

THE ADVOCACY GAP

Research for
Better Advocacy



Conducted by Shayna Englin and Stefan Hankin



BACKGROUND

In 2005, the Congressional Management Foundation reported that communications to Congress had increased fourfold over the previous decade, and had doubled between 1999 and 2004.¹

Those years included the explosive growth of the grand-daddy of online advocacy, CapWiz (now owned by CQ Roll Call, a sponsor of this report). In the eight years since the Congressional Management Foundation report was issued, dozens of platforms have launched that make it as easy as the click of a mouse and a few keystrokes to send a message to Members of Congress. Platforms doing just that include Salsa, another sponsor of this report, and PopVox, one of our research partners.

In a subsequent report in 2008, the Congressional Management Foundation surveyed American adults and found that 44% of them had contacted a U.S. Senator or Representative in the previous five years. 82% of people who contacted Congress did so at the urging of a third party organization.²

That is a ton of advocacy.

The 2008 Congressional Management Foundation report also found that people who contacted Congress were deeply disappointed with the response they got. More contact did not yield a closer relationship between the Members of Congress and their constituents, but seemed to be correlated with growing cynicism amongst politically active people. We read this as evidence of an “Advocacy Gap” of sorts.

Through the course of our work with Hill staff and advocates working to move policy, we amassed anecdotal evidence of an Advocacy Gap of a different sort. **We watched (and helped) organizations build ever bigger email lists used to mobilize ever increasing numbers of advocacy actions, all the while hearing from our friends on the Hill that the volume was ratcheting up but the signals were not getting any clearer.** Moreover, we were seeing important policy supported by large majorities of voters and robust grassroots advocacy campaigns fail to move on the Hill.

We thought a look at how advocacy is experienced from both sides of the effort – the mobilized and the targets – could point to better, more effective advocacy and maybe (speaking from our wonkiest inclinations) better policy.

So, in collaboration with partners and sponsors, we set out to document the Advocacy Gap. **We would like to acknowledge that our partners and sponsors were brave to collaborate with us on this project;** we did not limit our exploration or hedge our findings to protect the organizations and service providers who worked with us on this research. We promised only that all of the data released publicly would be the aggregate of all of the organizations’ activists responses. All numbers in this report are the weighted aggregate of responses provided by the nearly 4,000 activists who completed the survey. There are no organization-specific details available for public consumption.

Even so, **there are details in this report that suggest some difficult questions about advocacy best practices and how advocacy tools support meaningful citizen engagement.** That all of our research partners and sponsors are standing up for the conversation speaks volumes about their commitment to better, more effective advocacy.

It is our hope that this report helps organizations invest in smart innovations in their advocacy programs, helps the people who develop advocacy tools build out in ways that facilitate the most effective grassroots communications, and inspires further research to fill in the holes in our information. We will gladly partner with the next stalwarts who take it up.

SUMMARY

In collaboration with eight nonprofit organizations with active advocacy programs, we surveyed nearly 4,000 activists about how they participate in advocacy, what they think is most effective at moving the needle on policy they care about, and how they feel about their advocacy experiences.

Concurrently, we conducted off the record in-depth interviews with current and former senior Hill staff from both sides of the aisle and both houses of Congress. We asked about how various advocacy tactics were received, the best ways to get attention for an issue on the Hill, how their offices dealt with different types of constituent communications, and their best advice for people running advocacy programs.

What emerged was a fascinating picture of what we have dubbed **the “Advocacy Gap,” a disconnect between how activists mobilize and how Hill staff say they should mobilize to move a policy issue.**

1 Congressional Management Foundation, *Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy*. (Washington, DC; 2005)

2 Congressional Management Foundation, *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement*. (Washington, DC; 2005)

We also documented a compelling portrait of activists' motivations and beliefs about their efficacy in the policy process.

The data points to ways to bridge the Advocacy Gap, bringing citizens and their government closer and making organizations' investments in advocacy more effective.

Key findings:

- » **Advocacy and online action is essentially synonymous amongst activists.** Only 6% of activists reported that they never send email directly to an elected official. Four percent said they never sign an online petition. In contrast, 26% said they never call an elected official.
- » **Activists believe offline actions are more effective in terms of making a difference.** While 70% of activists surveyed sign an online petition "whenever I'm asked" or "regularly," only 24% believe it is very effective. 33% of activists said they never attend an in-person meeting with an elected official, but 42% of them said such meetings are very effective.
- » **Activists are motivated by patriotism, organizational allegiances, and news more than personal experience.** 46% of activists told us they typically take action on an issue or cause because it they feel it is important for the future of the country. Only 11% of respondents said it was because the issue affects them personally. Just 1% were motivated by partisan politics, and 1% reported acting because a friend or family member asked them to.
- » **When it comes to Congressional advocacy, all politics is still local.** Members of Congress and their staff want to hear from their constituents, and only their constituents. Contact from outside the district is wasted effort at best.
- » **Effective advocacy is rooted in how policy is made on the Hill.** Policymaking in Congress happens according to a set of rules and within a specific process. Members of Congress can only act on policy in certain ways at certain points in the process. Effective advocacy makes the right asks of the right Members at the right points in the process. Doing so demands a deep understanding of how Congress works, and missteps can be costly.
- » **Quality trumps quantity on the Hill.** A few personal emails beat hundreds of form emails; calls from a few constituents able to articulate on the phone why they care about an issue and how it affects them are better than calls from hundreds of constituents parroting a talking point; and constituents showing up in person is best.

RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY

Stefan Hankin and his team at Lincoln Park Strategies conducted a series of online surveys of organizations' key activists as well as interviews with current and former senior Hill staff.

To survey activists we partnered with eight organizations with active advocacy programs. Each organization used their own criteria to define who their activists were and sent an email to those activists inviting them to take an online survey. Survey questions asked activists to report on various advocacy efforts they have participated in as well as how effective they believe their efforts have been. Questions also probed the reasons behind respondents' advocacy efforts, as well as their self-perceived level of success in making a difference. Basic demographic questions were also included in the survey.

We received a total of 3,817 responses between February 1 and May 31, 2012. The responses were weighted to give each organization equal representation in the final results, ensuring that organizations with larger numbers of respondents did not skew the data. The margin of error on the full sample is +/- 1.5% at the 95% confidence level.³

Participating organizations:

- » Ocean Conservancy
- » Greenpeace USA
- » The Humane Society of the United States
- » POPVOX
- » National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP)
- » Credit Union National Association
- » National Association of Realtors
- » Friends Committee on National Legislation (FNCL)

In conjunction with the online survey, we conducted 25 off-the-record in-depth interviews with current and former senior level Hill staff. The interviews were structured to address the same themes as the activist survey, but from the perspective of the targets of advocacy. Most interviews were conducted over the phone, recorded and transcribed for notes. Five interviews were conducted in person with no recording, while the interviewer took notes in real time. Staff interviewed included current and former Communications Directors, Legislative Directors, and Chiefs of Staff. Nine of

³ The margin of error is relevant only to the extent the sample is representative of activists.

the participating Hill staff served in Republican offices, the remaining served in Democratic offices.

FINDINGS: THE HILL

Congress is made up 535 individuals, running 535 independent offices.⁴ There is wide variation in how different offices structure their constituent services, communications, and policy work. And as one would expect when dealing with 535 decision-makers, there are at least as many salient personal, biographical, philosophical, ideological, and political motivations for making policy decisions.

Which is to say that generalizing about how Congress receives advocacy is often ill advised.

However, several findings emerged consistently across all of our interviews. We validated these through a literature review of others' research on how the Hill works⁵, and by checking them with another set of 10 senior Hill staff.

We are confident enough in these findings to generalize: this is how Congress works when it comes to advocacy.

Contacts from constituents are the only grassroots communications that matter.

Every interview we conducted included an unprompted declaration from staff that contact through any channel from people outside of the district (or state, for Senators) is at best ignored, and at worst overwhelms communication from inside the district.

One communications director said, "If you tweet at us, and you are not from our state, you get ignored. And if I am seeing dozens of tweets about an issue, and all of them template and it appears they are not from our state, then those people are actually doing a disservice because they are drowning out the people from in state."

Another communications director said, "If you write to us through our website and are not from our state, we do not even write your email into the database. If you are on Facebook, post a question or comment, and you are not from our state, we feel no compulsion to get back to you."

⁴ There are actually 541 Congressional offices, but only 535 Members of Congress with votes.

⁵ See for example the Congressional Management Foundation's 2011 report, *Communicating with Congress: Perceptions of Citizen Advocacy on Capitol Hill*.

Another representative comment from a chief of staff: "It doesn't necessarily help if someone was to email or call our office or reference on Twitter or Facebook if they are not actually a constituent ... That is a big point of contention and something we run into a lot."

Returning to the 2008 Congressional Management Foundation study, 61% of people reported contacting a Representative or Senator other than their own. According to the same report 82% of people who had contacted Congress did so at the prompting of a third party organization.⁶ That points to a disconnect in mobilization that is at cross-purposes with moving an agenda on the Hill.

Effective advocacy is rooted in deep understanding of how Congress works.

As one chief of staff put it, "You have to understand the machinery of making change, and by that I mean if you want to do it legislatively, you have to understand which committees are responsible for the issue, and then who are the individuals who are chairing those committees and where are they from, or what districts they represent."

Another chief of staff noted that it was frustrating to be on the receiving end of campaigns that ignore the realities of politics, process, and power in the legislature. "We can't give you everything you want because there are a hundred members of the Senate that have their own agendas that all don't necessarily coincide," he said.

The common refrain we heard from all of our Hill experts was that Congressional offices are not set up to handle advocacy lobbed at them without respect to the policy process. Several specific examples were repeated in interview after interview:

- » **Advocacy that reflects the reality that Congress acts on policy and not issues was the most frequently cited wish amongst Hill staff.** Members of Congress can propose legislation, sponsor and co-sponsor legislation, vote on legislation, negotiate its details with their colleagues, coordinate with advocacy groups to support or oppose legislation, and lobby colleagues for or against it. The cogs of the Congressional wheels turn on legislation; if your advocacy is missing a legislative ask, Members of Congress cannot do anything to advance your issue or cause.

⁶ Congressional Management Foundation, *Communicating with Congress: How the Internet Has Changed Citizen Engagement*. (Washington, DC; 2005)

"If a constituent has a personal story to share about something, that always makes a difference."

– COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

- » Asking members of the House to act on Senate bills or Senators to act on House bills is wasted effort. The houses of Congress operate independently until conference committee.
- » Remember that Members of Congress are individuals. Knowing something about what moves key targets and

“Don’t tell me you support women’s rights. Tell me which bill you oppose, and which you support.”

– FORMER CHIEF OF STAFF

how they manage their offices will go a long way.

- » Advocate in light of current realities, including who is with you and who is not on a given piece of legislation. As one communications director put it, “One of the problems is... people rarely know who they are advocating to. On [bill], my boss is a sponsor of the bill. He has been an aggressive, outspoken supporter of the legislation. And yet, people are told to yell at us every single day as if he’s opposing the bill. It makes it hard to take the organization behind that campaign seriously.”

Fewer high quality, personal, targeted contacts beats big numbers almost all of the time.

Many of our interviews were conducted in the aftermath of “SOPA Day” – the 24 hours of advocacy that saw a massive outpouring of activism across the country, into every Congressional office, and resulted in a complete reversal of fortune for a bill that had been sailing through to passage. No staffer we talked to concluded that SOPA Day was the new norm. One chief of staff referred to it as the “Halley’s Comet of advocacy” – something we’ll see only once in a lifetime.

Absent an overwhelming outpouring of activism supported by every major online destination driving a single message demanding a stop to a specific piece of legislation, our interviewees were unanimous in their

“One compelling story from a constituent is far more valuable than ten template letters.”

– COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

assessment that fewer contacts representing a higher level of commitment from each constituent are more powerful than large numbers of contacts that represent nothing more than a click.

One chief of staff said, “It is always a balance between personalization and volume, but trying to accomplish both is the best way to go. And **I would err on the side of personalization rather than volume.**”

Another said, “my advice to people would be to supply your membership with some talking points or bullet points, and then encourage them individualize their communications.”

A communications director noted that, “We mine our constituent mail for stories that we can use in our speeches. Or, information that we can use to make our own material more compelling. Compelling quality is far more important than the numbers and quantity.”

Other consistent themes emerged, but were not universal so we will not be so bold as to generalize them to the whole of Congress. Some deserve mention:

While the ways that each office deals with Twitter and Facebook vary widely, it seems that **most offices still have not fully incorporated social media into their processes for receiving advocacy and engaging constituents.**

Of the 25 senior staff we talked to, none could point to an example of social media as a powerful way to get sustained attention of an office or influence the behavior of a Member.

One legislative director suggested that it’s only a matter of time and measurement, noting that tracking down whether a tweet or Facebook message comes from a constituent is nearly impossible, making them less effective channels for advocacy. He expressed confidence that this will be a short-lived problem.

On the other hand, a communications director said, “Tweeting at most offices is a waste of time. The person in most offices who sees the tweets, if anyone is looking, is a very junior staffer. Maybe someone in the press shop. What are the odds that message makes it up to the Senator? Not great.”

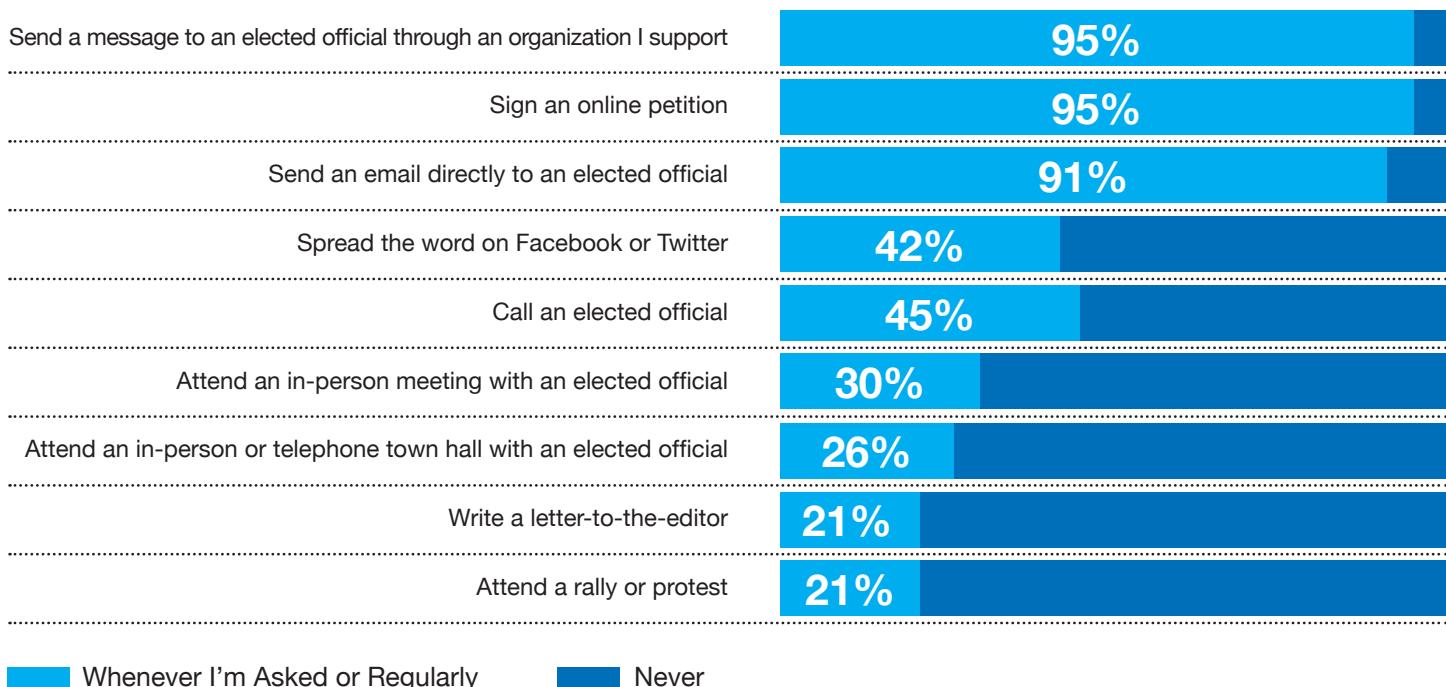
Among the offices that were more technologically oriented and staffed for social media, most regard social media as another broadcast channel as opposed to an engagement or input channel.

The majority of Hill staff we spoke with volunteered in-district activities as more important and influential than Washington, DC based activities. Rallies, constituent visits, and earned media were all mentioned specifically as tactics best based in-district for maximum impact.

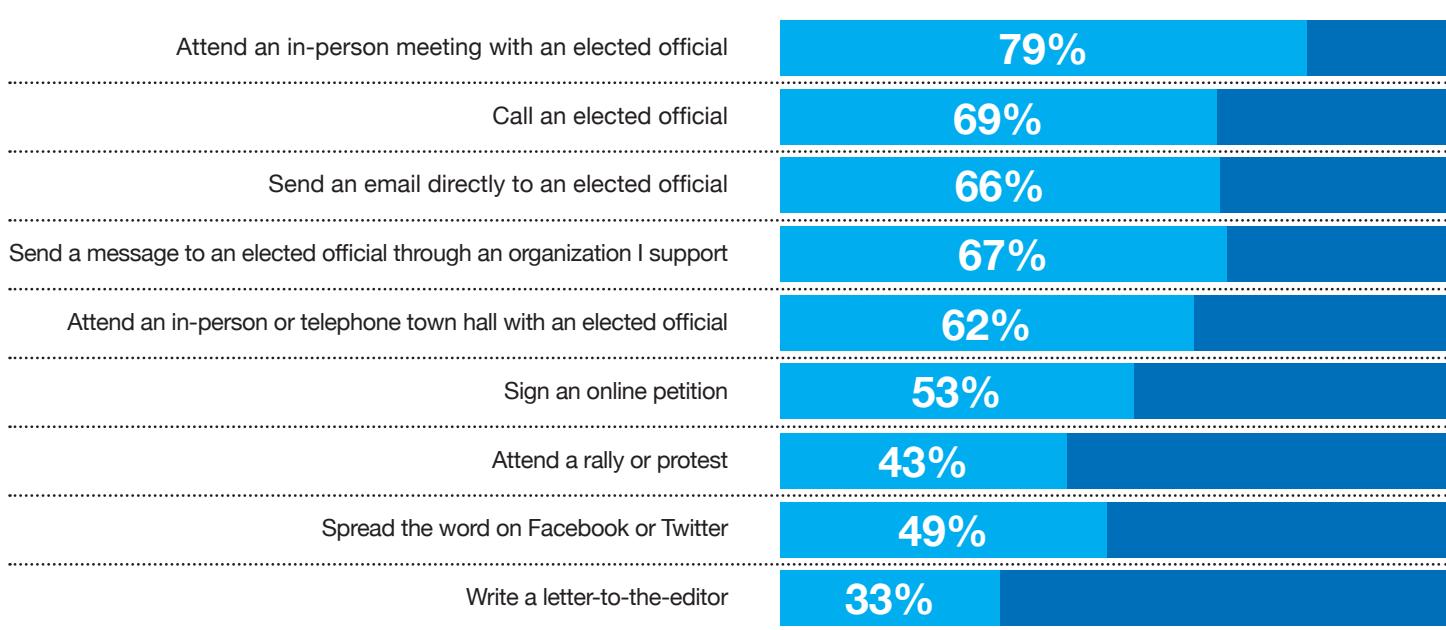
FINDINGS: ACTIVISTS

The Activist Gap: Maybe It's Like Diet and Exercise?

HOW OFTEN DO YOU...



EVEN IF YOU DON'T DO THESE THINGS, HOW EFFECTIVE IS... —————



Very Effective

Not very effective or not effective at all

"If you had a rally with 500 people at the State House and it showed up in the [state paper] the next day, then that is important. If you had five hundred people send a form letter on a generic issue, I would say less important. If you had fifty people calling from the district on a particular issue, I would say that would be better."

- CHIEF OF STAFF

Every organizations' "activist" is a little bit different, but most if not all of our research partners included people on their lists who had taken more than one action within the past year, online or offline.

Given that we surveyed activists only (as opposed to adults or voters as was the case with other research on this topic) we expected to see higher than average levels of activity, a more sophisticated understanding of advocacy and how it works, and more faith in the efficacy of advocacy. We were not disappointed. Compared to findings in reports released by the Congressional Research Foundation and the Pew Internet and American Life Project our sample is highly active and very motivated.

As was true for the Congressional in-depth-interview analysis, generalizations necessarily skip past important nuances and aggregated organizational data hides interesting variation across the participating organizations. Without naming names, we have highlighted caveats in the reporting below.

Advocacy and online action is essentially synonymous amongst activists.

Sixty percent of activists said they send an email to an elected official "whenever I'm asked" or "regularly." Seventy-two percent send a message to an elected official through an organization with the same frequency. The only online activity we asked about that fewer than 60% of activists said they participated in regularly or whenever they were asked was spreading the word on Facebook or Twitter (26%).

In contrast, none of the offline activities we asked about had more than 21% of activists participating regularly or whenever they're asked.

Digging into the organization-specific data, one of our research partners has invested heavily in mobilizing their activists offline rather than online and their results showed evidence the investment was paying off, with much higher levels of participation in offline actions than in the sample as a whole. Similarly, one of

our research partners has put a premium on building a strong social media presence and it shows in their data: their activists are twice as likely as the sample as a whole to have shared advocacy information on Facebook or Twitter.

Even though they don't participate in them very often, activists believe offline actions are more effective in terms of making a difference.

While 70% of activists surveyed sign an online petition "whenever I'm asked" or "regularly," only 24% believe it is very effective.

Thirty three percent of activists said they never attend an in-person meeting with an elected official, but 42% of them said such meetings are very effective.

For everything but spreading the word on Facebook and Twitter, activists are clear about what they think makes a difference and for the most part their perceptions align with what Hill staff told us. Like Hill staff, activists are not sure how, why, and when social media is an effective advocacy channel, and they do not use it as much for advocacy as other online channels.

Activists believe lobbyists are most influential, but may not understand how lobbying works.

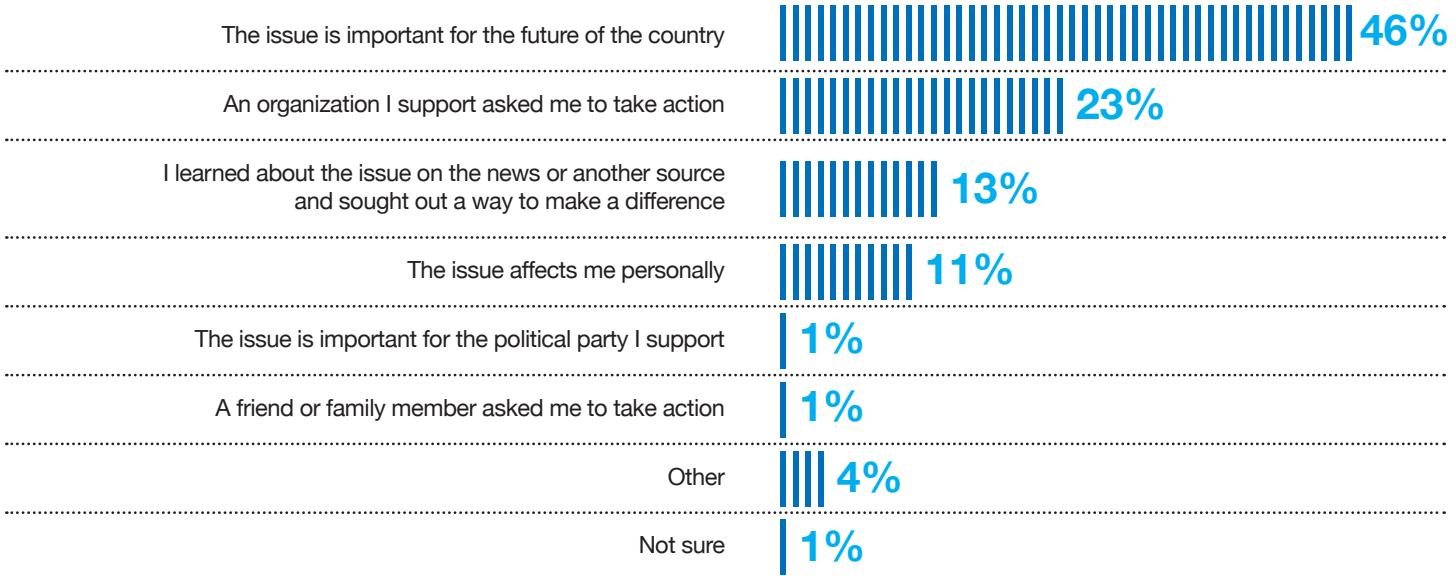
Nearly two of three activists surveyed (65%) said lobbyists are very effective at influencing policy. However, when asked in a different way, more activists ranked "demonstrating strength in numbers" (42%) than "highly targeted contacts to the Member of Congress from specific people" (29%) as the most effective way to get attention from a Member of Congress.

Lobbying is a highly targeted contact to a Member of Congress from someone with relationships, resources and information; exactly the thing activists discounted. The disconnect points to some misunderstanding

FINDINGS: MOTIVATIONS

Motivation: Activists Act to Make a Difference, Because They Can

WHY HAVE YOU TAKEN ACTION ON AN ISSUE OR CAUSE?



amongst activists about what lobbying is and what lobbyists do. Given a sustained public narrative about the corrupting influence of lobbyists, this is not surprising.

However, it is important to note that lobbyists are effective at least in part because they meet the needs of Congressional staff: they are highly targeted, high quality contacts that engage the Congressional process with knowledge of and in relation to the way policy works on the Hill.

Activists are motivated by patriotism, organizational allegiances, and news more than personal experience.

Forty six percent of activists told us they typically take action on an issue or cause because they feel it is important for the future of the country. Eleven percent of activists take action because the issue affects them personally. Just 1% are motivated by partisan politics, and 1% reported acting because a friend or family member asked them to.

Activists feel good about their advocacy actions, even though they are not convinced of their efficacy.

Asked to describe their feelings about the results of the advocacy actions they have taken, fully half of activists report satisfaction with their advocacy experience, even though they don't know if their actions made a difference. Another 24% report satisfaction and confidence they made a difference.

High levels of satisfaction amongst activists who are unsure of their efficacy could be a powerful reason that they take only those actions that are easiest – things that require only a click of a button – even though they know those actions are not the most effective at moving policy.

ANALYSIS: THE ADVOCACY GAP

While the aggregate data hides some important variations across the organizations that participated in the study, it points to a clear divide between what Hill staff say works to move policy, what activists know works to move policy, and how activists take action.

We recognize that not all advocacy actions aimed at the Hill are meant to move policy; sometimes advocacy actions are list building tactics, undertaken to build capacity for future mobilizations, cultivate donors, or meet the demands of funders. However, we assume that for most organizations, as for our research partners, grassroots advocacy that actually supports an agenda is a significant part of the mix.

For that segment of activity – the piece that is aimed at informing and persuading legislators to change policy – the Advocacy Gap is alarming. Unless either Congress changes or advocacy changes, the chasm between citizens and their representatives will continue to grow.

Congress is unlikely to change; advocacy has a recent history of major evolution. We have absolute confidence in organizations, activists, and service providers in the business of advocacy to help bridge the Advocacy Gap. Here is how we think it can start to happen:

[Abandon list building through messages to Congress.](#)

When activists contact their member of Congress, it should be for real, with a legislative ask, a possible path for the Member of Congress to act, and clarity about what the potential outcomes might be. And constituents should only be mobilized to contact their own representatives, through all channels. This will reduce the noise streaming into Congressional offices and make every constituent contact more impactful.

Note that we are not suggesting that organizations stop building big lists. Big lists can still be important for all sorts of reasons, not least of which a pool of people to cultivate into advocates. We are merely suggesting that list building activities be distinguished from advocacy, preserving the relationship between citizens and their representatives and activists and the organizations that mobilize them.

[Invest in making the higher impact activities easier for advocates.](#)

Activists do what's easiest for them to do, even when they know they're not doing the most effective thing

they could be doing. Data from a few of our organizations demonstrates that activists are malleable in this way – they can be mobilized in more effective ways, if the organization makes those actions accessible and easier.

Advocacy technology has evolved to amazing places, making “a click and a few keystrokes” a realistic and low bar for a contact to Congress. It’s time for the next evolution in software and software-as-service, and providers working with advocacy organizations to bake in processes that drive more effective advocacy. POPVOX, one of our research partners, is doing some of this already: guaranteeing constituent contacts only, on active bills, and no form letters. Our friends and sponsors at CQ Roll Call and Salsa are similarly investing in tools to make higher impact activities easier for activists, things like click-to-call and direct-to-staff contacts.

[Get deep into districts, shifting away from Washington, DC.](#)

Activists don’t have to come all the way to DC to meet with their representatives to make a big difference on issues they care about. Impact is as close as the district office, an event in their hometown, and even a personalized email telling their story to their representative. Refocusing some advocacy energy back to the district level, even while issues are increasingly national in nature, would go a long way toward bridging the Advocacy Gap.

[Abandon the notion of “Congress.” Embrace Members of Congress.](#)

There is no Congress. There are only Members of Congress. “Congress” has a single-digit approval rating, but Members with approval ratings below 50% are few and far between. Advocacy programs that embrace this reality will be a big step closer to building capacity and mobilizing that capacity in ways that engage activists effectively.

We recognize that these are heavy lifts, and not without controversy. We propose big changes in the way advocacy is generally done, and the way activists are mobilized. Moving in this direction will mean new metrics for evaluation, and funders that are on board.

We also recognize and appreciate the myriad people working hard every day to make advocacy more effective, along the lines we recommend and in entirely different directions. We look forward to working together, whatever's up next.

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