

Talking Impeachment as a Citizen-Lobbyist

What's a Citizen-Lobbyist?

Most people – even among concerned, politically-active people – never make the effort to talk to their elected officials in person. This is not surprising, as it is typically the responsibility of the average citizen to simply make their views known.

The traditional methods of phone calls, letters/emails, petitions, and marches have usually been sufficient to accomplish the goal of “being heard” on a particular issue. Public officials do take those expressed views seriously and, if an outcry is strong enough, a positive result can be expected.

Scheduled meetings with a Representative in their offices, however, have long been the purview of the paid lobbyist. They have a specific issue or commercial interest that they want to advance through legislation and must persuade the official to vote for it.

In recent years, the political landscape has changed to the point where many people have concluded that their voices are not being heard “inside the beltway.” On a variety of issues, it has become necessary for citizens to be more forceful in trying to bridge a widening gap between them and “their leaders.”

More and more, “citizen-lobbyists” have begun to challenge elected official through face to face meetings in an effort to lobby them to change a position that is seems destructive or nonsensical. The purpose of these meetings goes beyond simply making the official aware of one's position. The citizen-lobbyist comes prepared to debate the merits and challenge any unfounded objections.

Most importantly, the citizen-lobbyist is there to make it clear that a sustained effort is underway -- that they are not there to simply “gripe and go.” The objective is to develop a relationship with the office. Making clear that there will be follow-up on what was said and publication of the effort to get the official the change their position.

However, this is not “a movement.” There is no need for citizen-lobbyists to be coordinated in any way or to have some laundry list agenda that is agreed to by any centralized group. They act on the issue of the moment and demand immediate result. This makes them particularly threatening to insiders – and consequently very powerful.

This is the challenge you are taking on.

Lobbying For Impeachment

In lobbying, as with writing, the first rule is to know your audience. This is particularly true when it comes to impeachment because of the surreal worldview that dominates inside the beltway. Even the best and smartest among them are victims of a Euphemia echo chamber that severely warps their view of reality.

Remember this is a place where casting a futile “no” vote against an extreme court nominee, but refusing to join a filibuster to stop the appointment, is considered “opposing.” Asking them to seriously consider impeachment is a bit like asking them to stand on their head – they need to be given a good reason and a lot of coaching.

Time for intervention. It is this “reality gap” that can exploit to good use in lobbying for impeachment. You can explain that your “real concern” is the pattern of this disconnect between what the insiders seem to think and what you see among the general public and rank-and-file Democrats.

You can recite the litany of outrages; from stolen elections, to the Alito nomination, to phantom WMDs, to now war crimes being committed in our names, and question why there has been no recognition, let alone confrontation, from DC Democrats.

It seems as if the list of rationalizations for their inaction; fear of electoral backlash, concern over divisiveness, desire to “keep our powder dry,” obsessing over the next election horserace, has become almost a robotic response to all calls for action. Make clear that putting impeachment “off the table” is really the last straw.

In doing this try to assert that, whatever their insider perception may be, the only “message” being sent to the rest of us is one of weakness and complicity with “business as usual” politics. And that this is the surest way to keep the next election close enough to steal (again).

Making the case. While it’s possible that your meeting will include a discussion of “impeachable offenses” by the bushchenev regime, that isn’t very likely. What is really at issue is the political will on the part of officials to engage in impeachment proceedings. They are currently displaying very little of it.

If you find that you do need to “make the case” for impeachment, keep it simple. The case is not complex. Less is more. Overly complicating the case is a trap many impeachment advocates fall into.

Start with the most powerful charge -- torture and other violations of Geneva Article 3. This charge is also the simplest, in that it has already been adjudicated by the Supreme Court in Hamdan in a finding that violations had already occurred. It is also helpful that it’s both a treaty violation (int’l crime) and a domestic Federal crime (US CODE: Title 18, 2441). Ask them what should be done about this.

Political will. Remember that the “real issue” here is their lack of political will. (If they had the will, they’d “make the case” overnight.) Ask questions that focus on that lever. Try to be comprehensive about why impeachment is necessary and beneficial – for the country, for the party, for their own self interest.

Are they not getting unprecedented anger from the public? Why do they think this is? Explain that this is energy to be tapped -- mother lode of money and volunteers for the party. Can't they see that it's there to be tapped or wasted?

Do they really want to be remembered as one who “did nothing” in the face of this lawless regime? Do they really think non-binding resolutions and complaining to the media constitutes doing something? Do they think the victims of ongoing torture agree? Would they expect a world court to approve of their failure to act? Will their children?

Your purpose is to get them to declare exactly what their position is. Do they agree that impeachable offenses have been committed? Are they just waiting for others to act? Why? Are they willing to ignore these offenses to win votes? The more you can draw them out, the more effective you are being.

More specifically, get them to declare their position on Dennis Kucinich's bill HR 333, to impeach cheney (see Note below). Will they cosponsor, why not? Should it come to vote, will they vote yea or no? Ask the same for a hypothetical “impeach both” bill. Will they vote yea or no if put on the spot?

If they express reluctance even to support someone else's efforts, you can ask how this is not “defending the regime.” You can describe their reticence as being the regime's last firewall. But do so as a lament, rather than an accusation if possible.

Note: While HR 333 is a step in the right direction and could make a good vehicle for impeachment, keep it mind that it is not a real solution and that the “cheney only” option is a non-starter. The puppet strings remain in place until both resign or are removed. Do not accept this as a “compromise.” It isn't.

Benefits of impeachment. As was said, their warped worldview allows them to see no good in impeachment. You must explain to them that, in reality, the only substantive option they have is to pursue impeachment. In the face of filibuster, veto, and ultimately “Rule by Signing Statement” (and the regime's appetite for simple criminality), whatever they are imagining is being accomplished is literally a mirage.

Make it clear to them that you are demanding an impeachment vote in the House – that the result of any Senate trial is virtually irrelevant. Concern about that is also “above their pay grade.” Make the case for the benefit of impeachment in itself – to send a critically needed “message of objection” to that which the American People never gave their proper consent.

Explain that this is a message that must be sent to the world, to our children, and to history. That it is not unlike Emil Zola's "J'Accuse" which began to unravel the Dreyfus Affair. That such an objection or accusation is the first step toward any form of accountability or redemption of our national good name.

Remind them that, on a more "practical" level, the public/electorate is far ahead of them on the desire to confront the regime. Show the polls that have shown consistent support for impeachment among what is more typically an apathetic public. Ask them how they cannot see that this a mother lode of energy and support that they need to take advantage of while they can.

The bottom line is that **Failure to Impeach** is complicity. It is tacit approval and even exoneration of the regime for their impeachable, unconstitutional, and criminal acts. If it is allowed to be the result, it would be catastrophic for our nation, the Democratic party, and the world.

Setting Up a Meeting for Maximum Effect

To be most effective, a meeting should be set up properly through the meeting request process. The meeting request/set up process can be as simple as an email and approval or calling a known contact. But more often it requires several steps. And each can be used to improve the effectiveness of the meeting. For example:

Step1: Faxing/sending a formal letter of request should be used to declare your position and pose specific questions to be discussed. A non-confrontational angle can avoid the "auto-eject" response we have been up against. This letter should only be sent after calling to get the specific "scheduling" staffer to contact at the specific office you intend to visit (local, DC).

Step2: Follow-up calls are often required. The purpose is to confirm receipt of the original request and to instill a sense of urgency. This can be the part of the process where they are most on the defensive. Since you have made a formal request, they are at a disadvantage if they failed to respond to you. This is the point you can try to be insistent about seeing the Representative themselves, if it is at all possible. Do try to get a specific staff email contact at this time.

Step3: Scheduling emails -- e.g., confirmations, questions, or changes to attendees -- may or may not be required. But they can provide a more casual exchange where you can be blunter. You can confirm that you'll be talking to someone who speaks for the Rep., not a "sponge" who just "absorbs" and "passes along" your "concerns." You may even use such an exchange to ask the staffer about their own personal feelings on impeachment.

Step4: Faxing/emailing a confirmation agenda a day or 2 before allows you to spell out key questions so they cannot claim they have been sand-bagged or would have to "look into it."

Your group is not requesting a meeting simply to be "heard." You have specific questions and you are determined to get answers. If the Representative/Senator is not available, then only a staffer authorized to speak for the Representative will satisfy.

Include the key questions in your request to meet. (While you may be able to get a meeting without one, faxing a formal meeting request that includes concrete and specific questions give you an "exhibit" ("We spelled out question X up front, and still they evaded!"))

Meeting Preparation

We have found that the best number of attendees is a contingent of three. This is not a hard and fast rule, but in general, effective dialog is increasingly elusive with five or more.

The point of a face-to-face meeting is to engage in dialog, not to "show force." There are other ways to show numbers, but there is no substitute for in-person, face-to-face, back and forth exchange where you can directly question their "reasons" for refusing to immediately impeach Bush and Cheney.

Note: If you have enough willing attendees seek more than one, separate meetings if possible. (e.g., Do some of "facers" belong to another group? Can they request a separate meeting as representatives of that group?). The power of multiple independent group meetings spaced out over a couple of weeks packs far more "punch" than one "big coalition" meeting. It also gives a greater chance of meeting with the Rep and/or a more influential staffer.

Roles of the attendees. One person should certainly take the speaking lead. They should introduce the other attendees and have a brief introductory comment prepared. The other attendees need not stand mute but should be mindful not to change the subject or interrupt anyone.

It is helpful to represent that you are reporting back to a group, so one of the attendees should be dedicated to taking notes -- visibly. Another attendee should be in charge of any written material; news articles, polls, etc... that might be discussed. Multiple copies should be brought so that you can leave as much with the office as they might seem interested in.

This "librarian" should also be sure to have all correspondence with the office printed out and in hand -- particularly if you are to meet with the Rep. themselves (or rather, if that has been what you've been led to believe).

If you can, try to work as a team. The librarian can be pulling written material to display or offer as something specific is being discussed. The note-taker can bring up things said earlier in the discussion, particularly if they seem to contradict something else being said.

Don't be shy about passing notes if something seems important enough.

The speaker should have a personal checklist with 2 or 3 top things that you want to be sure you got across. They should check this as you begin to leave to confirm the job got done and perhaps reiterate them on exiting.

Conducting the Meeting

Do adopt the attitude that you are conducting this meeting and that you own the room (because you do). Try to keep in mind that you should not expect a “come to jesus” moment out of your counterpart. You can press them on important points, but if a frank discussion becomes a heated argument you are probably doing more harm than good.

Speak for the masses. While it is generally assumed that they are “on the record” and that you will publish and distribute what is said, it can be helpful to remind them. If you can, without sounding “threatening,” make clear your intent to broadcast what happened in the meeting -- “to our members” or “on our blog” or even in a letter to the editor.

You shouldn’t simply announce this, but rather try to work it into the discussion as an aside. Perhaps if they notice the note taking, you can give the reason. Or, if you are given a response you disagree with you can respond “that won’t go down too well with the readers of our blog.”

Mirroring What They Say. It can be very effective to mirror any responses they give in a way that makes it sound worse (really, as bad as it is). For example, if they attempt to claim impeachment will cause political losses you can answer “Let me get this right, you’re saying winning an election is more important than defending the Constitution?”

Be Oversensitive. While it’s generally not good practice to be confrontational or aggressive, there is an exceptional case which you should be on the lookout for. This is any instance in which you are being patronized with vague talk of “things you don’t understand,” “plans in the works,” or others “things I can’t discuss but can pretend to be reasons.”

The same goes for any expressions of “sympathy” or your “emotion” you are feeling -- frustration, anger, hatred of the regime and the like. This is just another insulting way to avoid the issue and dismiss you as non-serious.

In these cases it is not out of bounds to take a bit of umbrage and tell them to set aside their sympathy – that you don’t need it. What you need is to be taken seriously and have your arguments addressed directly, with a relevant response. Then repeat the original question/challenge.

If the flavor of their “sympathy” is a form of comment that they too “hate bush,” you can interject that you are there out of frustration with them, not the regime.

Deny All “Facts.” This is not to say you should challenge things you know to be true -- just that you should not accept something simply on their word. Often they will claim something as fact that is opinion or refer to “internal polls” or some unpublished reality. The intent is to disarm you with a claim of being better informed.

This does not mean that you scream “Liar” at them, but try not to let them get away with such tactics. If a poll is mentioned, ask for a copy of the results. If it’s just a statement of “knowledge” you can simply challenge it with a statement like “That doesn’t sound right.” Or “We’re not buying that.”

It may even be possible – if they make a claim that conflicts with something you know -- to turn such a statement around on them by saying “That’s not true. How can you say that when ...?” If they persist you can simply say that they’re “sounding evasive.”

The object is to not let something go unchallenged if possible. To let them know that their rationalizations or dismissive notions are not being accepted. There’s no need to dwell on such a disagreement, but your challenge can cause them to reconsider the point later – which is a success for you.

On the other hand, if you find yourself in conflict on “the facts” you should always be ready to cite the basis for your claim (the poll, the published statement, the news item).

This type of situation is ideal for generating a follow-up contact. Note that you will be sending or receiving supporting information in the near future.

Bombshells. Don’t be hesitant about interjecting a “bombshell” question into the discussion if the opportunity presents itself. These would be the sort of “cut to the chase” or virtually rhetorical questions that can catch them off their guard. For example:

- If they are rationalizing about why “there’s nothing they can do” and how it’s better to just wait until the next election you can ask:
How is that not just defending the regime? Aren’t you just their firewall?
- If they are touting the “other priorities” they have that they claim to be making progress on you can ask:
How is that more important than stopping the ongoing torture?
- If they are being overtly dismissive of impeachment you can ask:
Are you saying that Rep. Kucinich and the other sponsors of HR 333 to impeach Cheney are being ridiculous?

Be sure to wait for an answer – even if there’s not one forthcoming. Write down anything they say in response. It is only by asking the tough questions that you can make them realize the emptiness of their position.

Erroneous Arguments. Guard against making any erroneous arguments by being sure you know your facts. Be aware that one argument that has been used by some impeachment advocates is that the Constitution says they “shall” impeach. This is a misreading – the word “shall” refers to being removed on conviction only.

Another more generally erroneous argument has to do with any “legality” involved in impeachment. There is none. It is an entirely political process. This means there are no “rules” for why to impeach, no need to “prove” anything, no “evidence” requirements, no standard for conviction. Be sure not to make such a claim. And more importantly, accept no such claim from your meeting counterpart.

After the Meeting

Assuming you've not been asked to leave following a heated exchange (or have been placed into custody); try to assume a cordial but non-familiar attitude that projects that you are leaving the office as "winners." Refrain from any intergroup discussion, or reaction, until you are well clear of the office.

As soon as it's practical stop and review what was said. Different people often remember different things and you should augment the meeting notes as much as possible. Pay close attention to reasons for follow-up contacts – search the notes for opportunities.

Try to make a judgment as to how effective you think you've been. Take an inventory of what happened and what didn't:

- Did you get buy-in on any of the impeachable offenses/crimes?
- Do you have their specific position nailed down? You'll want to be confident of what it is when you "re-frame" it in a less flattering way.
- Is there any question for which they had no answer/response?
- Did they make any quotable snide remarks?
- Do you have some reason(s) for doing a follow-up?
- Tally any of their rationalizations for inaction: not enough time, too divisive, "more important" things to do, will hurt us politically.

Celebrate. Even if you felt the entire time that you were simply being patronized or were shouting at the wind, this is simply not true. You have done what millions wish they had the time, or energy, or courage to do and you are to be admired for it.

For what it's worth, *thedepeople* think you are heroes.

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