

Direct excerpts from **A GUIDE FOR THE POWERLESS –AND THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW THEIR OWN POWER; A PRIMER ON THE AMERICAN POLITICAL PROCESS** by Samuel Halperin for The **American Youth Policy Forum** (AYPF) is a non-partisan, non-profit professional development organization based in Washington, DC.

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(Please note: Much of this article covers how the political system “works.” It is not necessarily representative of my own views of how the political process should “work.” But it does make some very worthy points. Victoria M. Young)

This guide is based on the conviction that we need to adjust many of our counterproductive attitudes about the political process and, then, to hone a few easily acquired political skills.

Powerlessness is an unacceptable condition in any facet of life or work...At a time when society has more reliable knowledge than ever about what works to improve human lives, we must use that knowledge in dealing with our elected and appointed officials.

*Powerlessness is mostly self-imposed.*

Let us learn, apply and prosper.

## **POWER AND POWERLESSNESS**

When the concept of power is used in this guide, it refers to its Latin root, *potere*, “to be able to.” *Able* to understand and *able* to operate in the political process with a fair degree of skill. *Able* to use our political institutions for no less than the protection and extension of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

*When vigorous electoral activity is joined to effective lobbying of officeholders, the combination can be particularly powerful.* Thus we need to recognize at the outset that influencing elections and lobbying are not dirty concepts, not shady, extra-constitutional acts, but the bedrock basis of our representative form of government.

## **ADVOCACY: A STATE OF MIND**

The starting point for all success is an unyielding belief that *we can* succeed, that *we can* make a difference in the political process. *Will and determination.*

Lobbying is a broadly protected constitutional right, defined loosely as any attempt to influence *specific legislation*. Advocacy is support for a cause you believe in, and may embrace a wide variety of activities and might, or might not, include lobbying. Lobbying always involves advocacy, but advocacy does not necessarily involve lobbying.

***Politicians’ Views of Educators—In Their Own Words ...*** The point of listing these criticisms is to alert you to the importance of avoiding giving them any credence by your actions.

- 1) ***Educators are arrogant*** and, worse yet, sanctimonious... They act as if they have all the answers.
- 2) ***Educators don't communicate effectively***... Real understanding is often undermined by the way they communicate with us.
- 3) ***Educators don't understand the legitimacy and importance of the political process.*** ... They often view our difficult daily work of negotiating, compromising, balancing interests, and refining or fine-tuning public policies as dirty, or underhanded, or somehow even immoral... Instead of a united educational front, we often are faced with warring factions... They are reluctant to build coalitions with other educators and with non-educator groups, to advance larger social goals... Unlike most successful interest groups, educators don't support legitimate political processes with personal cash contributions or with organized volunteer help.
- 4) ***Educators mainly want more money.*** ... And they don't like the legislature acting to assure that tax dollars are well spent, but that's our job!
- 5) ***Educators mostly promote their own economic and professional interests.*** ... Sometimes it's hard for politicians to know whether what they propose is good for kids in school or the adults employed by the system.
- 6) ***Educators give lip service to "standards" and "accountability" but don't do enough to bring it about.*** ... They say they agree with the need for accountability to achieve academic achievement, but then they tell us they are professional people and that we don't have to worry about their acting in an accountable manner.
- 7) ***Educators are weak in supplying important information and sound analysis.*** ... We need practical, not idealized pie-in-the-sky responses to immediate problems.
- 8) ***Educators blow with the wind and are addicted to fads and quick cures.***
- 9) ***Educators blame everybody else for children's failure to learn.***

All in all, with negative perceptions like these—factually valid or not—is it any wonder that the worlds of politics, education, and the human services generally are so often at odds? But forewarned is forearmed. These stereotypes need not be reinforced by behavior that feeds into them.

## **A START TOWARD BRIDGE-BUILDING**

Reaching out with some understanding of how “the other side” might view the forthcoming meeting can only help.

After having put yourself in the policymakers' shoes, sensing how and why they might be predisposed toward you—and being careful to avoid reinforcement of any negative stereotyped impressions—additional homework is in order... read the lawmaker's

biography...[And] all potentially useful information in establishing rapport... Beyond the formal structures and personnel of government, be on the lookout for the lawmaker's informal network of family and friends

This guide stresses the importance of building human relationships, rather than mere knowledge of the political process or following a set of "how-to" steps.

## **PERSONAL (AND PERSISTENT) COMMITMENT**

This guide includes tips for meeting with your representatives or their staff, stresses the importance of good letter writing, and gives advice on giving testimonies.

### **Some "golden rules" for successful representation with public officials of all types, elected and appointed.**

- 1) **Be fair** to public officials. Your job is to inform them effectively about what you think is right...and then back them up with information and organized support.
- 2) **Avoid cynicism**. In short, the political process we too often disparage is still our best hope of effecting constructive social change.
- 3) **Be understanding**. 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 public officials only when you want their help.
- 5) **Be reasonable**. Recognize there are legitimate differences of opinion. Keep working to change the other person's mind.
- 6) **Be appreciative**. Commend the right things public officials do.
- 7) **Be charitable**—up to a point. If you can't change their minds, of course, you can always fall back on the time-hallowed rule of thumb for American politics: "Don't get mad—get even." Every elected public official knows that you will have a chance to do just that at the ballot box on the next election day. But retribution at the polls should be a last resort, not a common tactic.
- 8) **Be constructive**. Rather than negative carping, present a positive alternative, a new way of looking at the problem, a constructive formula for solving an old impasse.
- 9) **Be cooperative**. If a public official makes a reasonable request, try to comply with it. Don't back away for fear that it's a "compromise" or that you're "getting into politics."
- 10) **Be realistic and persistent**. Remember that controversial legislation and regulation usually result in a compromise not wholly satisfactory to any one contending party. Progress, although incremental, is no less real—and it may even be more enduring for the evolutionary development that builds wider support and longevity.
- 11) **Be practical**. Recognize that each lawmaker has basic commitments and that a certain amount of vote-trading (log-rolling) goes on in all legislatures.
- 12) **Be a good opponent**. Fight issues, not personalities. And again, be ready with alternative solutions to problems and shortcomings, as well as with responsible criticism.
- 13) **Be informed**. Do your homework and establish a reputation for reliability.
- 14) **Be trustworthy**. When promises are made, keep them. This is a cardinal rule of politics.
- 15) **Be loyal**. Avoid surprising your friends with unannounced strategems. Don't change horses in the middle of the stream. Never leave officials out on a limb by changing your position after they have publicly agreed to the action 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 really intended to become law. So don't criticize lawmakers for every bill they introduce, 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 lawmakers and other officials being "bought," "fixed," or "paid off" is worse than useless. You have absolutely nothing to gain and much to lose by baseless speculations.

18) **Be generous**. Remember in success everyone can claim credit.

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

19) **Be visionary**. Especially when it comes to the political process, there is seldom an absolute and final defeat. A loss with one lawmaker may lead to finding a better champion elsewhere. An opposing legislator one day may be your strongest ally the next. The shortest distance between two points is seldom a straight line.

20) **Practice energetic work and the importance of persistence**. In the immortal words of Charlie Chan: "Everything cometh to he who waiteth, as long as he worketh like hell in the meantime!"

Of all the political assets, stamina, endurance and persistence are surely the most underrated but indispensable ingredients of success.

And always remember that tomorrow is another day and that few defeats are really final.

Victory in legislation and public policy—like success in other walks of life—has its roots in sound organization, thoughtful planning, unceasing cooperation, imaginative liaison, constant surveillance, and just plain hard work.

The most successful advocates in my experience had mastered the political wisdom reported in this guide. Far more powerful, however, was their *belief system*, their sense of the moral rightness, the justice, of their objectives in the fields of education, employment training, youth development, and essential human services. Alert and alive to the pain and distress of others, and with a vision of a better world as it could one day be, they found within themselves the life-sustaining force, the energy and persistence to reach goals perceived by them as right and just. Sound technique *plus* strong conviction are far superior to either acting alone.

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