



Maneuvering through the legislative process



The Texas legislative session presents numerous challenges for grassroots movements to bring about change in Texas. Transforming an idea into a law is difficult, especially when those ideas conflict with the goals of powerful special interests.

Elected officials become beholden to powerful special interests that have deep pockets that fund their campaigns. After elections, those interests move to the front of the line when it comes to access to the elected members. That access continues as well-heeled lobbyists wine, dine and rub shoulders with lawmakers and their staff members and are afforded access to areas off limits to many others.

Yet grassroots activists can win – and we do. Grassroots activists simply have to use different tactics to make the legislative process work for them.

Understanding the players

The Texas House of Representatives is made up of 150 members, each elected for two-year terms. The speaker of the House is the presiding officer and is elected by a majority of fellow House members. The speaker appoints chairpersons and members of all House committees, and he or she refers each bill to a committee.

The Texas Senate is made up of 31 members. Each senator serves a four-year term, and roughly half of Senate seats are up for election every two years. The presiding officer of the Senate is the lieutenant governor, who is elected to a four-year term by a statewide popular vote. He or she is not a member of the Senate and votes only in case of a tie. Like the House speaker, the lieutenant governor appoints all chairpersons and members of Senate committees, and he or she refers each bill to a committee.

The majority party is in the drivers seat in determining

the priority of issues. However, just because an issue is a priority does not guarantee its successful passage. Private school vouchers, for example, have been a priority for the leadership of the Texas Legislature for the last several sessions. The Texas Freedom Network and its coalition partners, however, have been successful in defeating voucher bills in every legislative session.

Understanding the process

The process is explained in the *Citizen Handbook – How the Texas Legislature Works*, which is enclosed in your notebook. A bill is introduced and referred to a committee, which holds public hearings on the legislation. If the committee approves the bill, the legislation then moves to the floor of the House or Senate for debate and a vote. The bill must pass both chambers before going to the governor for his or her signature or veto.



Understanding how you fit into the process

As you follow the progress of bills, you will want to be prepared to take action at various stages of the legislative process. In the early phases of the process, your involvement will likely include communicating your support or opposition to your elected officials, usually by telephone calls, written correspondence or even visits to their offices. You can learn who your elected representatives are by going to www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us on the Internet.

Contacting your representative

Contacting an elected official through correspondence or phone calls can be a very effective way of advocating for an issue or piece of legislation.

Below are the most frequent types of contact that constituents have with their legislators, in order from most effective to least effective:

1. Handwritten letter or typed, original letter (on personal stationary)
2. Phone call
3. Fax
4. Form letter/fax
5. E-mail
6. Electronic petition

While personal communication is obviously best, any contact is worthwhile, even if you only have a minute to sign an electronic petition.

Meeting with your representatives

- Be on time for your appointment, be patient and keep the meeting reasonably brief. Because of a legislator's crowded schedule (particularly during a legislative session), it is not uncommon for him or her to be late or for a meeting to be interrupted.
- Be prepared. Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position. It is helpful to provide information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation.
- Stick to one subject. Don't dilute your main point by discussing multiple issues.
- Be political. Officials want to represent the best interests of their district. Wherever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of his or her constituents.
- Follow up the meeting with a written "thank you" that outlines the different points you covered during the meeting. If additional information and materials are requested, include this with your "thank you."

Before meeting with your elected representative

- Plan carefully. Be clear about what you want to achieve and remember that your representative probably splits time between district and state offices. If you cannot meet with your representative, identify the staff member you need to meet to achieve your purpose.
- Make an appointment by contacting the representative's office. Explain your purpose and why you want to meet. It is easier for staff members to arrange a meeting if they know what you wish to discuss and your relationship to the area or interests represented by the member.





Maneuvering through the legislative process

*When you write or visit your representative*

- Stick to one subject. Don't dilute your main point by discussing multiple issues.
- Be brief. Limit your note to one page.
- Include the specific bill number and title (if possible).
- Get personal. Describe how the legislation impacts

you and your community.

- Be political. Explain the relevance of the issue to your hometown, district or state.
- Ask for action.
- Be courteous and appreciative. A written "thank you" when deserved gets attention with elected officials. Follow the issue after you write and send a letter of thanks if your legislator votes your way.

Understanding the committee process

When bills are in committee, you will continue to communicate your views to the committee members. You might also attend committee hearings.

When a bill is scheduled for a public hearing, it becomes critical to have as many people as possible to attend the hearing and, when possible, to testify.

That testimony puts a human face on an issue for lawmakers. It can also create the perception that a bill has widespread support or opposition.

Committee hearings often run very late into the night, however, and it is important to plan ahead accordingly.

Preparing your testimony is critical because you want to make the most of your limited testimony time.

Consider the following points when preparing your testimony:

- Expect to have no more than three minutes to give your testimony, although sometimes committee members might ask questions and extend the time.
- Stay on message. Focus on your key point and avoid bringing up other topics that will distract from your message.
- Try not to repeat points made previously by others. You have limited time. Focus on your main point.
- Although you should write your testimony, try not simply to read it aloud. Try to maintain a conversational style that engages the interest of committee members. Invite questions that allow you to extend your remarks and provide persuasive details.
- Make it personal. Providing personal experiences can make a citizen's testimony a powerful tool for persuasion.

TFN Tip

Committee hearings are usually streamed over Austin cable television and the Internet. Remember that you may be testifying to a small number of committee members, but others may be watching at the time or later once the video recording is archived on the Internet.