



# How to Develop a Political Action Plan

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# HOW TO DEVELOP A POLITICAL ACTION PLAN

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Former [U.S. House] Speaker Tip O'Neill used to say, "All politics is local." Many decision makers and policy makers have trouble relating to the numbers unless they're brought closer to home. You are in a unique position in your community. Fire chiefs provide distinctive expertise. In many cases, many of you already implement a political action plan. For those who need to impact their political process, this guide is provided as a tool for getting started. Depending on your local political environment, volunteer fire departments may be able to implement more of the plan elements than a career fire department. Use this tool not only to implement your individual department's political action agenda, but also to understand how those who may oppose your recommendations are committing to a plan of attack.

## **Acknowledgement**

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This information is provided by the International Association of Fire Chiefs in the event you want to develop and implement a political action plan for your fire department. The IAFC wishes to recognize the International Association of Fire Fighters as the original authors of this information. We thank the IAFF for allowing us use and editing rights.

# DEVELOPING A POLITICAL ACTION PLAN

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In the world of politics, getting buy-in and commitment is essential. Your initial objective is to take advantage of the coalitions you have already established with elected officials who support high-quality, government-based public services. Anytime you have an issue, it is critical that you develop a strategy that will communicate your side of the issue. Once you develop your strategy, you will need to define your message and take it to your coalition. From here, you are then ready to develop a political action plan.

Regardless of the strategy, your political goals will be the same:

- Explain the value of the fire department and the services you provide
- Discuss the value of the changes you seek and create public pressure on political leaders
- Produce the votes needed if implementation requires a vote by the city/county council or commission.

This level of political activism is a new concept to most municipal officials, the media and the general public. Therefore, begin your political action plan by educating elected officials, influential civic and business leaders and the general public on the existence and importance of the fire department. There are several tactics you can use for reaching these individuals:

- Private meetings
- Public meetings
- Community organizations
- Telephone banks
- Door-to-door canvassing
- Polling place campaigning. Each state has election laws governing polling place campaigning. Check to see what, if any, boundaries there are to campaigning in your state's polling places.

## Private Meetings

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Behind-the-scenes, private negotiations with individuals or small groups often present the best opportunity to discuss your arguments or to review the complex financial implications involved. A face-to-face meeting gives you the best means for establishing a relationship with appointed and elected officials, who often will speak more openly in private than they will during a public meeting.

Some people hesitate to lobby their elected officials in this fashion, feeling ill-equipped to persuade them. But fire service personnel understand public safety better than government officials do, and they have the unique ability to present new and important information to these officials.

Remember, you are the expert when it comes to understanding the fire department. Nobody knows more about fire fighting than fire service personnel. You can help these individuals make informed decisions. Never make the mistake of assuming that the person you meet with completely understands the issue.

These seven easy steps can help you make the most of your personal visit with an elected official:

1. Schedule the meeting by phone. If there is time, follow up with a letter or email confirming the logistics of the meeting and briefly review the issue.
2. Prepare for the meeting by studying your issue, remembering that you may have only 15-20 minutes to present your case. Rehearse the answers to questions you are most likely to be asked. In addition, be prepared to respond to questions raised by the opponents of the issue. If several proponents are to attend, decide in advance what speaking role each person will assume, making certain that each attendee participates. Schedule a pre-meeting planning session to review each person's role and your expectations of the meeting.
3. Once the meeting begins, take a few minutes to explain what you are seeking and what its effect will be on you and your community, even if the elected official claims to know all about the issue. Keep the discussion on track, and avoid attempts to steer the conversation to topics not on your agenda.

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4. Clearly indicate the action you want the individual to take. Do you want the elected official to introduce a bill or motion? To place the issue on the ballot as a referendum? To be an active proponent on your behalf during a ballot referendum campaign?
5. At the meeting's conclusion, review the issues discussed and any commitments made.
6. After the meeting, send a short note, again reviewing your discussion and reiterating any commitments made.
7. If the individual is undecided, do not force the issue; because you may lose him or her unexpectedly. Instead, schedule another meeting to discuss the issue again. Before your next meeting, send additional information to review when you meet the second time.

## Public Meetings

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In general, the same suggestions for a private meeting apply to a public meeting. Preparation is essential, as is a professional presentation. An advantage of public meetings is that they present an even better opportunity for you to educate a larger audience while making your point to the elected official, even if he or she is unwilling to commit at that time. The meeting may also offer the opportunity to enlarge your coalition by asking sympathetic audience members to join. In addition, an elected official is also more likely to keep a commitment made at a public meeting/city council meeting in front of an audience.

In the few minutes immediately before a public meeting, you usually have the chance to speak briefly with elected officials. If you are meeting someone for the first time, or someone who may have forgotten you or your position, always introduce yourself by name and indicate your position in the fire service, clearly naming your fire department.

Always arrive early at public forums. Opportunities to speak may be limited, with time at the microphone given on a first-come, first-served basis. During the meeting, be on the lookout for others who express similar viewpoints. You may discover unknown allies with whom to work.

If an official says something with which you disagree or that you believe is incorrect, and you do not have the chance to address the comment publicly, try to get the attention of the official afterward. If unsuccessful, follow up with a meeting, a phone call or a letter, stating your position or supplying information to refute the inaccurate comments.

Whether in a public or private meeting, remember these basic rules for lobbying appointed or elected officials:

- When discussing an issue, be polite and courteous. Do not argue or threaten.
- When seeking a commitment for support, be clear and to the point as to what you want. Do not be evasive. And, be sure you ask for their support.
- Know the reasons why the official should support or oppose the issue in question, and anticipate objections to and questions about the proposal.
- Schedule meetings in advance. Do not show up unannounced and expect a meeting on the spot.
- Never resort to name-calling. Remember that you may need to meet with this individual again on the same or some other issue.
- Never threaten political retaliation if the elected official disagrees with your position.

## Community Organizations

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Gaining support for local issues will require the help of community groups that can deliver your message – to the media, elected officials and other residents. There are several types of groups to approach.

### Civic Organizations

Many fire chiefs have established relationships with their community's clubs and civic associations. Many chiefs pay dues for members to belong to these organizations. Ensure that at least one member of your department belongs to each of them such as the Elks, Jaycees, Kiwanis, Lions, Masons, Moose, Rotary and Shriners.

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## Business Organizations

In most communities, the leading business organization is the Chamber of Commerce. Work with the president of the chamber and schedule a time to address the organization's membership.

## Homeowners Associations

Few groups are more concerned about the quality of their fire protection. Offer to address members at their association meetings. Deliver presentations on fire prevention in the home and distribute stickers for telephones, listing emergency numbers.

## Senior Citizen Groups

Most people don't expect their house to burn down, but do foresee that sometime in their lives they will need emergency medical services. No set of individuals understands that better than senior citizens. You may reach senior citizens through organizations like the American Association for Retired People and Canada's Association for the Fifty-Plus and through residences built specifically for seniors and through senior centers. This is an excellent opportunity to get retired fire fighters engaged in this part of your community involvement program.

## Telephone Banks

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If your strategy involves a vote by your city council or commission, or if you are encouraging passage of a community-wide referendum, a well-planned telephone campaign is an effective tool for reaching large numbers of voters and accomplishing several objectives:

- Identifying voter preferences
- Recruiting volunteers and raising money
- Informing voters about an upcoming campaign event or election
- Reminding voters of your referendum campaign on election day.

Depending on your community and in light of recent telemarketing infringement, this may not be an effective method for stimulating support. If you do decide to use this method, information on organizing a telephone campaign is printed below.

Phone canvasses are generally organized from one large centralized phone bank, from several small phone bank locations or from fire service personnel's homes. One centralized phone bank is the easiest to manage because you can supervise closely the quality of each voter contact while ensuring that your workers complete the necessary calls. Possible locations include union halls, real estate offices, insurance or law firms—locations that usually have multiple phone lines that are available during evening hours.

When recruiting phone volunteers, always recruit at least 1.5 to 2 times the number of volunteers you will need, since you are guaranteed to have no-shows or last-minute cancellations. If more volunteers show up than phones available, have additional work readily available for them to do rather than sending them home. Remember, a disappointed or unused volunteer is unlikely to return when asked in the future.

Preparing a phone bank is easy if you plan it well in advance. In addition to a project manager, you will need to recruit several shift supervisors who manage the phone bank on certain days, using the following materials:

- Sign-in sheet
- Instructions (one for the person phoning, one for the person supervising)
- Typed message
- Voter phone lists
- Question forms (if a voter asks for additional information)
- Volunteer worker forms (if a voter sounds enthusiastic about your position, try to recruit him or her as a volunteer)
- Daily report forms (used to determine how each caller did with his or her call list).

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The shift supervisor's work includes these responsibilities:

1. Call volunteer workers to remind them of their commitment, usually the night before.
2. Prepare call lists and other materials identified above.
3. Welcome and sign in volunteers when they arrive.
4. Review instructions and phone scripts with the volunteers, making sure they understand their assignment, and answer any questions they may have.
5. Listen to phone callers to make sure they are delivering the appropriate message and to solve any problems.
6. Schedule breaks for phone callers.
7. Bring refreshments.
8. At the end of the shift, thank callers, check their work, collect their report forms, and ask them to sign up for another shift before leaving.

The process for the caller is simple:

1. Identify yourself and then deliver a brief, persuasive message about the issue, including the election date, and try to determine if the person called will support or oppose the referendum.
2. Record the results either by hand or computer, and send a brief follow-up letter or mailer to any undecided voters.
3. Ask supporters of your position to volunteer for the campaign.
4. If a recipient of a phone call is opposed to your position, do not become argumentative. Politely thank the person for his or her time and move on to the next call.

## Door-To-Door Canvassing

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When pursuing passage of a referendum, face-to-face personal contact can leave a stronger impression with each voter than any other voter contact tool. Organizing a door-to-door canvass, however, requires a substantial time commitment and may be impractical in all areas. Before deciding to undertake a door-to-door canvass, you must assess the feasibility of implementing such an undertaking. Are the precincts compact enough to go door-to-door, and do you have enough volunteers to perform the work?

If you can implement a door-to-door canvass, the rewards are considerable. A door-to-door canvass is more persuasive than a phone bank, and usually more successful in converting undecided voters into supporters and supporters into volunteers. A door-to-door canvass also establishes visibility for a campaign and allows you to hand a piece of literature to the voter.

There are, however, limits to door-to-door canvassing. Voter preference information collected by canvassing is less reliable as that gathered by a phone bank. Undecided voters are more likely to say they support an issue or candidate, and unfavorable voters are much more likely to say they are undecided in a one-on-one conversation with a canvasser than over the phone with a volunteer. Therefore volunteers must be trained to look for this problem and to probe for voter preference.

Managing a door-to-door canvass requires the following materials:

- Sign-in sheet
- Instructions
- Precinct map
- Walk lists or cards of registered voters, divided by street address
- Brochures
- Typed script
- Campaign shirts/buttons
- Volunteer forms
- Question forms (should a voter want additional information)
- Daily report forms.

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Because effective volunteers cannot stand on a doorstep and read from a prepared script, as an inexperienced phone caller might, canvassers require additional training (usually including role-playing) so they can learn how to deliver the message and make a good presentation.

The process for the canvasser is similar to that of the phone caller. Instead of working alone, however, canvassers work in two-person teams. They meet at your canvassing project temporary headquarters to collect information and materials, and then head out on foot or by car to their assigned precinct. Once they arrive in their assigned neighborhood, they split up rather than double-teaming voters. At the end of the day or tour, they return to the headquarters to deliver report forms and return any extra campaign literature.

## U.S. Voter Registration Drives

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This can be successful in all communities because fire departments can work on voter registration drives organized by their local union, their volunteer fire fighters or by other community groups. (In Canada, voter registration is unnecessary because all Canadians over the age of 18 are eligible to vote in municipal, provincial and federal elections whether they have been enumerated or not.)

The key to winning any referendum or election is to identify a minimum of 50.1 percent of the eligible voters to participate in the election who would support your position. After conducting your phone banks and door-to-door canvasses, you may determine you do not have enough identified votes to win. If this is the case you have several options.

The first option is to determine if there are enough undecided voters, or “soft” opponents that you could target to persuade them to support your position. If this still leaves you short, consider undertaking a voter registration drive to increase the pool of potential voters.

The first step in undertaking a voter registration drive is to look internally at the fire department to be certain that all fire service personnel and their families are registered to vote. Second, reach out to your coalition groups to make certain that all of their members are

registered to vote. Elections have been won or lost by a mere vote or two, and no one wants to lose an election because a few fire service personnel were ineligible to vote because they were not registered.

Contact your local city or county voter registrar to learn how to obtain the lists of registered voters. There will likely be a cost for these lists.

Contact unregistered members by phone or in person, using the same general approach described earlier in this section. After making follow-up calls or visits, enter the information on those newly registered voters into the database. However, keep in mind that you should approach voter registration in the same manner that you approach voter turnout. Target your voter registration efforts to those who would be most likely to support your position. Voter registration can be a time-consuming process but also a valuable part of your campaign plan.

## Polling Place Greeters

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This tactic is perhaps the easiest to overlook, but it can be one of the most effective in a political strategy. Many voters arrive at the polling place either unaware of or undecided on ballot initiatives. Handing out sample ballots or handouts can have a decisive influence on these individuals.

The fire department’s job before Election Day is to recruit volunteers to cover the entire voting period. If you can not cover the entire day, be sure to have volunteers present at peak voting times—in the morning before most people go to work, and in the early evening as they are returning from work. The handouts can be simple, one-color pieces with a direct message on one side (vote for or against the referendum), and more detailed information about the implications of the referendum on the other side.

In Canada there are some limitations on polling day activities. Refer to the relevant provincial or federal elections legislation, or contact the Returning Officer before conducting activities in the vicinity of a polling location. In the United States, rules for soliciting voters at the polls vary by state. Be sure to check with the State Election Commission when determining placement of your volunteers.

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## Literature Drops

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Producing simple, one-page brochures to educate your audiences on the fire department will be an essential tactic. Mailing copies to every registered voter in your community is often too costly to consider. Instead, you can target your mail to households that have registered voters, or organize and conduct literature drops in targeted neighborhoods. You can also distribute information at community events, such as county fairs, church bazaars, homeowner association meetings, local festivals or any other event in the community that attracts a large audience.

## Identifying Those Who Oppose The Issue

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In any campaign, criticism of your organization and your issue is inevitable. To defuse such criticism, you must identify your opponents and the ideas they are promoting, and communicate your information as effectively as possible with those who are in a position of change – your legislators and government officials.