
Chapter 1:

ADVOCACY IS A JOURNEY NOT A DESTINATION

No matter where you are in your advocacy journey, it is important to remember that engaging in advocacy is a long-term commitment that requires persistence and dedication while working towards your desired outcome. This chapter contains valuable insight that will help put the Policy Advocacy Guide into context to keep you motivated beyond election cycles and throughout your advocacy journey.

Preparing for the Long Game

When nonprofit organizations set out advocating for policy change, they might believe it is possible to achieve in a short period of time. Unfortunately, this is not usually the case, and it can take years for policy change to be realized. It is important to recognize that policy advocacy is an ongoing process, marked with both milestones and setbacks on the path to reaching your ultimate goal. However, each step taken, even one that may seem to counter your efforts, is a step towards your nonprofit's end goal. Given that the rewards of your work are not always immediately realized, it's important to be committed to your goal and ensure that everyone involved in your advocacy efforts has the same expectations from the outset. This will take planning, organizing, patience, and persistence. Remember, change does not happen overnight.

There is No One Way to Reach the Goal

Policy advocacy is critical, especially when reinforced during an election period. The election is a time when real change can occur for nonprofits, and also an opportunity for advancing your nonprofit's policy agenda (see chapter 6) with a strategic engagement strategy (see chapter 7). Bringing up a completely new issue during an election period may not be the best way to capture the attention of political candidates and parties, but you can seek commitment on issues that you have been consistently advocating for, at a time when candidates are listening to the wants of their constituents. This can be done by demonstrating strength in numbers, influence and impact, or through communicating the risks involved in losing support for the important work nonprofits do.

Policies and regulations can be created and undone during an election cycle – they can be eliminated by a determined opposition party, refocused political attention, or a change of government. The attention of legislators and policymakers can be quite short, often spanning only the time between elections. A change of government may bring to power politicians who know little or nothing about your issue, or do not see its value. Public attention also ebbs and flows – your nonprofit's issue might be the focal point of public attention today, but tomorrow you may find the public has moved on to other issues, leading to a loss of public support and setbacks to your advocacy efforts. Do not let these realities discourage you. These ebbs and flows are a natural part of democracy and reinforce why nonprofits must continue policy advocacy beyond election periods.

To reach your nonprofit's advocacy goals, remain adaptive and open to trying different approaches. Consider what you are comfortable compromising, and which issues you will advocate for at all costs. Advocacy is often about dialogue and negotiation, and it can be helpful to identify a "fall back" position that will allow you to still achieve an acceptable outcome, even if it is not perfect.

Tracking Your Success

Monitoring and evaluating throughout your advocacy efforts is crucial to success. During the planning and execution of an advocacy strategy, be sure to track progress towards your desired objectives. By monitoring what is working well and what is not, you will be able to stay on track to achieving your end goal. Be prepared to change your advocacy strategy if your monitoring shows that you are off course.

Evaluation, the measurement of the impacts of an advocacy project, examines the entire advocacy cycle. An effective evaluation focuses on the overall achievements of the project, and also measures the intended or unintended outcomes. Evaluation is about proving and improving – proving the success of your advocacy efforts and improving in areas that did not yield your desired outcomes.

Successful advocacy often depends on the current political environment, and the strategy that you are using, neither of which are easily measured. It requires a redefinition of what it means to succeed, and what it means to fail. Advocacy success does not necessarily mean that your ultimate goal is realized – you can, and should, also celebrate the small wins on the journey. For example, meeting with a Cabinet Minister to discuss your issue is a measurable objective to be recognized along the journey towards a goal of changing a policy.

Policy advocacy should not be treated as an end destination. Your efforts should continue beyond election periods, with a continued focus on achieving your goal. Do not feel the weight of your advocacy strategy is on your shoulders alone – your advocacy work will continue even beyond your own efforts, building on the collective success of other nonprofits and policymakers.

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What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is an activity performed by an individual or group that aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions. Nonprofits often turn to advocacy work when seeking to achieve systems-level change that could not be accomplished through service delivery alone. Advocacy efforts by nonprofits can propel social change to better meet the needs of individuals and local communities.