

Do's and Don'ts

1. **Be fair toward legislators.** With very rare exceptions, they are honest, intelligent and want to do the right things. Your job is to inform them effectively about what you think is right.
2. **Avoid cynicism.** Government and politics may be faulty, but so is every profession. A disdainful attitude is an expensive luxury these days for it “poisons the well” and immobilizes the will to work for social betterment.
3. **Be understanding.** Put yourself in the legislator's place. Try to understand his/her problems, outlook and aims. Then you are more likely to persuade him/her to do the same in understanding yours.
4. **Be friendly.** Don't contact legislators only when you want their help. Take pains to keep in touch with them throughout the year, every year. (Lyndon Johnson: “You have the kind of friends you are. Get to be a part of your legislator's future.”)
5. **Be reasonable.** Recognize that there are legitimate differences of opinion. Never indulge in threats or recriminations; they are confessions of weakness. Keep working to change the other fellow's mind.
6. **Be thoughtful.** Commend the right things legislators do: that's the way you like to be treated. Remember that legislators, in particular, need your “strokes” of recognition, publicity, visibility and validation.
7. **Be charitable – up to a point.** The failure of legislators to do what you wanted may be your responsibility if you have not done a good job in preparing, presenting and following through on your case. In any event, if you can't change their minds you can always fall back on a time-hallowed rule of thumb for American politics: “Don't get mad – get even.” Every legislator knows that you will have a chance to do just that on the next election day.
8. **Be constructive.** You don't like to be scolded, pestered or preached to. Neither do legislators. Present an alternative, a new way of looking at the problem, a new formula, and not merely negative carping.
9. **Be cooperative.** If a legislator makes a reasonable request, try to comply with it. Don't back away for fear that it's a “deal” or that you're “getting into politics.”
10. **Be realistic and persistent.** Remember that controversial legislation usually results in a compromise not wholly satisfactory to any one contending party. That is the principle of “Rough or Approximate Justice”; it has always been and will always be so in a democracy. Progress, although incremental, is no less real – and it may even be more enduring for its evolutionary development that builds wider support.
11. **Be practical.** Recognize that each legislator has commitments and that a certain amount of vote-trading goes on in all legislatures. Don't chastise legislators who normally support you if they vote against one of your bills. This doesn't necessarily mean that they have deserted your whole program. Give them the benefit of the doubt; the legislator will appreciate it and remember that you did. And remember that while some votes may be firmly committed, there will be many others – on both sides of the partisan aisle – that can be swayed on the basis of sound arguments, properly presented and well documented.
12. **Be a good opponent.** Fight issues, not personalities. And again, be ready with alternative solutions to problems and

shortcomings, as well as with criticism.
This is fair and constructive opposition.

13. **Be informed.** Do your homework. Never meet with legislators or candidates to advocate a position without first studying the facts and the arguments, pro and con, as well as the context of rules and politics in which the decision will be made. The mere fact that you want a legislator to adopt your position won't be enough.
14. **Be trustworthy.** When promises are made, keep them. This is the cardinal rule of politics. If you tell a legislator you'll do something, stick to your end of the bargain.
15. **Be loyal.** Avoid surprising your friends with unannounced stratagems. Don't change horses in the middle of the stream. Never leave legislators out on a limb by changing your position after they have publicly taken the position that you have urged upon them.
16. **Evaluate and weigh the issues; don't panic at each engagement.** For example, many bills are tossed into the legislative hopper "by request" and are never intended to become law. So don't criticize legislators for every bill which is introduced, and don't sound the panic alarm until you're sure a bill or legislative action is "for real".
17. **Be discreet.** Participation in discussions about legislators being "bought" or "paid off" is worse than useless. You have absolutely nothing to gain and everything to lose by such speculations. Furthermore, chances are extremely high that it isn't true.
18. **Be generous.** Remember that in success everyone can claim credit. As Senator Wayne Morse used to remind his colleagues in the years when federal education legislation was exceedingly difficult to enact: "Victory has a thousand fathers, defeat is an orphan." Therefore, thank legislators for their positive acts at least as often as you inquire why they went

wrong. Let them know you are watching their record closely and are at least as ready to reward and praise as you are to punish and condemn.

19. **Be visionary.** Especially when it comes to the political process, there is seldom an absolute and final defeat. A loss with one legislator may lead to finding a better champion elsewhere. Failure in committee may be overturned on the floor. Debate in one chamber may often be reversed in the other. Victory may be snatched from the jaws of defeat in a conference committee...and so on.
20. **Work – and be persistent.**