congress than being a PAC representative." Although the research suggests that individuals requesting access who had previously contributed to an elected official's campaign at high levels were more likely to get meetings than individuals who had contributed at low levels, the finding was not statistically significant.

Yale University political scientist Joshua Kalla partnered with UC Berkeley's David Broockman to build upon these laboratory findings through a field experiment that put the real-world decisions of schedulers to the test by zeroing in on two types of local people: those who have donated and those who haven't. To do so, they partnered with a grassroots advocacy organization seeking meetings with members of Congress and randomly varied whether the emailed request identified the people requesting the meeting as "local constituents" or "local campaign donors." In total, meetings were requested with 191 congressional offices.

Published in the *American Journal of Political Science* in 2016, the study showed that when "informed prospective attendees were political donors, senior policymakers made themselves available three to four times more often." The large and statistically significant findings led Kalla and Broockman to conclude: "Our results suggest that the vast majority of Americans who have not donated to campaigns are at a disadvantage when attempting to express their concerns to policymakers."

David Broockman teamed up with UC San Diego's Daniel Butler to take this question of access and connect it to another challenge in American democracy: racial discrimination. In their study they sought to understand whether the race of a person emailing an elected official might affect that official's level of responsiveness. To do so, they adapted an experimental design successfully used to test discrimination in housing and job markets: varying the name of the requestor randomly between a typically white-sounding name (Jake Mueller) and a typically Black-sounding name (DeShawn Jackson), as determined by census information on names and race.

In the study, published in the *American Journal of Political Science* in 2011, the researchers sent 4,859 email requests for help on registering to vote to state legislators across 44 states. Butler and Broockman found that "legislators responded to 60.5 percent of the emails sent from the Jake Mueller alias but only 55.3 percent of those from the DeShawn Jackson alias, a statistically significant difference."

However, when they analyzed the results to take into account the race and the political party of the elected officials, they found that while white Democratic officials were 6.8 points more likely to respond to the Jake Mueller alias, non-white Democratic officials were 16.5 points more likely to respond to the DeShawn Jackson alias. The small number of non-white Republican officials in the sample did not allow the authors to carry out the same analysis for both parties. Butler and Broockman conclude: "Race still matters in American politics—both for elected officials and their constituents."

Finally, a similar research design was utilized by Matthew Mendez and Christian Grose to understand whether a similar bias was at work in the responsiveness of elected officials to Latinos. The researchers created two aliases: a white-sounding constituent named Jacob Smith and a Latino-sounding constituent named Santiago Rodriguez. They then reached out to 1,871 legislators across 14 states with a question about whether a driver's license was needed to vote on election day.

Published in *Legislative Studies Quarterly* in 2018, the results show that requests written in English from Jacob Smith were answered 50.4 percent of the time, compared to 44.3 percent of the requests from Santiago Rodriguez. When written in Spanish, the response rates drop to 12.8 percent for Jacob Smith and 10.3 percent for Santiago Rodriguez. Further analysis also revealed that if legislators supported

voter identification laws, there was an even larger gap between the response rates for the white-sounding name versus the Latino-sounding name. "There are significant implications regarding fairness in the democratic process," Mendez and Grose conclude, "when elected officials fail to represent disadvantaged constituency groups."

Key Lessons

1   Prioritize building support among an elected official's own constituents to get a foot in the door.
2   Use political contributions to increase the odds of getting access.
3   Help elect more people of color to improve responsiveness to constituents who are often overlooked.

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Question 7   Are elected officials good messengers?

Elected officials are often the targets of advocacy campaigns, but they can also be powerful allies in shaping the broader environment in which a campaign unfolds. What communications from these leaders really matter? Experiments find strong support for the power, and danger, of tailored communications to disrupt accountability and shed light on the unique way in which representatives can drive opinions simply by staking out public positions.

Methodology

We profile two field experiments that can help advocates understand whether elected officials are good messengers: one looks at whether explanations from elected officials change constituents' opinions and the other looks at whether taking policy positions can change constituents' opinions. The first experiment, published in 2015, uses both a field experiment and a survey experiment to understand the effects of officials' explanations to constituents on the issue of immigration. The experiment involved all 100 US senators and 1,195 survey respondents. The second study, published in 2017, involved an unusual field experiment in which legislators agreed to randomly vary their communications to 1,047 constituents, who were then tracked through an independent opinion survey to measure the effects.

Results

Advocates often spend a lot of time trying to get elected officials on the record in support of their issue and carefully track how these officials speak about a cause. But when elected officials speak, are people really listening? To untangle this question, researchers have sought to carefully track both what elected officials say and what their constituents think to better understand the connection between the two.

To understand this dynamic in the context of constituent communications, political scientists Christian Grose, Neil Malhotra, Robert Parks and Van Houweling sent all 100 US senators both pro-immigration and anti-immigration letters from constituents staggered over eight weeks. They received at least one response from 86 senators, with 56 senators responding to both the pro- and anti-immigration letters.

Published in the *American Journal of Political Science* in 2015, the study concluded that the senators "strategically changed whether they mentioned pro-immigration or anti-immigration actions in their explanation depending on the constituent's position." For example, senators were nearly twice as likely to

mention pro-immigration actions in their response to the pro-immigration letter than the anti-immigration letter.

Do these tailored communications matter? To find out, the researchers conducted a parallel survey experiment where 1,195 respondents were first asked about their position on immigration and their opinion of their senator. Respondents were then given a randomly selected passage from the senator's constituent communication on immigration and asked again about their beliefs. "We find strong evidence that when senators explain their votes by selectively mentioning certain additional actions," Grose and team conclude, "respondents change their perceptions of senators' positions." In other words, carefully crafted messages that minimize areas of difference between elected officials and their constituents makes a difference. Targeting communications to constituent belief results in statistically significant improvements in favorability ratings for elected officials.

At the same time, this kind of targeting "obscures respondents' abilities to certainly and accurately assess the positions of the senators." For example, compared to an untargeted letter, reading a letter targeted to constituents who hold an opposite view on immigration "decreases correct identification of the senator's immigration position by 34.5 percentage points." Left to their own devices, without the watchdog role of the media and independent advocacy, elected officials will often leave many of their constituents confused about their true position on important issues.

While the experiment by Grose and colleagues shows the power of elected officials to obscure their true positions, can officials go even further and actually shift their own constituents' beliefs? To find out, UC Berkley's David Broockman and UC San Diego's Daniel Butler secured the cooperation of legislators in a unique experiment involving constituent communication. The state senators agreed to randomly vary their constituent communications: a control group of constituents received no communications; a first treatment group received communications in which the senator staked out strong positions on issues like decriminalizing marijuana and undocumented immigrants, including lengthy justifications; and a second treatment group received communications with the same strong positions but only minimal justification.

To understand the potential shifts in the beliefs of the constituents, researchers surveyed a sample of 1,047 constituents before and after they received the letters (for what they believed was an unrelated project). Published in *American Journal of Political Science* in 2017, the study found that the state senators "were able to move constituents' opinions by stating their own positions with minimal justification… there is no evidence that extensive justifications made these positions more persuasive." The finding that legislators can shape constituent opinion simply by staking out a position reinforces the importance of securing visible support from elected officials for advocacy issues.

Key Lessons

1   Focus on making the elected official's positions clear in order to counteract spin in constituent communications.
2   Prioritize securing public support from these officials for your cause.
3   Ask officials to include support for your positions in constituent communications to help drive public opinion.

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Question 8   Which inside tactics get results?

Translating advocacy actions into policy change means converting public officials into champions of your cause. Experiments show that a number of tactics can get results, including using surveys of constituents, fact-checking campaigns, highlighting policy examples from other communities and citing academic sources to maximize your credibility.

Methodology

We profile five experiments that help advocates understand which inside tactics get results. In the first experiment, published in 2011, researchers surveyed 10,690 people and then presented the results to state legislators to learn whether knowing the views of their constituents would shift the legislators' votes. In the second experiment, which will be published in 2020, researchers conducted a randomized field experiment testing different settings for lobbying. In the third experiment, published in 2015, researchers selected 1,169 state legislators and randomly assigned them to one of three groups: a control, a treatment group that was told they were being monitored and a treatment group that received a letter warning them about the dangers of making false statements. The fourth experiment, published in 2017, used a survey experiment involving 575 local policymakers to understand whether peer communication about policy could shift their positions. The fifth experiment, also published in 2017, used a survey experiment involving 1,108 government staff to test which sources of information were most persuasive.

Results

Winning over public officials to your cause can dramatically increase your odds of success. But which tactics are likely to accomplish that goal? Fortunately for advocates looking to invest in this inside strategy, a number of experiments point the way forward.

One common tactic is the use of survey results to try to push elected officials to adopt the positions of their constituents. But does it work? To find out, Yale University's Daniel Butler and University of Notre Dame's David Nickerson partnered with a state newspaper to survey 10,690 New Mexicans about the governor's spending proposals and then bring these district-specific results to the attention of half of the state legislators, with the other half serving as a control group.

Published in the *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* in 2011, the results show that among "the legislators assigned to the treatment group, there is a strong positive relationship between constituents' support for full spending on the Governor's proposals and their likelihood of voting yes." By contrast, they find that legislators in the control group "did not

receive information about their constituents' opinion on this issue and it shows. The correlation between constituents' support for the spending and the legislators' vote on SB 24 is nearly 0." Butler and Nickerson conclude that "learning constituency opinion can have a substantial effect on a legislator's vote," although it is important to note that this approach might be less effective on issues under intense debate or on issues already subject to frequent discussion between legislators and constituents.

Another important element of an advocacy campaign is direct lobbying, where representatives of an advocacy group appeal to public officials for their support. What kind of lobbying is likely to secure the support advocates seek? The University of Southern California's Christian R. Grose teamed up with Pamela Lopez, Sara Sadhwani, and Antoine Yoshinaka to test out whether varying the location in which lobbying took place might also have an impact on its effectiveness. To do so, they partnered with an active advocacy campaign seeking to influence the vote in a state legislature on education funding.

To understand whether lobbying in a social setting might be more effective, they randomly divided up the legislature's 120 members into one of three groups: a control that would receive no contact, a treatment group whose members would be lobbied in their offices and a treatment group whose members would be lobbied in social settings such as restaurants. The results, which will be published in the *Journal of Politics* in 2020, show that the legislators "randomly assigned to be socially lobbied more frequently expressed public support for the interest group's preferred policy than did legislators lobbied in their offices or not contacted by the lobbyist." Specifically, 19.5 percent of the legislators in the social lobby group publicly supported the policy goal, compared to 7.9 percent of the control and 7.5 percent of the office lobby group.

Another common tactic by advocacy groups is to serve as a "watchdog" in the legislative process, using the power of transparency and public oversight in an effort to shift the actions of public officials towards the public interest. To test this approach, Dartmouth College's Brendan Nyhan and University of Exeter's Jason Reifler selected 1,169 state legislators across nine states and randomly assigned them to a control, a placebo or a treatment group.

The control group received no communication. The placebo group received a simple letter informing them that their reelection campaign was being monitored for accuracy. The treatment group received a longer letter warning them about risks to their reputation and reelection chances if they were caught making false statements. Nyhan and Reifler then tracked these legislators' accuracy ratings by the watchdog organization PolitiFact and in media stories through LexisNexis during the campaign.

Published in the *American Journal of Political Science* in 2015, the study found that "legislators who were sent our treatment letters were substantially less likely to receive a negative PolitiFact rating or to have their accuracy questioned publicly in the study period." Specifically, the percentage of elected officials in the treatment group who received either a negative rating from PolitiFact or had the accuracy of their claims questioned in the media during the campaign was just 1.3 percent, less than half the 2.8 percent among the control and placebo groups.

What if your goal isn't simply pushing for greater accuracy or alignment with constituent opinion, but a specific policy position? Often advocates turn to direct pitches to legislators to build up support for their ideas. Political scientists Daniel Butler, Craig Volden, Adam Dynes, and Boris Shor Butler developed an experiment to better understand what kind of outreach actually works. To do so, they developed a survey experiment involving 575 municipal officials who were given a short description of a policy adopted in another community and asked if they would be interested in learning more. They varied the details of whether the officials who had passed the policy were Democrats or Republicans.

Published in *American Journal of Political Science* in 2017, the study found that a big driver of interest in learning more about a policy was the political party of the officials who had adopted that policy in another community. "For conservatives," the researchers found, "the interest-in-learning gap between the other-party treatment and the same-party treatment rises to about 40 percentage points." A similar but smaller pattern is found with liberals, who were about 20 percentage points more likely to want to hear more about a proposal they are told was adopted by Democrats compared to one adopted by Republicans.

Another important dimension in the efforts to build support for a policy among elected officials is the source of the information an advocate is providing. To explore how the receptivity of elected officials might vary by source, University of British Columbia-Vancouver political scientist Carey Doberstein recruited 1,108 government staff to participate in a survey experiment to test

which sources of information were most persuasive. The participants were asked to read research summaries on minimum wage and income-tax splitting policies with half of the respondents receiving a summary with the accurate affiliation and authorship and half receiving a summary where those details were randomly assigned. They were then surveyed on how credible they found the research.

Published in *Policy Studies Journal* in 2017, the study found that "academic research is perceived to be substantially more credible than think tank or advocacy organization research, regardless of its content." For example, when academic research was attributed to an ideologically left-wing think tank, there was a 68 percent decrease in the odds of it being selected as a higher credibility source. Likewise, when a document produced by an ideologically right-wing think tank was attributed to a university, it experienced a 292 percent increase in the odds of it being identified as a higher credibility source.

Reviewing all the results, Doberstein concludes that "academic research has a privileged position of credibility among policy analysts, followed by think tanks and then advocacy organizations; and think tanks and advocacy groups with less ideological orientation demonstrate higher credibility (and thus closer to academic research), whereas strongly ideologically oriented sources receive much lower credibility scores, closer to those afforded to advocacy groups."

Key Lessons

1   Use surveys of constituents when you have public opinion on your side.
2   Make your fact-checking visible to keep elected officials honest.
3   Seek out success stories that match with the party affiliation of the public officials you are trying to persuade.
4   Conduct lobbying in social settings to maximize your effectiveness.
5   Wherever possible, cite academic sources for your policy ideas.

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