

ACCESS TO POWER: BUILDING POLITICAL CLOUT FOR THE ARTS

"The reputation of power is power."—Thomas Hobbes

Access to power is the path to success in politics. Arts advocates need that entrée to their legislative leaders, politicians and policy makers to move an arts agenda forward. Through time and effort spent building relationships with legislators and other public officials, advocates for the arts can enjoy real access to power in politics. It is a long-term investment. Relationships developed over months and years create supporters who will take the initiative on your issues—not simply those who will vote favorably on those issues, but who will step out in front and make things happen.

The cultivation of good friends in government takes nurturing. One-to-one communication is the basis of successful political alliances. Like all relationships, these connections need to be maintained throughout the year. When advocates keep connected with their politicians, those officials are more responsive to the arts.

Arts advocates around the country have enjoyed success in building relationships with politicians. Their experiences, gathered here, offer an abundance of useful strategies for gaining access to power.

campaign for your friends

Often, the question, "How did you get to know the Speaker of the Assembly [or the governor, or your senator]?" is answered with "I worked on the election campaign" or "I contributed to the campaign." Politicians never forget their campaign supporters and contributors. Your first friends in government are those you helped get elected to office.

If you have contact with candidates running for office—individuals whose candidacy you support—provide them with policy positions on the arts and give them the background information they need to speak as a supporter of public arts funding during the campaign. Whether it's a primary race or the general election, you can mightily influence candidates for the legislature, for Congress, for governor or for president. Indeed, in states with early presidential primaries, arts advocates have an extraordinary opportunity to sway candidates in their position on federal arts policy, and to cement powerful relationships.

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STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING ARTS SUPPORT

Start even earlier in the electoral process and recruit candidates who share your values to run for office. Promote the candidacy of leaders who understand the role of the arts in their community, who believe in the importance of public support for the

“Very few political candidates are aware of the strength of the arts support network among their constituents. When candidates hear from arts supporters early in their campaigns, the awareness can develop into a long-term and often beneficial relationship for arts advocates.”—*Tog Newman, chair, North Carolina Arts Council*

arts. That ideal candidate may be the former chair of your state arts council, a community leader from the board of the local arts council, a professional artist or an arts administrator. When your candidate gets elected to the legislature, you have an ally who understands your issues and can promote your interests.

The artist-politician or arts patron-politician who sits in the legislature can be an essential link to the power centers. When your friends get elected to office, seek them out, ask their advice, let them help you strategize. They can open doors to fellow legislators that may have been closed before.

pick your targets

Recognize that some politicians can be more helpful to you than others. Begin with those who have the most influence over legislation affecting arts policy and budget in your state. Look for ways to get to know those figures who control the destiny of your arts interests.

Of course, you want contact with the legislators who chair the committees that write your budget and shape the laws that control your activities. Pay attention as well to the party leadership in the legislature, and to the major players in the party caucuses. Look also to the members of the special interest caucuses where the arts intersect with their policy issues. Position your special interest to complement theirs.

If you are not able to get direct access to the legislative leaders, try to get there through someone you know who can arrange a meeting for you. It may be another legislator who can make the connection for you, or it may be a legislative staff person who can clear the way.

Don't overlook the importance of legislative staff. Be available to them for help when your issues are on the agenda. A sympathetic staff member who understands your issues can be a valued ally on the inside, able to carry your message to that strategically positioned legislator.

start early

Begin working with new legislators when they first take office and educate them on your issues. With term limits in many states, turnover in the legislature is frequent. Position yourself as an expert on arts policy willing to be helpful when questions arise. Demonstrate your ability to connect the issues in the arts to the interests of the legislator's constituency.

First, capture your friends who are elected to office and bring them into your issues. Be there at the start to offer information and assistance on issues of public arts support in your state. Your friends and colleagues who have gained elective office will be an immediate point of entry for you into the legislative power structure.

Build allies from within. Encourage the appointment of new, interested legislators to the arts council. Experience has shown that lawmakers who have been exposed to the workings of the arts agency and the reach of public dollars across their state become forceful voices for government arts support.

“Get to your new legislators early—especially when you have term limits. Look to the new leadership base in the legislature.

Introduce them to their arts constituents.

Emphasize the programs that serve the arts in their communities. Patience is golden.

Solid work over the years with your legislators will pay off in their strong support, both philosophically and financially.”—Wayne

Lawson, executive director, Ohio Arts Council

gain access through influence

Influential leaders in the arts can help you gain access to political power. Work with savvy arts board members and commissioners who know the legislators you want to meet. Identify the legislator you need to work with, then identify that politician's key supporters in the community who are also involved in the arts.

Recruit leaders with stature and visibility, such as corporate executives who are active in the arts, heads of arts organizations, and board members and directors of major arts institutions. Engage campaign contributors and constituents who know the legislators you depend on to carry your legislative agenda forward.

Put together a group of patrons and arts organization staff to meet with legislators. Educate your council members and arts leaders about the issues and their advocacy responsibilities. Give them talking points to make their work easier.

Enlist council and board members who were involved in the campaigns of state and local officials in inviting those officeholders to arts events. An invitation to an arts

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“Our success in dealing with elected officials on both the state and local levels is based on the old adage, ‘It’s who you know that opens the door; it’s what you know that will get you an invitation to dinner.’ We use members of the commission or influential board members who are personal friends or have direct contact to ‘knock on the door’ for us if that is appropriate.”—*Rich Boyd, executive director, Tennessee Arts Commission*

event can be a powerful act of advocacy, putting a public official in a situation that can provide visibility and esteem among people who are important politically—friends, financial contributors, and constituents. Invite legislators to lunches and other special events with significant people in the arts whom they would like to know. Recognize that the arts world has contacts to offer politicians as much as the arts want to connect with the political world.

don’t ignore your opponents

Sometimes, the legislator you need to court will be an opponent. Conversion is possible. Don’t overlook those who vote against you—those skeptics in the legislature who have not been convinced of the importance of the arts to their constituents. Draw them into your realm; show them what you do.

An opponent can be an active agent for opposition—organizing and broadening opposition—or simply a vote against you. Opponents might tell you what could make them supporters, or they could learn to support you. You can advance their support by making progress along that continuum.

If you have the entrée—through a campaign contributor or through an influential arts patron—you have the chance to tell your story, to explain the role of public arts support from your point of view. Keep up the communication; you might win over a legislator who will support you with the fervor of a convert.

Some of the strongest advocates of public arts funding have become supporters through controversies. Former opponents have turned into supporters by learning the value of the arts in their communities. Once they understand who among their constituents participates in and cares about the arts, they shed their preconceived notions.

At times, oppositional legislators have been appointed to state arts councils—and to the National Council on the Arts—where they learn from the inside about the good work of the arts agency. The doubters emerge as supporters, and they return to the legislature spreading good news about the arts.

keep in touch

Success in politics turns on the strength of one-to-one relationships. If you want to do business with your political leaders, don't overlook the personal connections. Entertain politicians, their staff aides and family members at arts events. Remember birthdays and anniversaries. Pay courtesy visits to legislators and their staff members even when you aren't asking for something.

As arts administrators, patrons and board members, you will often find yourselves at social events with politicians. Use those occasions to develop the personal bonds that grease the wheels of politics. Discover common interests, but avoid (if you can) asking for something. The next time you come before that legislator to discuss your issues, you will be seen more as a colleague and friend than as a supplicant.

“The executive leaders of arts organizations need to see themselves in the same role as the corporate CEOs in their communities—participants at chamber of commerce functions, in attendance at political fundraisers—visible at any community event where political connections are made.” —*Judy Rapanos, past chair, Michigan Council for the Arts & Cultural Affairs*

follow the spouse

Often the spouse of a legislator comes with a deep interest in the arts, whether it be the museum, children's theatre or dance company. Bring the spouse into your advocacy. Develop “pillow” talking points to help promote your interests.

Legislators' spouses who are appointed to state arts councils or to the boards of arts organizations can be among your most influential advocates. Through the politician's spouse, you can gain access to the power centers that might otherwise be closed to you. And don't underestimate the spouse's dedication to the process and understanding of the legislature.

play to a politician's special interest

To influence a legislator, don't focus too much on the intangible benefits of your issue. Understand what matters most to that politician and how the arts relate to their agenda. It may be the arts' role in promoting tourism or improving education or reducing crime. Experience has proven that the arts win attention when they are part of a broad agenda of public policy concerns. Offer concrete information about the reach of the arts in your state and the impact of public funding.

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Find out what makes the politician interested in the arts. If it is a special appreciation of poetry, for example, highlight your poetry program and bring that legislator into it. If you want to build ties with a public official who enjoys the paintings of a certain artist, arrange a tour of that artist's work in your local museum.

And always look for a way to be helpful with a legislator's special arts projects at home. When an elected official contacts you for ideas on promoting the local cultural scene, assist in every way possible. By contacting you, that legislator has opened the door to collaboration on arts policy and projects. Your response is key to developing an important political connection. You may discover a new ally willing to work with you in the future, whose involvement can take your advocacy to higher levels.

catch a rising star

Follow your legislative contacts through their careers. The freshman you worked to transform into an arts supporter may turn out to be a major power figure in a few years. As that politician rises through the ranks, continue to provide the material and information necessary to keep abreast of your issues. Ultimately, you will reap the dividend of that long-term investment with a legislator who is now in a position to be an even greater arts champion.

When a former council member gets appointed to a position in government—an office in the governor's cabinet, for example—keep in touch and take advantage of your relationship to gain influence on behalf of the arts. You will have a friend in a high place who understands your interests and can be helpful to your cause from a new position of influence.

pay attention to your friends

Personal attention paid to the legislators who can help you the most will ensure a strong relationship when you need that connection. Invite your political friends to special events, and thank them in an appropriately public way. They will enjoy the exposure to constituents and the chance to experience the arts offered by your programs.

Call on your political allies for advice. Your friends in government should be willing to help you with useful information from the insider's perspective. To return the favor, help your supporters when they need information on an arts issue. Working as a team will make it possible for your friends in high places to espouse your cause and to promote their own political interests at the same time. That way, you both win.

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Be aware of the legislator's needs in the home district. Offer your theatre space to a politician for a town meeting on nights when the theatre is dark. If the legislator is working to promote public sculpture at home or the local cultural heritage, be available to help with making the project a success and seeing it through to completion. Your ability to open doors for a local arts project can help to open doors for you in the legislature.

Remember your friends when you are giving out awards. Everyone likes to be recognized for their work. And don't forget when the time comes to contribute to the election campaigns of your friends in politics.

hire a lobbyist

Sometimes, you will have to hire the connections you need. A government agency may have the ability to employ a lobbyist or engage government relations staff to help with the legislature. Otherwise, that well-connected legislative expert might be available to a state arts agency through the state arts advocacy group. Private, nonprofit arts organizations are fully able to hire lobbyists to help with their legislative advocacy activities.

A lobbyist can give you the access you want to the power centers in your legislature. Lobbyists spend their time cultivating friends and building relationships with legislators. When they are working for you, your interests become the interests of the lobbyist.

It's all about the relationship. By employing a variety of these strategies for building political clout, arts advocates can claim a place in the corridors of power.