
CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO

LOBBYING DECISION MAKERS



ACLU

AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION
of TEXAS

ABOUT LOBBYING DECISION MAKERS

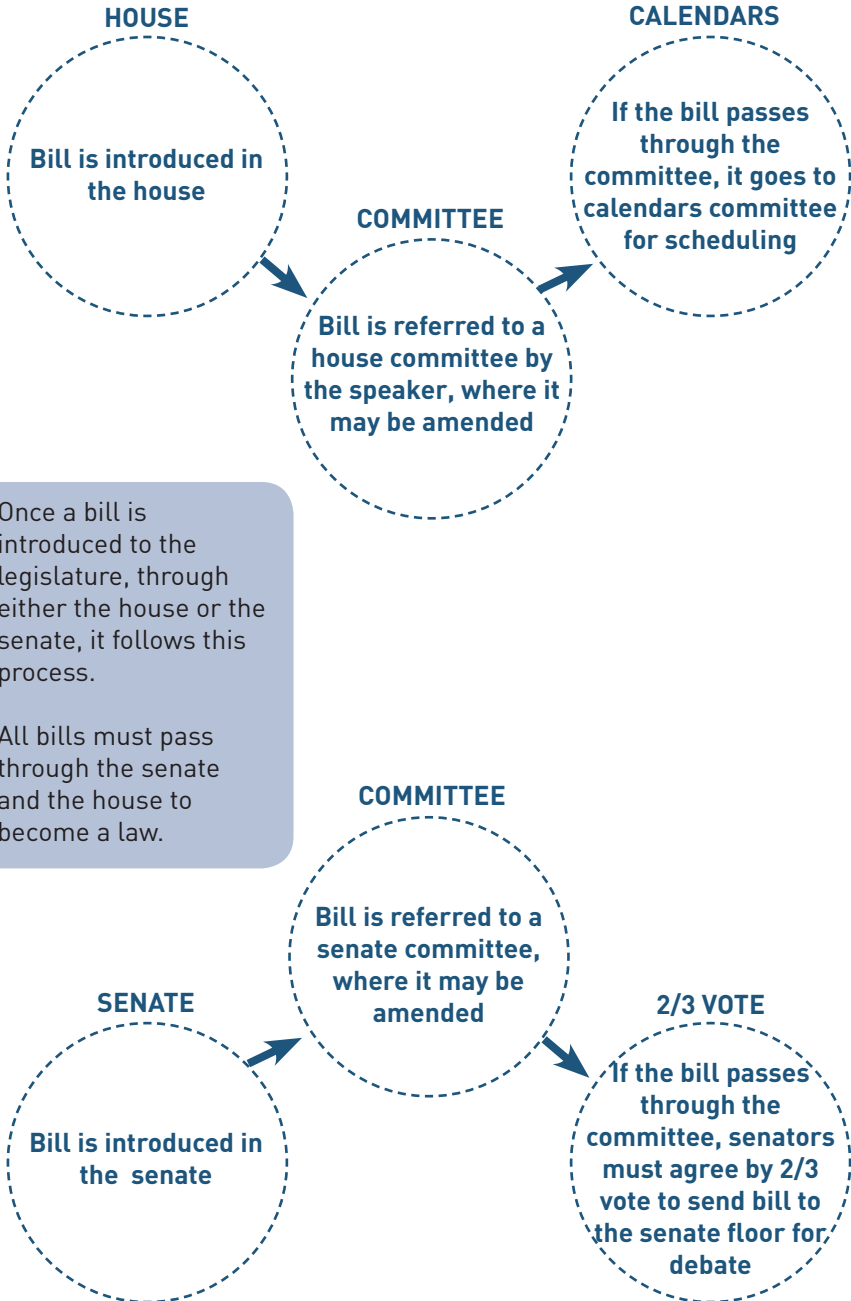
Lobbying is often thought of as a dirty word, but lobbying is simply working to get your voice heard by elected officials. In this handbook you'll find some basic tools for influencing your elected representatives.

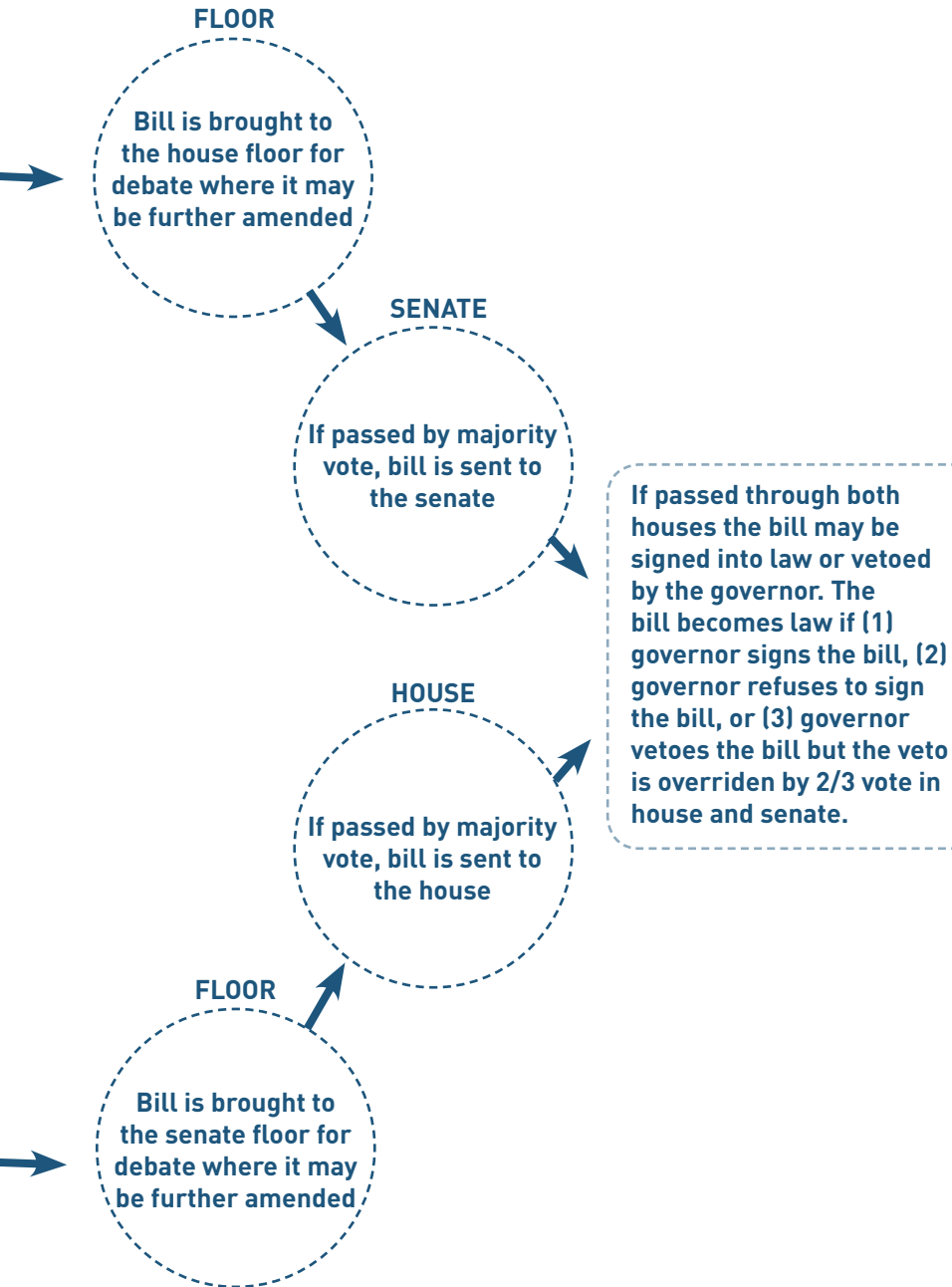
There are lots of ways to influence decision makers. One is a meeting with the decision maker. Another is public testimony at a hearing or meeting. A third is an event that you stage to get the decision maker's attention.

Lobbying should be one part of an overall strategy to win people over. This includes persuading your neighbors, other activists, members of the media, and people across the district, state, or country. Your decision makers are more likely to pay attention if they know you are making waves elsewhere and there are many other people who stand with you.



HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW IN TEXAS





MEETING WITH DECISION MAKERS

A face-to-face meeting is the most powerful way to advocate for an issue and to build a relationship with your elected officials. You can use meetings with decision makers to learn more about their position on a certain issue, to educate them about a particular issue or bill, and to persuade the decision maker to adopt your view on an issue.

Schedule the meeting

- You can send an email, fax, or a letter requesting the meeting. If you send an email, follow-up with a phone call. You may have to follow-up several times to get the meeting scheduled.
- Always explain the purpose of the meeting.
- You may be asked to meet with staff rather than the decision maker, and that kind of meeting is fine. As the people who do the work, staff members are often better versed on the issues than the decision maker. If the office proposes you meet with a staff member, ask for the person who is assigned to cover the issue you want to discuss.

Plan your meeting

- Educate yourself about the issue.
 - Get your talking points in order. Outline two or three main points that you want to make to support your position.
 - Do your homework on the decision maker. Is he/she a co-sponsor of the measure? Does he/she have a public position on the bill? Is he/she assigned to a committee responsible for considering the measure? Does anyone in your group have connections with the decision maker?
 - Figure out who will attend the meeting. Make sure to bring people who represent different groups that have an interest in the legislation. Don't take more than five people in your group.
 - Prepare your materials for the meeting. You could bring helpful literature, fact sheets, and other educational materials. You might gather letters of support from people who could not attend. You can also ask supporters to mail letters to the decision maker a week before your meeting.
 - Decide on your "ask." Will you be asking for a "yes" or "no" vote? Do you want to get a commitment from the lawmaker to introduce or sponsor legislation?
 - Decide who will speak on each issue.
 - Assign one member of your group to take thorough notes during the meeting. Taking good notes makes it easier to follow up later.
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Deciding on the ask

- If you are talking with a decision maker who supports your position: You may ask them to sponsor or co-sponsor a bill. You might request the decision maker to urge their colleagues to support your goals. You might ask the decision maker to give you insider information.
- If you are talking with a decision maker who is undecided or opposed: You will want to find out what the decision maker's concerns are about the bill to figure out if you can change his/her mind. Your final ask may not be to get a commitment to support a bill, but rather to allow the bill to be debated. You can also ask them to not lobby against it.
- You should consult with ACLU of Texas staff before your meeting to develop the most effective ask.

The meeting

- Be on time.
- Thank the decision maker or staff person for meeting with you. Be courteous throughout the meeting.
- Use the introductions to make a personal connection. Emphasize that you are a constituent and explain why you are interested in the issue.
- Keep the meeting concise. Meetings can be as short as five to 10 minutes.
- Use your talking points to educate the decision maker about the issue and your position.
- Use examples and personal stories from your community.
- Stay focused! Don't get drawn into discussions that aren't relevant to your goal.
- If they ask you a question you do not know how to answer, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." It's perfectly ok to say that you will find out the answer and follow up.
- Make your "ask." Don't be afraid to ask for a commitment.
- Set a deadline for a response—both when you will get back to the decision maker with more information and when you can expect a response from him/her.

After the meeting

- Debrief. Compare notes with your group members and figure out how you need to follow up with the decision maker.
 - Send a timely thank you note.
 - Follow up with the decision maker.
 - Be persistent.
 - Report back. Let us know how your meeting went!
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WRITING YOUR DECISION MAKERS

Your elected officials rely on feedback from constituents to know how to best improve and serve their community. They receive far less mail than you might imagine, so decision makers assume that each letter they receive represents the opinion of many voters who did not take the time to write.

General guidelines

- Be concise and focus on a single topic. You can normally get your message across in one page—about three paragraphs. It is helpful to include a subject line below the address and above the salutation. For example: Reform School Discipline.
- Be courteous. Keep the tone of the letter respectful and polite.
- Tell the reader why your view matters. Say who you are and why you are writing. List your credentials: Are you a constituent? Do you represent a local organization? Do you have some professional expertise? Are you personally impacted by the issue?
- Personalize your letter. If you type your letter, add a handwritten note at the end.
- Provide details. Include the issue, bill number, or title if that is available.
- Tailor your message to the decision maker's interests. For example, you might highlight cost savings with a fiscally conservative lawmaker. You might focus on small government for a libertarian. On many civil liberties topics, the ACLU of Texas can provide "talking points" that provide you with the bill number, title, and information about the legislation.
- Ask the lawmaker to take action. If a vote is coming up, your letter should specifically ask for a "yes" or a "no" vote on the bill. Make sure you also ask for a response. End the letter with a request like: "Please advise me of your thoughts on this issue and let me know if I can count on your support for [or opposition] to the referenced bill."

Every contact counts

- *E-mail*: You can easily find an email address for your lawmaker on his or her official website. Be sure to include your name and home address in your email so the decision maker knows you are a constituent.
- *Fax (either handwritten or typed)*: Fax your letter when you are contacting your decision maker about a time-sensitive issue.
- *U.S. Mail (either handwritten or typed)*: A decision maker knows you are genuinely concerned about an issue when you take the time to write a personal letter. Be sure to include your return address and contact information so the lawmaker can send a response.
- *Mass letter or petition*: Mass-produced postcards and letters demonstrate to decision makers that large groups of people hold the same point of view on an issue.



Sample letters to representatives can be found at www.aclutx.org:

- End the Death Penalty In Texas
- Stop the School-to-Prison Pipeline

You can find contact information for your state decision makers at:
www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us

CALLING DECISION MAKERS

Even if you can't travel to Austin to visit lawmakers personally, you can still make sure your voice is heard. A simple way to lobby elected officials is by calling their offices.

The most effective time to call is before a major vote on legislation or before a key decision will be made. That's when the issue will have the decision maker's attention.



General guidelines

- Focus on one specific issue. Include important details, such as the bill number or the name of a measure or legislation.
- Keep it short, normally one to two minutes long.
- Be prepared with two or three main talking points.
- Personalize your message. Make sure the office knows you are a constituent. Offer personal experiences and stories and tailor your message to fit your decision maker's interests.
- Always ask for the action you want the decision maker to take, such as a "yes" or "no" vote on a specific bill.

You can locate the contact information for many of state lawmakers at:
www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us

TEMPLATE CALL SCRIPT

"Hello, I'm calling from [name of city] to ask [decision maker] to support [issue or bill].

The staff person may ask for your full name and contact information; be sure to provide this so the office can respond to your request by mail.

"The reason I want [decision maker] to support [issue/bill] is:"

Give two or three specific reasons. Use a personal experience or story.

Always thank the staffer for his or her time.

NOTES

A photograph of an older man and woman looking at a newspaper together. The man, in the foreground, is wearing glasses and a red and brown striped shirt. The woman, behind him, has white hair and is wearing a dark top and a gold necklace. They are both looking down at a newspaper held by the man. The background is a warm, orange-toned wall.

The ACLU of Texas defends the civil rights and civil liberties of all people in Texas, in courtrooms, at the state legislature, and in large and small communities throughout the Lone Star State.

Learn more at www.aclutx.org

