

California Native Plant Society - Legislative Focus 2003
Growing Native "Grassroots"

SUCCESSFUL POLITICAL ACTION DEPENDS ON GRASSROOTS

"When I feel the heat, I see the light" (Everett Dirksen, U.S. Senate Republican leader during the 1960's.)

A new book on lobbying has much to say on this issue¹.

The "three-legged stool" of effective political action includes: money, grassroots, and lobbying.

Politicians see lobbyists as conduits for campaign funds, connections to interest groups for political support, sources of information, sounding boards to assess actions, and political cover when other interests are upset.

Term limits allows sophisticated interests to again play a meaningful role in shaping the make-up of the legislature by selecting, electing, and backing friendly candidates. Some groups even support local government officials to groom future legislative candidates.

Grassroots action is aimed at stirring up activity to pressure politicians by demonstrating widespread constituent interest. Few politicians want to offend large numbers of constituents or major donors. If its money vs. grassroots, grassroots will probably prevail.

Under term limits politicians are more attuned to local attitudes (grassroots) and less connected to Sacramento. The key is to involve "significant constituents"- persons who because of their position, authority, support or ability to generate support are seen by the politician as critical to obtaining and retaining office.

If a politician knows or suspects that a lobbyist has organized significant constituents it can make gaining access to the official much easier and reinforce the value of cooperation. Legislators must know that significant constituents are monitoring their actions and this requires informing and motivating constituents to contact the legislator at key times.

Classes of "Significant Constituents:"

The Garden Variety - a registered voter (in the legislator's party) who votes for the politician, who promotes the politician among friends, etc., and who provides useful information about local issues.

The Very Significant - the Garden Variety, plus one who publicly defends and advocates for the politician, makes at least a small dollar contribution, and volunteers in the campaign.

The Active Supporter - all of the above, in addition one who hosts fund-raising events, arranges for the politician to make appearances at club events, regularly attends fund-raising events, visits the Capitol occasionally, and perhaps serves on a campaign committee.

¹Jay Michael and Dan Walters, *The Third House: Lobbyists, Money, and Power in Sacramento*, Berkeley Public Policy Press, Institute of Governmental Studies, UC Berkeley, 2002

The Friend Of - becomes an active part of the politicians support network, engineers support and financial contributions, is a member of an important district interest group, facilitates meetings with major donors or political players, and possibly serves as an officer in the politician's political party.

"A legislator will knock himself out to maintain friendly relations with anyone in the second or third level of significance and will sell his mother's soul to take care of those in the fourth level.."

Additional Notes:

A comprehensive lobby campaign is similar to warfare, except hopefully without the bloodshed. There are four steps to prepare for legislative war:

- Carefully assess the resources and support available - will there be reports and news editorials, can you get constituent contacts when needed, is there a reliable network of support?
- Clearly understand the goal and the fall back position in case the initial goal proves unrealistic or too costly (in political terms not just dollars and cents).
- Evaluate the Capitol battlefield, assets/arguments of the enemy, the rivals soldiers (lobbyists & legislators) and devise a strategy.
- Be flexible, circumstances can change rapidly once the battle is engaged.

General Tactics of Legislative Warfare:

1. Win on the merits.
2. Win procedurally, using cunning and a better understanding of the legislative rules.
3. Win through grassroots action (an important technique under term limits).
4. Win by mobilizing public opinion thru paid media.
5. Win by mobilizing public opinion thru influencing the news media.
6. Win with a silver bullet - a single shot provision in a bill that when it becomes known takes out the target.
7. Win by inserting a poison pill (kind of like chemical or biological warfare).
8. Win by burying the issue in the state budget or a budget trailer bill.
9. Win at the ballot box thru initiative or referendum.
10. Win by negotiations.
11. Win by moving the issue to the courts.
12. Win by post-legislative administrative action.
13. Win the old fashioned way by buying it.