

Are legislators more or less open to persuasion

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[Amy Showalter](#)

Bloomberg Government regularly publishes insights, opinions and best practices from our community of senior leaders and decision-makers. This column is written by Amy Showalter, a national authority on government relations best practices, grassroots and PAC influence.

Are legislators more or less open to persuasion than in previous years? Are relationships with legislators improving or degenerating? Is grassroots advocate recruitment easier or more difficult?

These are just a few of the questions asked in the second Grassroots Influence Pulse (GRIP®). The GRIP® is a biennial research project initiated in 2013 to assess current trends in grassroots influence tactics, and most importantly the trends in how members of Congress are responding (or not responding) to grassroots influence strategies. The research provides a baseline of data that reflects the direction of not only grassroots *techniques*, but more importantly successful grassroots *influence*.

Respondents were asked to compare their current year activities to the previous year. Descriptive statistics were performed, followed by an analysis of specific correlations of interest.

Better Legislator Relationships, Yet Reduced Legislator Openness

17 percent of respondents said that their organization's relationships with legislators "improved significantly" over the previous year. None reported significant relationship degradation; 5 percent had "somewhat degraded" relationships.

However, the rest of the story is... only 2.6 percent of the respondents said that legislators are more open to their communications, and 5 percent reported that lawmakers are "much more open to persuasion than the previous year."

As in the 2013 research, we believe this finding has tremendous implications for grassroots professionals who must demonstrate persuasion results. It raises our often-repeated question: "Who's influencing whom here?" Relationships seem to be improving, but less actual persuasion is occurring. Influence is a two-way street, and that means that many organizations find themselves in a vortex of the parity influence dynamic: legislators are trying to influence your advocates just as much as your advocates are trying to influence them.

Think about it—don't legislators who are opposed to your issues try to put the best frame around their opposition, indifference and apathy? That's because they're trying to influence your advocates. As one retired legislator said, "We hear all kinds of odd ideas. It's like telling someone they have a really ugly baby. You can't just say, 'That's the most stupid thing I've ever heard.'"

Organizations that understand and can teach advanced grassroots influence—rather than simply grassroots advocacy—will have more confident and energized advocates.

The bottom line: Legislators are quite adept at influencing grassroots advocates. It's a two-way street.

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Ask yourself: Are you being honest with your grassroots volunteers about the reality of parity influence, or do you tell them to “Just tell your story?”

Do this: Get real with your advocates. Many advocates are tired of being told to “tell their story” to little effect. There is more to influence than a good story.

Other findings on legislator relationships:

- Not surprisingly, improved legislative relationships correlate with greater investment in face-to-face meetings.
- Improved legislator relationships are a predictor of public support from legislators—the better the relationships, the more likely they are to publicly support your cause.
- Enriched legislator relationships do not correlate with greater investment in social media tactics. Legislator relationships actually deteriorate when more time is spent on social media.

Time spent on certain activities means that others will not be prioritized. There are benefits and consequences for each time investment. As long as your organization prioritizes those that align with your strategic outcomes, there is no “right” or “wrong” result. If your goal is to experience improved legislator relationships, you now know what affects those relationships.

Grassroots Volunteer Recruitment is More Difficult

22 percent of the respondents found it “somewhat easier” to recruit advocates than the previous year, and 24.5 percent found it “somewhat more difficult.” Our 2014 report found that 32 percent were finding it easier to recruit grassroots advocates, and 24 percent had more difficulty—volunteer recruitment is becoming overall harder.

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Because context affects recruiting, we looked at seven factors that may impact recruiting, and found that just over 50 percent stated that “encouraging legislative/regulatory results” made it easier to recruit advocates. “Advocate burnout” accounts for 61 percent of the respondents who found it more arduous to recruit volunteers.



Although it may be an indicator of the proverbial positivity bias present in research analysis, we found that 43 percent cited “better or new volunteer leadership” as a reason for improved recruiting results.

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The bottom line: Grassroots results usually lead to ease of grassroots recruitment.

Ask yourself: Are you demonstrating results, or relaying the number of activities completed to your advocates? Most activities should lead to a tangible result.

Do this: Take inventory of what your activities have accomplished. There should be a connection. If not, re-examine your priorities.

This is part one of a two part series on grassroots influence.