

Effective Advocacy Before Congress

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Thank you. Good morning; I'm happy to be here with you today.

What I want to do is give you some practical advice on the most effective ways to advocate in front of Congress. I know all of you want Congress to support the work of federal statistical agencies, but it's up to you to be proactive with Congress and be effective in convincing them why adequate funding and sound policies are important.

So, I'll focus on three important areas: the first is effective communication, second is timeliness of your advocacy, and the third is where I might get a little wonky on you – that is congressional rules and procedures.

Number one: Communication – you can't underestimate the importance of knowing how to communicate effectively to Congress. If you don't communicate well, you're just wasting your time.

There are several elements to effective communication, but before I go into specifics, I want to mention that the advocacy page on APDU's website has a useful document called "Communicating with Congress: How to Deliver the Message." It includes many of the things I'll mention, and I encourage you to take a look at it.

The two ways you're most likely to advocate before Members of Congress and their staff are face-to-face meetings and letters.

For meetings, remember that Members and staff are always juggling several balls in the air at once. Your issue is probably not going to be the most important issue they're dealing with on that day.

Be respectful of their time. Don't be late to your meeting, and don't arrive too early. Come prepared to make your case in a direct and straight-to-the-point manner.

You should have a specific "ask." In other words, as well as talking in general terms about how important it is to have strong federal statistical agencies, you should make a specific request regarding how much money these agencies need to do their jobs. Don't come to a meeting without a specific ask. You don't want to leave your meeting with the person you just met with puzzled over what specific action you want them to take.

Bring real-world examples that support your arguments. The best approach is to show a congressman or Senator how the cause you're advocating will benefit their district or state.

You should also anticipate any questions or issues the person you're meeting with may have. If it's a conservative who's a deficit hawk, he may have issues with or objections to the budgetary cost of your request. If you're meeting with someone who is active on health policy, you should be prepared to dive deeper into how data can influence health policy.

Another important part of communication is the materials – such as fact sheets or issue papers – that you bring to a meeting. These are called “leave-behinds,” and they need to be concise enough that when you leave them behind with the person you met, that person can look at them in 60 seconds or less and clearly understand your request. Graphics and bullet points are helpful. Use clear and concise data to make your point.

But don't overwhelm them with thick folders of dense background information that may not be relevant to what they need to know. Give them information they can use. Give staffers concise bullet points they can use to brief their boss.

I've seen leave-behinds that were written like textbooks -- several pages of too much detail typed in tiny font and 600 words on a page. Don't do that! I may have seen them but I

rarely actually read them. If you overwhelm somebody with too much information and information they don't need, they may set those leave-behinds aside and never look at them again.

Finally, after your meeting, do what your mother always told you to do – write a thank you note. A simple email to the person you met with lets them know you appreciate their time and their interest in your issue, and it gives you the opportunity to reinforce your request.

If you can't meet with a congressional office, writing a letter is also an effective way to advocate. Much of what I've said about face-to-face meetings also applies to letters: be concise – one page is better, but no more than two pages, include information they can use, and have a specific ask. You should also offer to follow up with them if they have questions; offer to be a resource.

One thing that's helpful to know about sending letters to Congress is that attaching a letter to an email is better than using snail mail. For security reasons, anything mailed to the Hill gets poked and prodded, as well as delayed. I've opened letters that have been irradiated so much that they literally fell apart in my hands. It's better if you identify the right person to contact and send an email with a letter attached.

That covers some points regarding how you can effectively communicate with Congress. Now I want to cover the two

other points I mentioned at the beginning – timeliness of your advocacy and congressional rules and procedures.

Timeliness: one of the biggest mistakes people make in lobbying Congress is not starting their advocacy effort soon enough. Making your case at the right time is critical.

I had an experience where, as an appropriations staffer, I received an email from a lobbyist when I was in the middle of a committee markup session – that’s when a committee considers amendments to a bill. The lobbyist asked if there could be a change to the bill being considered during that session. There was nothing I could do about the request – it simply came too late. And the lobbyist’s credibility suffered by waiting to bring the issue forward at such a late date.

If you have a request relating to the size of an agency’s budget, get to the Hill as soon as possible after the President’s budget is released in February, and no later than two weeks before the appropriations subcommittee expects to meet to approve a draft bill. It’s much more effective to try to influence appropriations early in the process than later.

That doesn’t mean you should never advocate late in the legislative process. You may need to follow up from an earlier meeting, provide new and relevant information, or perhaps refine your request. But the bottom line is: start early.

My final point is on congressional rules and procedures. I warned you earlier that I was going to get wonky on you, and I'll probably lose some of you here. But try to resist the urge to doze off, because it's critically important to understand that you, or someone on your advocacy team, need to be knowledgeable about House and Senate rules and procedures, as they can be quite arcane and complex.

You need to be able to answer a basic question when you develop an advocacy strategy, and that is, is what we want to do possible under the rules of the House or Senate? Entire legislative strategies have been lost when that question isn't properly answered.

For example, if you want to push for more money for an agency, and you want to accomplish that by asking a Member of Congress to introduce an amendment to an appropriations bill, budget rules require that the amendment offset that budget increase with a decrease to another account in that bill. If you want that amendment to be offered on the House floor, the rules also require that the outlay rate, or rate of spending, in the account where you take the offset be equal to or greater than the outlay rate for the account where you want to increase spending.

Did you follow that? I said I'd be wonky, and I didn't want to disappoint you.

So, let me translate what I just said into normal language: if there is an amendment that increases spending for a program by \$30 million, the amendment also must decrease spending somewhere else by at least \$30 million. If it doesn't do that, the amendment is dead under House rules.

The example I just used, where the budget for one agency is increased at the expense of another, is something that those of you who care about the Census Bureau should be concerned about. That's not because there are Members offering amendments to increase the Bureau's budget, although maybe there should be; it's because the Census Bureau is often a target of amendments that would take money away and give it to another program. And, it's a target because of what I just mentioned – its spending rate is higher than a lot of other programs, so it's easy to comply with House rules by taking money away from Census.

The House has been working on an appropriation bill this week. An amendment was submitted to the bill to take \$30 million away from the Census Bureau to fund a different program in the Commerce Department. Fortunately for the Census Bureau, the sponsor of the amendment arrived on the House floor too late to offer the amendment, so the House never took it up. But two years ago, the House passed an amendment that cut Census by \$100 million and moved that money to a Justice Department grant program.

You also need to appreciate the role that the House Committee on Rules plays in the legislative process. The Rules Committee is powerful, and most major legislation must pass through this Committee before it heads to the floor of the House of Representatives. It's controlled by the House Leadership – it's referred to as the Speaker's Committee – and the ability to amend or not amend bills is determined by this Committee.

Using the appropriations bill the House just took up as an example, House members submitted over 950 amendments to the Rules Committee, but the Committee permitted only 342 amendments to be offered.

The Rules Committee can also decide if a provision in an Appropriations Bill can be exposed to a point of order. Okay, so I'm getting wonky on you again. If there's a provision in a bill reported from the Appropriations Committee that does not strictly comply with the Rules of the House, and another House committee objects to the provision, the Rules Committee can allow the provision to be stricken from the bill.

Simply put, you need to factor rules and procedures into your advocacy strategy. Otherwise, you can get burned.

One last point before I close. Yesterday there was a panel at this conference on "How Data is Used to Build Evidence for Policymaking." I hope you had the chance to listen to that panel, because it fits well into the topic of effective advocacy.

Most Members of Congress are interested in how to make government work better.

In this era of so-called fake news, there are still those who believe that facts matter, that good data matters, and good public policy must be driven by good data.

A greater focus on evidence-based policy can improve the way government works. And it's important that experts like you make that case to your congressional delegations.

Thank you.