



# Navigating the Advocacy Maze

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## Introduction

Policy advocacy—pushing for legislative action on an issue—is a busy arena, with a wide range of organizations devoting billions of dollars and significant time and energy to advocacy activities every year. Almost three out of four nonprofit organizations engage in policy advocacy,<sup>1</sup> and our experience suggests that just as many large foundations aim to influence policy through grant-making and other activities, though they cannot engage directly in lobbying. This is not surprising: after all, investments in advocacy can yield significant returns, as government spending in furtherance of any policy dwarfs even what the largest foundations and nonprofits could spend directly.

Despite this attention to advocacy, there is often little clarity about which activities are most effective, even among leaders of organizations that are active in it. This stems partly from the fact that advocacy encompasses a spectrum of disparate activities—everything from working with celebrities to raise the profile of an issue, to analyzing public spending. And the process through which these activities ultimately influence public policy is often described in ways that are vague, confusing, or circuitous. In our experience, meetings devoted to advocacy planning at nonprofits and foundations often devolve into debates about tactics—some staffers think a letter-writing campaign will work well, others want to buy television air time, and still others argue for hosting a dinner for selected members of Congress—with little shared understanding of how these activities relate to each other and at what stage these activities are most effective at moving the agenda forward.

But advocacy does not have to be a mystery. Drawing on our experience working with foundations and nonprofits, an extensive literature review,

and numerous interviews with current and former policymakers and advocacy practitioners, we have developed a set of three frameworks that nonprofit and foundation leaders can use as they formulate their advocacy strategies. First, we have identified six categories of activities that collectively we call “the advocacy system”—the range of activities that organizations can undertake in pursuit of their policy goals. Second, we have developed a conceptual diagram of how an idea evolves and gains momentum in its journey toward becoming public policy. Finally, by combining these two frameworks—the advocacy system and the end-to-end view of the policy life cycle—we have created an “advocacy map” to help organizations pinpoint where their particular issue is in the process, and therefore identify specific actions that can move their issue forward.

We recognize the inherent difficulty in using a few frameworks to encapsulate the universe of messy and unpredictable events that constitute successful advocacy. Indeed, there is no single path to policy change, and there are no guaranteed formulas for advocacy success. That said, we believe that understanding the range of activities and where they might lead can be tremendously helpful. To date, use of these frameworks has helped our clients drive strategic decision making on advocacy issues, allowed advocacy teams to communicate more effectively with other colleagues about their work, and changed how and where advocacy resources are invested.

## The advocacy system

The advocacy system provides a way of structuring and discussing the range of possible advocacy activities. The system consists of six categories: position development, educating and lobbying policymakers, “grasstops” or influencer mobilization, “grassroots” or constituency mobilization, electoral politics, and use of media (Exhibit 1, page 5).

Many of these categories are related, but organizations need not engage in all six; they can be selective depending on where their issues are in the policy life cycle and what complementary activities

<sup>1</sup> Johns Hopkins Nonprofit Listening Post Project  
Advocacy Sounding, 2008

are under way at other organizations working on the same issues. Partnering is also an option, as is merging with other entities. For example, the antipoverty ONE Campaign, which focused on grassroots mobilization and use of media, merged in 2008 with Debt, AIDS, Trade Africa (DATA), whose core activities were position development, educating and lobbying policymakers, and grass-tops mobilization. Today the combined entity, called ONE, engages in every category in the advocacy system except for electoral politics.

In this section, we briefly describe the six categories and touch on the challenges and success factors involved in each.<sup>2</sup>

### POSITION DEVELOPMENT

An organization engaging in policy advocacy must first translate its overarching goals into specific policy positions and objectives. For example, its overarching goal might be to reduce global poverty; a specific policy objective would be to protect the relevant line items in the international affairs budget. Position development involves analysis of existing policy to understand what the organization should fight to change or protect. It can also require investments in rigorous data gathering and evaluation, particularly for organizations that want to promote a new or untested idea.

Think tanks and research institutions are expert at assembling a solid fact base and putting forth positions in practical, data-driven policy reports and have thus shaped the debate on many issues. An organization seeking to excel in this area would need to employ analysts and content experts to track how an issue is evolving, monitor the legislative calendar, commission research as needed, and become a trusted resource to policymakers and their staffers. A handful of nonprofits, including

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have proved so adept at policy analysis and position development that they are now considered think tanks in their own right.

### EDUCATING AND LOBBYING POLICYMAKERS

An organization's official representatives—either its leaders or paid lobbyists—need access to policymakers in order to communicate their messages directly and in a timely manner. The best way to secure such access is to nurture relationships with policymakers and their staffs over time.

Most large nongovernmental organizations have Washington-based lobbying and government relations staff tasked expressly with this function, and the chief executives of some organizations very actively educate policymakers and build relationships with them. This investment of time and energy is possible because each organization's "whom-we-need-to-influence" priority list is shorter than one might think; the ultimate decision makers on any given issue are often a small set of individuals. Organizations should develop their priority list of people whom they need to influence, understand how to get the attention of these individuals, and target their efforts accordingly. Organizations that invest in educating and lobbying policymakers are often rewarded with a seat at the policymaking table; nonprofits as disparate as the National Education Association and the National Wildlife Federation are regularly consulted on specific language in bills dealing with their areas of interest.

### GRASSTOPS OR INFLUENCER MOBILIZATION

Whereas the term grassroots refers to the majority of engaged citizens, grasstops refers to people who wield unique political power based on their position in society or their personal relationship with policymakers (e.g., civic and corporate leaders, campaign donors, a senator's college roommate). These individuals can be valuable assets to organizations by leveraging their personal relationships with policymakers to influence the policy process. Current and former staffers on Capitol Hill have told us that a visit or a phone call from a

<sup>2</sup> A caveat: in this paper we do not discuss legal advocacy, or the use of the judicial system to move policy. As shown by cases like *Roe v. Wade* and *Brown v. Board of Education*, litigation can be powerful, but its unique attributes as a way to influence policy—such as the extensive involvement of lawyers and the need to frame an issue in the context of specific plaintiffs or defendants—make it significantly different from the other categories in the advocacy system.

Exhibit 1  
**The advocacy system**

<i>Narrow audience</i>	Sample activities	Types of organizational resources required
<b>Position development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commission research</li> <li>• Write policy positions and proposals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicated policy staff (e.g., policy analysts)</li> <li>• Legislative tracking capabilities</li> </ul>
<b>Educating and lobbying policymakers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Testify on relevant legislation</li> <li>• Host educational trips, briefings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senior leadership and staff commitment to relationship building</li> <li>• Lobbyists</li> </ul>
<b>Influencer mobilization (grasstops)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultivate influentials through education</li> <li>• Host targeted events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff focused on building grasstops involvement</li> <li>• Clear ladder of engagement strategy for influencers (a set of escalating “asks”)</li> </ul>
<b>Constituency mobilization (grassroots)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure turnout at relevant candidates’ events</li> <li>• Organize supporters to attend lobby days</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field organization (e.g., local organizers)</li> <li>• An online organizing presence (e.g., e-mail alerts, social networking)</li> </ul>
<b>Electoral politics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publish scorecards comparing where candidates stand on your issues</li> <li>• Endorse specific candidates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate legal structure (e.g., PAC)</li> <li>• Serious political savvy—capable of making smart decisions on positions, allies</li> </ul>
<b>Use of media*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use message testing and opinion research to develop messages</li> <li>• Run print and online campaigns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trained spokespeople</li> <li>• Media and marketing expertise</li> </ul>
<i>Broad audience</i>		

\* Media can be focused on a broad audience or a narrow audience  
Note: Does not include legal advocacy – use of the courts and judicial system to influence policy

policy maker’s acquaintance or friend can trump thousands of identical e-mails or letters.

Grasstops’ influence depends not only on their access, but also on their commitment and credibility. Celebrities are not always effective grasstops for this reason. For every eloquent, policy-savvy advocate like Bono or Michael J. Fox there are dozens of well-meaning celebrities who may be able to gain access but cannot speak with authority on the issues.

## GRASSROOTS OR CONSTITUENCY MOBILIZATION

It is said that nothing concentrates the political mind like a swarm of angry voters. Mobilizing grassroots support is a time-honored approach to policy advocacy, and indeed, a grassroots campaign—especially one that has a clear objective and a specific “ask” of policymakers—can deliver results.

Internet, e-mail, and social-networking strategies have proved effective at engaging grassroots sup-

porters, but constituency mobilization is not just a numbers game; an organization must show depth of commitment in addition to sheer volume of supporters. Nowadays, policymakers will tend to discount the membership claims of nonprofit organizations as inflated, given that technology empowers almost any group to generate high e-mail volumes fairly easily. Policymakers tell us that they pay attention, though, when people show up in person, either in their home district or their Washington or state capitol offices. And policymakers pay even greater attention when these voters prove themselves to be well-informed on the issues and are clear about what they are asking for.

## ELECTORAL POLITICS

Electoral activities—those that directly attempt to influence the outcome of an election—include campaign donations to a political action committee (PAC), candidate endorsements, underwriting election-oriented ads, and “score-carding,” or tracking and publishing policymakers’ or candidates’ positions on a given issue. These activities

require creating a legal entity separate from a 501(c)(3), and donations toward these activities are not tax-deductible.

Many nonprofits avoid electoral politics, often because they do not want to alienate supporters—electoral politics requires a willingness to draw hard lines, and many nonprofits have a bipartisan member base—and because of the difficulty of managing tax-deductible activities alongside electoral activities without violating stringent legal requirements. That said, demonstrating a willingness to make strict ideological choices (and, consequently, enemies) can be powerful in itself. A number of nonprofits—the Sierra Club and the National Rifle Association are two well-known examples—are active in electoral politics and have helped elect or defeat specific candidates. During the 2008 elections, nonprofit groups spent nearly \$200 million on electoral activities, triple what they spent in the 2004 campaign cycle.<sup>3</sup> An organization considering any level of involvement in electoral politics should first consult expert legal counsel and other organizations that have managed these complicated matters.

## USE OF MEDIA

Media can be a powerful tool for targeting either broad or narrow audiences. The fragmentation of media and the increasing popularity of Web sites like YouTube and Twitter means that organizations now have an ever-growing range of media and communication vehicles at their disposal. Mass media may help start a national grassroots movement, but smart organizations can make effective use of more targeted media. The billboard near the airport security lines at the Reagan Washington National Airport, for example, is always in high demand because of the heavy policymaker traffic. And many organizations sought airport advertising space in Iowa and New Hampshire during the presidential primaries, targeting not only candidates but also the hundreds of journalists and campaign staffers traveling through.

<sup>3</sup> “Soft money political spending by 501(c) nonprofits tripled in 2008 election,” The Campaign Finance Institute, February 25, 2009.

Because most nonprofits have very limited budgets for paid advertising, “earned” media—press coverage that organizations do not pay for—represents the best opportunity for bringing their agenda to the policy audience. Human Rights Watch, for instance, nurtures relationships with journalists at global media outlets and gets them to cover human rights abuses. In contrast to such targeted efforts, many organizations still launch large-scale media campaigns, hoping that greater public awareness will lead to policy change. But awareness-building media campaigns must contain a clear call to action and work in concert with other advocacy activities; otherwise they will raise awareness and achieve little else.

## Taking the right actions—at the right time

The activities an organization should take up depend on the progress its idea has made toward becoming public policy. Organizations equipped with an understanding of the end-to-end policy life cycle—how an idea evolves, gathers momentum, and eventually makes its way into policymakers’ agendas—can locate where their issue is in the progression and therefore make better decisions about which specific activities to pursue. Policy change inarguably happens in a nonlinear manner, but we find that some simplification, with the caveat that there are always exceptions and unpredictable developments, is helpful in determining which advocacy activities are most effective and at which junctures.

## HOW AN IDEA BECOMES POLICY

In general, ideas go through six stages before being integrated into policy: idea articulation, initial momentum, experimentation and evaluation, limited political adoption, critical mass, and finally implementation and sustainability. An issue that has made progress may loop back to an earlier stage even after a policy has been implemented; it may, for instance, need to gain support to prevent changes or keep the policy from being overturned.

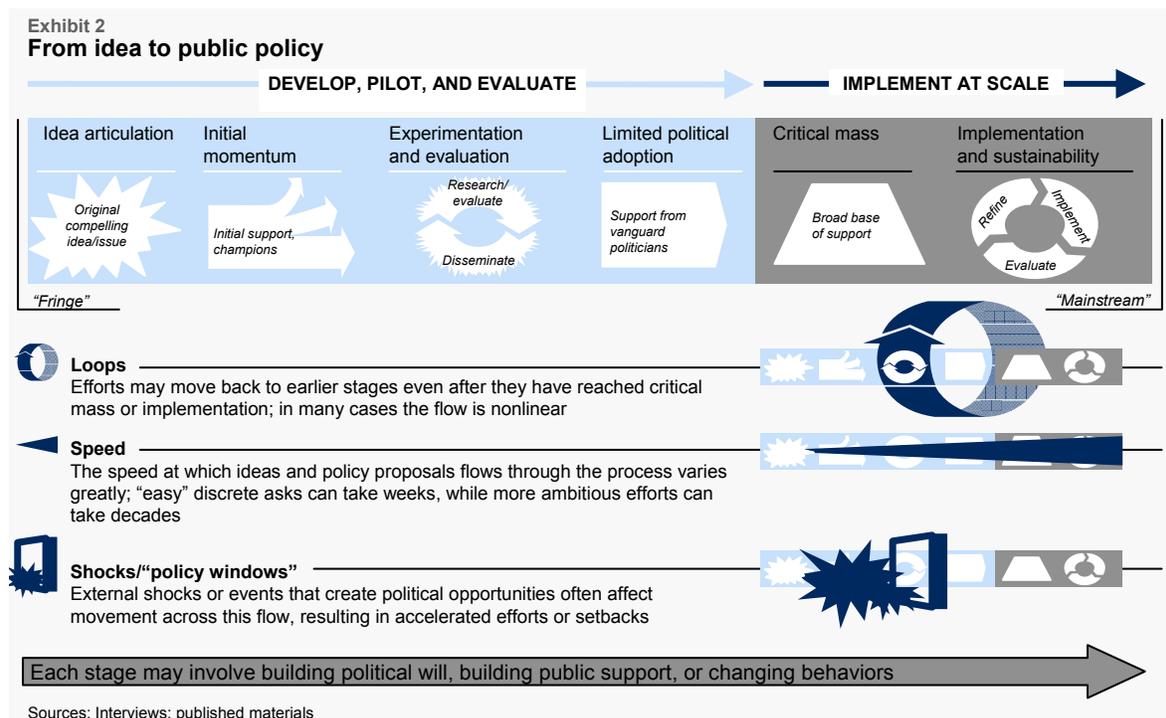
Also, the speed at which ideas move along the continuum varies greatly. “Easy” changes can take just a few months, whereas more ambitious efforts can take decades. Furthermore, external events—for instance, macroeconomic changes or a new chairperson in a key committee—can create political opportunities and affect movement across the policy life cycle, resulting in acceleration or setbacks (Exhibit 2).

That said, the process always begins with an issue—often a controversial or surprising one that is not currently being actively debated or receiving much attention. In the first stage, new and compelling information comes forth—a recent example is how Al Gore’s 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth* raised awareness of climate change—and creates a sense of urgency or outrage that spurs media coverage.

In the next stage, which we call initial momentum, the idea gains traction with groups and individual champions who then work to persuade others of the idea’s merit. Support can come from a wide range of fields and disciplines: academics, activists, corporate executives, celebrities, and political or civic

leaders. A number of efforts have drawn attention by bringing together “unusual bedfellows”—individuals or groups from different sides of the political aisle, from very different fields, or perceived to be neutral or even opposed to a particular issue (for example, war veterans pushing for anti-war legislation).

Ideas enter the third stage, experimentation and evaluation, with some support and momentum but now need to be translated into actual change at some scale. Initial solutions are developed, plans of action form, and experiments and pilots are run. This is the messiest and least predictable stage, and it is itself a loop—several different experiments might run in parallel; experimentation, evaluation, and dissemination of pilot results do not always occur in sequence; and any number of experiments may be required before there is enough evidence to move to wider political adoption. (In certain cases, advocates may decide to move forward despite imperfect outcomes and insufficient evidence.) Pilots can be difficult to implement because the idea is still either controversial or not perceived as a priority, momentum may be directed toward rival



solutions, or sometimes a change in local policy is needed before a pilot can begin.

The next stage, limited political adoption, begins when a clear vision and a detailed policy proposal emerge from the “messiness” of the prior stage, and politicians at the relevant level of government (e.g., local, state, federal) begin to seriously advocate for the proposal. There has to be sufficient agreement and consensus in order to move forward; credible dissenters can stall and derail progress or force the issue back into the experimentation and evaluation stage. And as always, the power, influence, and charisma of early political champions has a huge impact on the ease and speed with which the idea moves forward.

In the penultimate stage, which we call critical mass, policy proposals garner broader endorsement, party leadership openly advocates for the issue, organizations and thought leaders rally behind the ideas, and opinion polls indicate sufficient public support. Finally, specific policy requests flow into

the offices of legislators, who then debate proposals, compose bills, and fund legislation. Policy is implemented. Of course, the work is not done once the policy is approved. To the contrary, the policy should be evaluated and refined, and support and momentum must be actively maintained to ensure that, at the very least, the policy continues to be funded or is not rescinded. Also, new information or changes in context may require that the idea re-enter a prior stage in the policy life cycle.

### THE ADVOCACY MAP

Understanding how the advocacy system and the policy life cycle interact allows us to understand what advocacy activities make sense in which stages of an effort (Exhibit 3).

For a nonprofit or foundation whose issue is in the idea articulation stage, high-priority activities might include commissioning new research or analyzing existing policy relevant to the issue. Once an idea has gained some profile and momentum,

**Exhibit 3**  
**The advocacy map**

**DEVELOP, PILOT, AND EVALUATE** → **IMPLEMENT AT SCALE**

**SAMPLE ACTIVITIES—NOT EXHAUSTIVE**

Activity categories	Idea articulation	Initial momentum	Experimentation and evaluation	Limited political adoption	Critical mass	Implementation and sustainability
	Original compelling idea/issue	Initial support, champions	Research/evaluation Dissemination	Support from vanguard politicians	Broad base of support	Refine, Implement, Evaluate
<b>Narrow audience</b>						
<b>Position development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct new research</li> <li>Develop initial messaging, framing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify likely champions</li> <li>Support with additional research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design and run pilots</li> <li>Use opinion polls to track/build credibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Articulate achievable policy “ask”</li> <li>Identify full set of target policymakers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refine proposals</li> <li>Use opinion polls to demonstrate support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide input into final policy language</li> <li>Refine position as needed</li> </ul>
<b>Educating and lobbying policymakers</b>	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicate idea to policymakers</li> <li>Cultivate champions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Secure local/ regional support for pilots</li> <li>Recruit policymakers as champions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with vanguard politicians to refine proposals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with policymakers to adapt proposals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Keep up relationships</li> <li>Continue to provide information, updates</li> </ul>
<b>Influencer mobilization (grasstops)</b>	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultivate grasstops messengers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show grasstops support for pilots</li> <li>Build coalition to support pilots</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grasstops outreach to target policymakers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use grasstops to support/pressure target policymakers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain relationships with grasstops, wield pressure as needed</li> </ul>
<b>Constituency mobilization (grassroots)</b>	n/a	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage local/regional grassroots support for pilots</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mobilize support for vanguards (e.g., via town halls)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruit broader grassroots base in target districts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain grassroots support (e.g., e-mails, events)</li> </ul>
<b>Electoral politics</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support champions via endorsements, donations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support/pressure policymakers through published score cards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use electoral tactics as needed to wield pressure</li> </ul>
<b>Media (elite, mass, online)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Publish original books, reports</li> <li>Place articles in print/online</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Craft and push messages/images that are pithy and dramatic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Publicize progress of pilots</li> <li>Encourage debate in policy journals, op-eds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Craft awareness campaign</li> <li>Embrace mass media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use media to support and put pressure on holdouts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to place stories—highlight new information, success stories</li> </ul>
<b>Broad audience</b>						

Sources: Interviews; published materials

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the priorities change. It becomes more important to execute experiments and small-scale trials and convene thought leaders to share the results and discuss possible policy implications.

The advocacy map is obviously not exhaustive, but we have found it to be a helpful guide as nonprofits and foundations decide how to invest their time and money, and how to sequence advocacy activities. It rarely makes sense, for example, to push for broad implementation of a policy before it is tested through trials, or to mobilize voters to put pressure on elected officials before policy proposals have been submitted. (That said, sometimes waiting for thorough evaluation of trials can cause an organization to miss a “policy window,” and organizations need to stay alert for such occasions.) The advocacy map is also a useful tool for deciding “where to play”—an organization can use it to map the advocacy activities that others are already undertaking, and identify gaps or opportunities.

At one large organization, we worked with a foundation director and a program officer who struggled to have productive planning sessions about their advocacy strategy, largely because they lacked a common language for their discussions. Upon seeing these three frameworks, the program officer realized—and the foundation director concurred—

that their issue was in the “initial momentum” stage. Thus aligned, they were able to have their first effective discussion about what this meant for their work going forward. Our hope is that these frameworks will continue to build shared understanding in a complicated field.

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To succeed in policy advocacy, nonprofits and foundations need to have the courage of their convictions to stick with their campaigns when funding becomes tight, the board gets nervous, or opposition intensifies. At the same time, organizations must be sufficiently nimble and flexible to respond to changing circumstances, willing to abandon unsuccessful tactics, and committed enough to persevere in efforts that can sometimes take decades to succeed. Policy advocacy is an art rather than a science. The disciplined approach to advocacy outlined here provides a frame and canvas. The art, we leave to the ingenuity and passion of advocates across the nonprofit world.

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Contact for distribution: Denielle Sachs  
Phone: +1 (202) 662-3135 E-mail: [Denielle\\_Sachs@mckinsey.com](mailto:Denielle_Sachs@mckinsey.com)