

E
X
H
I
B
I
T

107

Chapter 2

UNDERSTANDING SUCCESSFUL ADVOCACY

Successful political advocacy is contingent on the selection of an appropriate strategy — one that maximizes the use of available resources to achieve policy objectives. Historical events, the state of the economy, and the mood of the country or community are things generally outside the control of the political advocate. They frequently must accept these constraints as they pursue their policy objectives. However, if we take these kinds of things as given, there is still a substantial amount of control over behavior, resources, and strategy that the political advocates can have as they make their case. In short, political advocates may have little control over the unemployment rate in their state or community, but they may have a lot to say about the range of programs available to the families and individuals affected by the economy if they are able to make their case successfully. These are areas where the results of their political advocacy are likely to be seen.

A careful review of policy areas like child welfare, aging, education, veterans affairs, income maintenance, community development, and social services (Title XX) over the last 10 years demonstrates that successful political advocates in these respective areas take into account certain critical elements as they make their case and plan their strategy (see Dluhy, n.d.). These critical elements generally determine success or indicate failure in the political process. The important issue after these elements have been identified is to determine those that are most important or that combination of elements

which consistently leads to success. This is a difficult assessment to make.

The following discussion provides an overall *framework* for understanding successful advocacy. *The framework is composed of the four critical elements most often found in the policy-making process when political advocates are making their case.* Analysis of these elements will usually help you understand why a political advocate has been successful or unsuccessful. Throughout the volume, and whenever you have an example of successful or unsuccessful advocacy, you should run it through this framework to determine which element or elements were critical to success. It is in this way that you can build on the framework and integrate it into your own actions, modifying it as need be to make it more realistic and useful. (See exercise at end of this chapter.)

The critical elements of the framework can be illustrated initially by posing a set of four questions about the activities and behaviors of political advocates regardless of the arena they are working in. To what extent do the political advocates:

- (1) appeal to the objective needs of clients in the given circumstances or situations?;
- (2) manipulate successfully the value symbols of the dominant actors or groups involved in making policy decisions?;
- (3) propose policies (or change) in such a way as to maximize the policy's impact on a range of important beneficiaries (clients)?;
- (4) have organizational strategies capable of influencing the outcomes of policy debates?

In short, these four questions are premised on the understanding of how to: *appeal to objective need; manipulate values; design policy for relevant target groups; and build political organizations supportive of policy positions.* Although it would be hard to imagine successful political advocacy that ignored any of these elements totally, it might be reasonable to expect that successful political advocacy might emphasize one element over another depending on the circumstances and availability of resources. Illustrations below will make this point clearer.

APPEALING TO OBJECTIVE NEED

As political advocates make their case, they are frequently called upon to demonstrate as clearly as possible the needs of their client.¹ In demonstrating need, they must be clear and concise about it and whenever possible document the need with statistics, research, case records, surveys, and so on.

More important, they must not only be able to demonstrate the need of their client but also be able to *compare* their client with other clients and show why their client is worse off and in more need of support in a policy sense. Political advocates for the elderly who are poor, for example, can easily show the shrinking income and diminishing purchasing power of the elderly over time; and they do just this with statistics wherever possible. However, they are even more effective when they contrast the circumstances of elderly with those of other age groups in society (i.e., 30-35, 36-50, and 51-60). The figures on income and purchasing power always make the elderly who are poor appear to be in worse shape relatively.

Veterans are another case in point. Figures on unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, and mental illness for veterans are always higher than for nonveterans of the same age category. Youth unemployment in the inner city, the school drop-out rate of a community, the incidence of sexual abuse among female runaways, and the periodic psychological crises experienced by "hard-to-place kids" who go from one foster care setting to another are further examples of appealing to objective need. The political advocate quantifies the need of his/her client and then compares this client with a client whose needs are relatively less problematic. One must, of course, have the figures to use this approach as well as a comparable group so that the differences can be made as dramatic as possible.

STOP AND THINK

Identify the statistic about your client group which works best for you. Who do you compare your client group with? Could you be more effective in this area?

Many "program people" would like to make this kind of case but agency records or follow-up studies may not be available to provide the proof. For example, careful data collection on runaways locally is necessary across the country before national organizations can make their case with Congress, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Office of Management and Budget with more confidence and effectiveness. Generally, figures on delinquent youth are more readily available than those on runaways. Data collection problems also exist for such groups as battered women, ex-offenders, displaced workers, abused children, and so on.

To repeat, political advocates emphasizing this element of the framework must be careful to make sure they have the data and the relevant comparison group or their opponents will be able to destroy their case. Political advocates should not use this appeal unless they have done their homework and done it well. In the political process, decision makers cannot allocate money to all groups who demand it, so they will have to establish criteria for allocating money at some point. If the criterion of objective need is well-defined, it can be used to counter the political clout (or voting strength) of persons not interested in this population. It increases the likelihood that the political advocate will be successful.

In contrast, if one were advocating for senior citizen centers (open to all seniors regardless of income), family counseling programs for middle-class families, or general revenue sharing for suburbs, the case would most likely be based on political clout (or voting strength) since it would be extremely difficult to make the objective need case, as described above, for those kinds of clients. The challenge for those representing disadvantaged groups is to clarify the need or problem, collect information on the extent of the need or problem within the group, and then compare the disadvantaged group with a group which is not as disadvantaged.

MANIPULATING VALUES AND SYMBOLS

Political advocates frequently represent their clients in the political process. The language they use to refer to their clients is critical. The words they use may raise fears or touch the hearts of their audiences. These words represent values to other people, and it is necessary to consider whether these words affirm or reinforce acceptable and widely shared values, whether they activate new (but

positive) values, or whether they either affirm or activate negative or deviant values. Data or statistics may be unnecessary in many circumstances if the political advocate is able to manipulate through language or symbols the right set of values for his/her audience. Of course, the elderly are "deserving." Who can be against "crippled children?" Is not "family treatment" preferable these days to "individual treatment?" *The caution and care that a political advocate takes with language cannot be overemphasized.* The wrong words, or the use of words which are too low key for the audience, may make the case even harder to make. Words evoke passion in people. They move people to action. Never doubt the importance of the message.

For example, if you were seeking funding from traditional (in a value sense) community groups or churches for a runaway home, would you refer to your clients as "kids," "runaway kids," "troubled teens," "youth from families in crisis," "victims of society," "abused youth," "estranged youth," or "youth in crisis?" If you were seeking to get to people's conscience and perhaps build on a sense of guilt, one set of names would be preferable to another. Often pathological descriptions of clients, as those above, are more effective with certain audiences. One caution: While certain audiences want data and more neutral language, others want and need the dramatic language. Attention to "value manipulation" with different audiences through use of language will pay off in making successful cases.

Finally, there are circumstances when values ought to be affirmed or reinforced, other times when values ought to be left ambiguous, and still other times when new values ought to be appealed to. It is easy to see that the value of family stability and maintenance ought to be affirmed or reinforced whenever possible when making the case for runaways — thus, the appellation "youth from families in crisis" mentioned above. However, when you do not have or do not know the appropriate values to appeal to, then you should be value ambiguous or neutral and avoid value connotations. Otherwise your opponents will use these values against you. Using pathological connotations with professional clinicians, bureaucrats, or some funding agencies often does not work since they want data, based on research studies; and if you overdo it, they will refer to you as hysterical or accuse you of wearing your heart on your sleeve. Appealing to a new set of values may occur in situations where old values no longer work. Many think that characterizing elderly as a wasted economic resource is a new value appeal that may work in the future since it indirectly

relates to an old value, economic efficiency. The effective advocate must be on a continuous search for fresh and innovative value appeals.

STOP AND THINK

Take the client group you work with and identify the most (and least) effective way of referring to them. Could your value appeal be better? How?

Successful political advocates are always aware of the values they are appealing to. They modify their language and value appeal according to the audience they are dealing with. This is a simple point; but a reanalysis of agency documents, board minutes, and previous political conversations may reveal your failure on a regular basis to manipulate values according to the intended audiences. It would be a good habit to keep a log on important political conversations and look carefully at all agency-written documents over a period of time so that you could examine critically the language you have been using when advocating for your client.

DESIGNING POLICY FOR RELEVANT TARGET GROUPS

When a political advocate is putting together a policy proposal or recommendation for the actors in the political process, a fundamental design question must be addressed. Should the proposal be aimed at geography and numbers or targeting and visibility? For example, with child abuse programs, should the shrinking program dollars be spread thinly across the United States so that as many programs in as many states as possible are funded or should these dollars be concentrated in a few, very visible programs where the problems of child abuse are most severe and the chance of program success the highest? This is a real dilemma because spreading the money out increased future political support for the program while concentrating it demonstrates success and reinforces the appeal to objective need mentioned earlier.

The spreading out syndrome can be found in programs like Child Welfare Services, Title XX, HUD "701" planning programs, Title I

educational Aid, Community Development Block Grants, The School Lunch Program, and the Food Stamps Program, to name a few. Alternatively, the targeting and visibility strategy can be found in the areas of child abuse and neglect, teenage pregnancy, crippled children services, handicapped educational programs, E.P.S.D.T. (Early Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment, of children from low-income families), and so on. The challenge is to narrow the focus, concentrate the resources, target the clientele, and prove success from a programmatic standpoint rather than spreading resources out and building a political base. To get caught between either of these approaches is to fail in a political sense, since it is difficult to make a case for something that is neither politically popular nor successful from a program standpoint.

Consequently, designing a successful policy proposal means that careful attention needs to be paid to this issue. Either approach can be successful but do not get caught in the middle. Emphasize one or the other.

STOP AND THINK

Given your experience, have you been more successful in the long run when you targeted program resources or spread them around?

BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

A political advocate may have: the statistics on his/her side; the proper value appeal; and the most appropriate policy design and still fail. Failure may be due either to the lack of political support or ineffectual political support for a certain policy.

This element will be discussed in the chapter on coalition building; but the key point is that successful political advocates constantly struggle to create, build, and then maintain political organizations which will effectively support their policy positions. These political organizations are more powerful if they: represent most, if not all geographic areas;² are comprised of large memberships; have distinctive ideologies and clear value positions; are easy to mobilize in policy

debates; have large amounts of tangible resources at their disposal; and possess leadership which adroitly represents the organization's position in policy debates.

Finally, an organization that is stable over time and can deliver regularly is most successful. Shortcomings in any of the areas mentioned above mean weaker organizational support. Some unions, business groups, professional groups, public interest groups, and age-related groups historically have approximated this ideal. It is common knowledge, for example, in Washington, D.C., that the United Auto Workers, the National Association of Manufacturers, the American Medical Association, Common Cause, and Children's Defense Fund are illustrative of some of the most successful political organizations in national politics.

While all political advocates may not have such organizations backing them, in the long run, they would do well to approximate and work toward the most stable political organization as possible. Ad hoc organizations with high turnovers in membership and leadership frequently are ineffectual in the political process because they basically are not in it. The ideal may ultimately be to control the political process itself in the policy area of concern. We may criticize the oil companies, unions, and teachers; but we are aware that they control the political process which produces policy affecting them and in this sense we are using them unconsciously as a model.

STOP AND THINK

Identify both a good and a bad example of political organizational support. What made these examples successful (or unsuccessful)? Analyze key characteristics of each.

CONCLUSION

The framework for successful political advocacy consists of four critical elements that must be dealt with in the political process. It goes without saying that if you have the statistics, right value appeal, proper policy design, and stable political organization you are more likely to be successful than if you do not. The middle-class elderly, the veterans, and the physically handicapped, to name a few, have mastered these elements quite well. But what about political advocates

for youth, battered women, the rural poor, and frail elderly women living alone in the inner city? *If you are advocating for such groups, you should adopt at a minimum two principles as they relate to the framework presented.*

1. The Flexibility Principle

Make sure you vary your case to fit the audience. Diagnose the audience carefully and decide which of the elements to emphasize. Do not use the same argument (element) all the time, vary it to suit the circumstances. Be prepared to make four, not one presentation(s) if you are unsure of what the audience wants and needs.

2. The Overcompensation Principle

Play to your strong suit whenever possible. If the audience is receptive to a value appeal and you do it well, why bother with anything else? Overcompensate by doing what you do well first and then making other kinds of cases if you can and need to. Expending resources in areas you do not do well in is foolish and wasteful.

EXERCISE

The following exercise can be used with a wide variety of audiences and has broad application. Depending on the size of the overall group and time limitations, pick about four people to make brief presentations (15 minutes). Each person is asked to exemplify both a successful and unsuccessful strategy that he or she has used. They are to use the four elements of the framework in assessing these strategies. Participants not presenting should critically analyze each presentation in light of the framework and its elements. The group leader should emphasize the application of the framework and its individual elements, while stressing the overall importance of the flexibility and overcompensation principles.

In larger groups (over 12) a panel (of 4) format is desirable. In smaller groups (under 12), it may be possible for everyone to be a presenter. In either case, a group leader is needed to facilitate discussion and connect the practical experiences of the participants with the framework. *Make sure everyone has read the chapter and understands it before the exercise is begun.* The purpose of the exercise is to make sure that participants understand that different strategies are used and these strategies depend on who the political advocates are, what resources they have, and how they perceive their respective audiences. In any event, critical assessment of previ-

ous behavior is to be encouraged. With luck, most of the participants will say at the end of the exercise that if they had it to do over again, they would now do it differently. Or, if they had to do it over, they would emphasize one element of the framework more than the others.

NOTES

1. Client refers broadly to the disadvantaged group or groups that the advocate is representing.
2. This depends on whether one takes a community, state, or national perspective.

REFERENCES

- ADAMS, B. (1979) "The limitations of muddling through: Does anyone in Washington really think anymore?" *Public Administration Review* 39 (6).
- CLOWARD, R. and F. PIVEN (1977) "The acquiescence of social work." *Society* 14 (2): 53-63.
- DLUHY, M. (n.d.) "Comparing political strategies used by groups representing the disadvantaged." (unpublished)
- DLUHY, M. (1981a) "The changing face of social policy" in J. Tropman et al. (eds.) *New Strategic Perspectives on Social Policy*. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press.
- DLUHY, M. (1981b) "Policy advice givers — advocates? technicians? or pragmatists?" in J. Tropman et al. (eds.) *New Strategic Perspectives on Social Policy*. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press.
- GILBERT, N. and H. SPECHT (1974) *Dimensions of Social Welfare Policy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.