



Grassroots Impact Survey: Members of Congress

How Decisions Are Made On the Hill

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How is information processed in the offices of Members of Congress and how is that information prioritized and utilized to inform a policy decision?

With so many debates inside the Beltway, effectively reaching policymakers and their staff is critical for individuals and organizations who want to advocate on behalf of their industry, issue, or policy. While approaches may vary between Members of Congress and staff, the latest HPS/YouGov Grassroots Impact Survey (GIS) reveals some consistent trends and best practices that can ensure advocacy campaigns break through the mountain of issues and asks made of Members and staff on a given day.

This is a survey in which Congressional staffers were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the importance or effectiveness of various forms of contact with a Congressional office (with 5 being the most important or influential). After surveying 490 Congressional staffers, executive branch officials, political insiders, NGO executives and business leaders over a one month period, five major trends emerged:

1. **Targeting Matters: A Member's decision-making is personal, so efforts to influence that decision-making must be personal.** Contacts that are generated from inside a Member's constituency weigh more heavily than others generated from other constituents. Tallies of contacts are considered and may influence the final decision, staffers say, but other factors matter, too.
2. **Grassroots Advocacy Informs: Personal letters and in-person meetings carry the most weight of importance in offices.** In-person contacts are better than phone calls, and both are more influential than contacts through social media. Congressional staffers say Members give great weight to conversations with staff in the D.C. office combined with reports from district staff when deciding on policy.
3. **Local Impact Wins: Constituent stories of policy impact outweigh studies from an ideological or partisan source.** Consumer groups, non-partisan experts, and partisan organizations lack the clout of reports from constituents and business leaders, local news reports, and what the staff of a Member's home district says.
4. **Insiders Are Not Necessarily Inside the Decision Making Process: Political Insiders may underestimate the internal dynamics of Congress.** According to Congressional staffers, the desires of leadership and the conclusions of Congressional committees influence a Member's decision-making to a degree that even Political Insiders who are not currently staffers — may not understand.
5. **Lobbyists Are Important: Both the principle and profession of lobbying are strongly supported in Congress.** Broad majorities of staffers value the role of lobbyists as important and agree that all organizations should have the right to lobby Congress.

TARGETING MATTERS

It is clear that for any group to have impact on Capitol Hill, precise targeting matters. In today's crowded advocacy landscape, the messages, messengers and recipients of that message are important.

83% of Congressional staff surveyed said that their boss' final decision on any particular policy is a "personal decision." A Member's vote may be a "yea" or "nay" but the reasons behind this vote may vary: from influence by their colleagues, to interactions with a constituent business owner. It shouldn't be assumed that the decision-making rationale for one Member is universal for all. More importantly, a one-size-fits-all advocacy strategy is sure to fall flat if does not take into account that Members may bring a whole host of personal experiences and influences into any policy debate.

Cultivating relationships and getting to know Members is a long-term process, but it is through information about a Member's background and policy where grassroots can educate the staff and Member. Relationships take more time than many advocacy campaigns may account for, so Members are more likely to hear an advocacy message that impacts them personally over a buzzword on an any given issue.

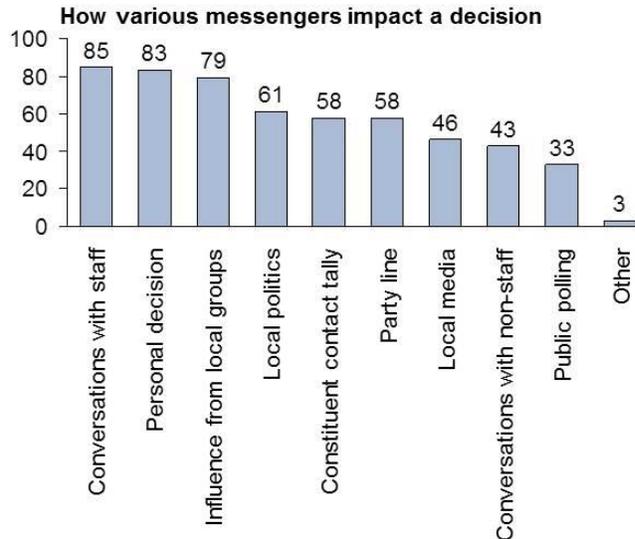
The effectiveness of targeted engagement is not limited to the Member's thinking alone. In fact, 85% of Congressional staff surveyed indicated that their boss makes their final decision on a policy through conversations with staff. This means that to the extent that targeting is effective (i.e. communications are directed toward members who have not already made up their minds), targeting members' staff is critical. When a member's decision can be informed, it appears that it is often finalized through staff interaction (Exhibit 1).

Individual Members' Decisions Can Often Be Influenced, So Precise Targeting Is Important

Many final decisions come down to either conversations with staff or are personal decisions.

Conversations with staff factor into 85% of final decisions made by members, staff say.

Member decisions can be influenced, but communication must be targeted to specific members to be effective.



Source: HPS/YouGov Poll, October 30 – November 22, HP11

Targeting resources ensures that every contact or meeting with a Member or Congressional staff ties a policy issue directly to their district or state. When asked to rank how valuable different kinds of information are to a Member's office, the top three responses were 1) local business owners, 2) reports from a Member's state or district office and 3) local constituents individually contacting an office.

GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY INFORMS

In-person meetings out-ranked every other mode of communication for impacting Members' decisions on policy.

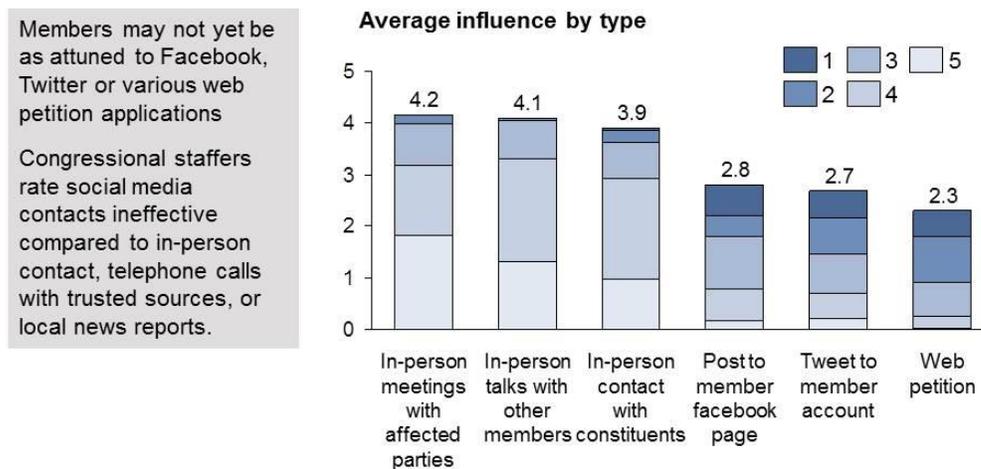
When asked to evaluate the extent to which a particular way of summarizing information on an issue was informative or influential, more than 80% of staffers rated both in-person meetings with affected individuals or companies and one-on-one discussions of issues with other Members or leadership as influential, with mean scores of 4.2 and 4.1 out of 5, respectively. These were the two most effective ways of conveying such information. In-person constituent engagement during congressional recess was the third most effective method, further supporting the preference for in-person contact.

The effectiveness of in-person engagement is also clear when other direct means of contact are considered. When asked to evaluate the power of various digital engagement strategies to inform and influence a member's decision, it is evident that none are as effective as in-person meetings. No digital engagement strategy had an average score higher than 3 out of 5 and the most effective digital engagement (issue-specific website) was rated as influential by only 27% of staffers. Facebook posts and

tweets directly to a member’s account received average scores of 2.8 and 2.7 out of 5 and were considered influential by 28% and 26% of staffers, respectively. Additionally, tweets to a member’s account, web petitions, tweets including a relevant hashtag, YouTube videos, and digital ads were considered to be ineffective methods of informing or influencing a member by at least 70% of staffers (Exhibit 2).

EXHIBIT 2

Social Media Does Not Come Close To Matching Effectiveness Of In-Person Communications



Source: HPS/YouGov Poll, October 30 – November 22, HP8, HP21

The relative strength of in-person engagement over more passive forms of communication, like tweets and Facebook posts, should be considered when targeting messages. While targeting the proper members or staff is important to influencing decisions, the power of such communication is also heavily dependent on its form.

LOCAL IMPACT WINS

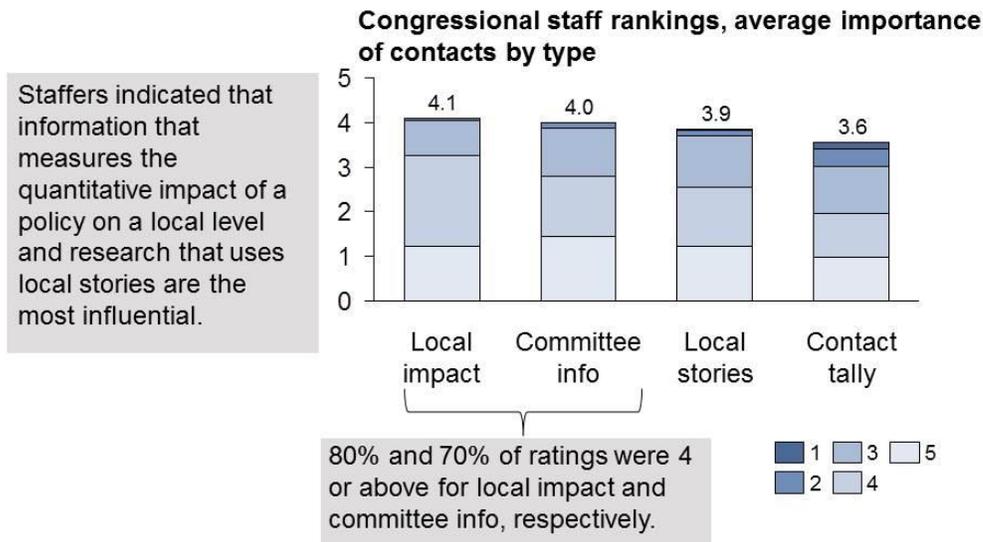
From surveying Congressional staff and political professionals, it is clear that not all information is created equal. The quality of the information Congressional offices receive from the sources described above is most important, but focusing on the potential local impact on a Member’s district or state provides the highest value to Members.

According to 80% of those surveyed, the most helpful information for a Congressional office is that which quantifies the impact of a particular policy on the Member’s district or state – it scored an average of 4.1 on a 5 point scale. This was closely followed by local stories (the experience of local business owners dealing with specific policies, for example) with a mean score of 3.9 out of 5, with 65% of those surveyed rating it 4 or 5.

These types of information and research scored well above quantitative national impact (45%) or any kind of public opinion survey, whether targeted or a broad poll, underscoring the well-worn political maxim: “All politics is local” (Exhibit 3).

EXHIBIT 3

Quantitative Reports Of Local Impacts, Hearing Stories From Those Affected Locally, Matter Most

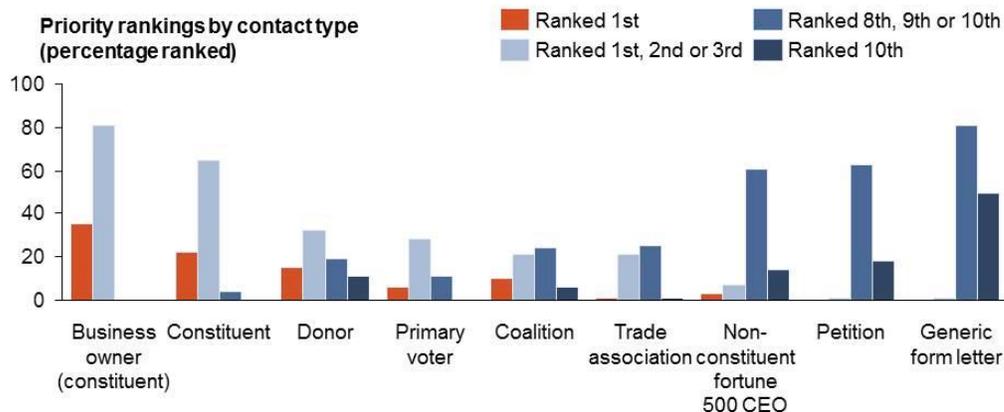


However, if quality (as described above) is important, quantity also plays a key role in informing a Congressional office. Most of those surveyed identified the total number of constituent contacts on any given issue as very helpful when making a decision. These results underscore the importance of conveying the local impact of a particular issue and indicate that mobilization efforts to flood offices with constituent communication may be effective in swaying staff and, subsequently, members (Exhibit 4).

EXHIBIT 4

Constituent Letters Ranked Highest, While Generic Form Letters And Petitions Were Lowest Priority

Letters from constituents – especially business owners – were ranked highest priority to Hill offices, as well as politically involved constituents, while anything non-targeted or out-of-district ranked lowest.



Source: HPS/YouGov Poll, October 30 – November 22, HP10

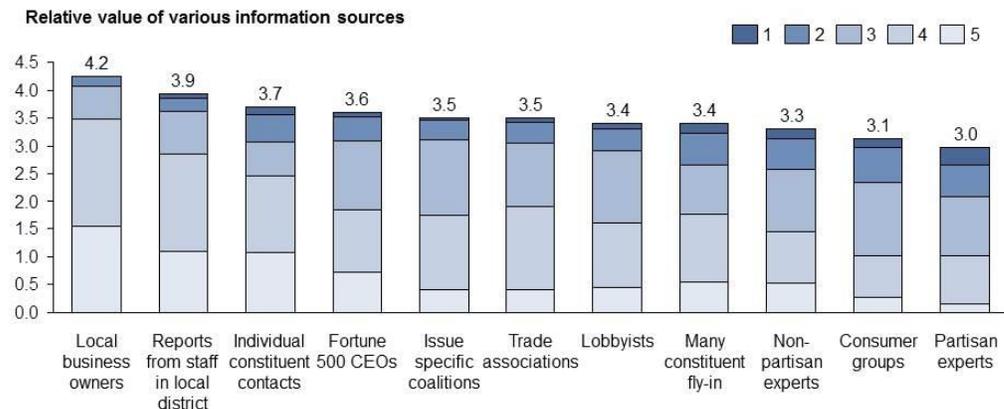
Interestingly, while many inside the Beltway tout the prestige and influence of more partisan experts and organizations were rated the lowest on providing valuable information, scoring an average of 3 on a 5 point scale (Exhibit 5).

EXHIBIT 5

Local Contact And Impact Outweigh Partisan Experts As Sources Of Information

Local constituent communication and reports are the most highly valued forms of information.

Partisan reports were rated the least valuable source of information by staffers.



Source: HPS/YouGov Poll, October 30 – November 22, HP7

INSIDERS ARE NOT NECESSARILY INSIDE THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Political insiders—the kinds of policy-savvy, politically-seasoned professionals often involved in policy fights on the Hill—prove to be tuned in to how Members and their staffers make up their minds, with two exceptions.

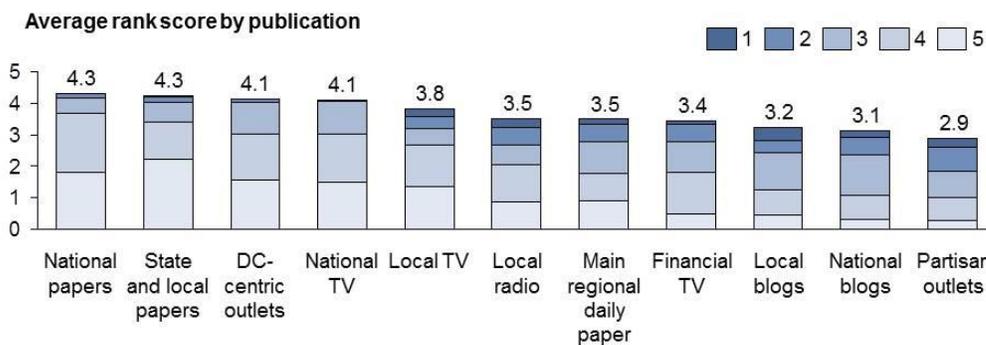
- Staffers are more likely than political insiders to report that the views of leadership and committees are influential when Members decide, suggesting the political insiders are underestimating the influence of internal House and Senate politics in Member decision-making.
- Staffers and political insiders both report paying a lot of attention to state and local newspapers (each rates the attention staffers pay to local news reports a 4.3 on a 1 to 5 scale, the highest for any news publication tested and tied with national newspapers). However, DC-centric outlets such as *Politico* or *The Hill* and national television news all score almost as high when Congressional staffers are asked how much attention they pay to each. Political Insiders underestimate how much attention these national or DC-centric outlets get from staff (Exhibit 6).

EXHIBIT 6

National and Local Media Outlets Carry The Same Weight With Member Offices

When asked what type of publication do Member offices pay as much attention to, local and national papers tied at 4.3.

However, 53% of staffers rated state and local papers 5's on the 1 – 5 scale, the largest proportion of 5's for any publication



Source: HPS/YouGov Poll, October 30 – November 22, HP13

LOBBYISTS ARE IMPORTANT

For all the negative connotations it may elicit outside the Beltway, lobbying is strongly supported, both as a principle and as a profession, by Congressional staffers.

Lobbyists are experts in their respective policy areas and they often inform and educate staffers and Members of Congress. This is not to say that lobbyists should replace the message of local constituents (with local business owners identified as the most valuable communication to a Hill office, with a mean of 4.2 compared to lobbyists at 3.4) but lobbyists provide a value to the Members' offices.

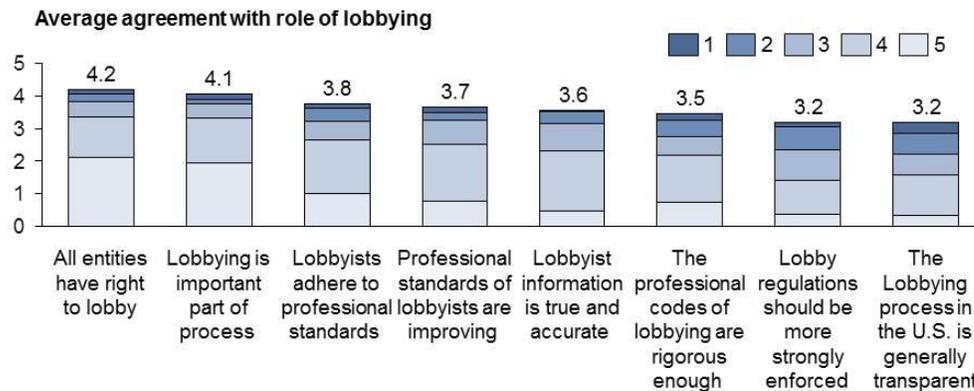
Of all those surveyed, 81% strongly or somewhat agree that lobbying is an important part of the Democratic process, while another 80% agree that all organizations should have the right to lobby Members of Congress (Exhibit 7).

EXHIBIT 7

Congressional Staffers Generally View Lobbyists As Reliable And Important

When asked about the role of lobbyists, a large proportion of staffers viewed them as important.

Additionally, staffers, in large part, feel that all organizations should have the right to lobby members of Congress.



Source: HPS/YouGov Poll, October 30 – November 22, HP12

CONCLUSION

The GIS roadmap to Hill engagement illustrates that compelling and high-impact engagement with Members of Congress is critical to breaking through the noise and clutter of Congressional debates.

Effective congressional outreach campaigns leverage the following strategies to demonstrate relevant and compelling reason for Members and staff to act on a given issue:

- **Targeting Matters:** A Member’s decision-making is personal, so efforts to influence that decision-making must be personal.
- **Grassroots Advocacy Informs:** Personal letters and in-person meetings make big impressions in Member offices.
- **Local Impact Wins:** Constituent stories that demonstrate policy impact outweigh studies from an ideological or partisan source.
- **Insiders Are Not Necessarily Inside The Decision Making Process:** Political Insiders may underestimate the internal dynamics of Congress.
- **Lobbyists Are Important:** Members and staff see value in the principle and profession of policy lobbyists.

METHODOLOGY

Respondents were interviewed between October 29 and November 22, 2013, the survey asked 490 political and business leaders to rate various forms of communication or information in terms of influence on decision making and value. Some questions focused on the relative value of particular methods, while others asked about the influence that certain methods have on member or staff decisions. Each method was assigned a score between 1 and 5, with higher scores corresponding to relative impact.

The survey interviewed current Congressional staff, and compared their answers to the answers of Political Insiders—the experienced veterans of campaigns and policy fights, recruited for this survey, by Washington political reporter James A. Barnes.

ABOUT THE GRASSROOTS IMPACT SURVEY (GIS)

This is a survey in which Congressional staffers are asked to rate on a 1 to 5 scale the importance or effectiveness of various forms of contact with a Congressional office (with 5 the most important or influential). Results are compared to findings of some of those same questions when posed to a group of Democratic and Republican Political Insiders, from a panel recruited by veteran Washington political reporter James A. Barnes.

About Hamilton Place Strategies: HPS provides communications, policy, and advocacy solutions at the intersection of business, government, and media.

About YouGov: The world’s leading online research organization, YouGov conducts public opinion polls each week for the *Economist*/YouGov poll, as well as surveys of special panels of experts, such as this survey of Congressional staffers, surveys of Political Insiders, and surveys of other expert panels on policy issues.

With support from:



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