



CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE

A Voice for Washington's Children, Youth & Families

Six Reasons for Trying Even When Your Elected Officials Seem “Hopeless”

Here's a familiar line: “My representatives won't listen to me no matter what I say. They believe the opposite of everything I believe. I'd be wasting my time talking to them.”

Familiar yes, but wrong!

While it is true that successful political movements work with traditional allies and “swing votes” in the political middle, good advocacy is about winning over (or neutralizing) the opposition. Here are 6 reasons for approaching elected officials who oppose your view.

...conveying your position is basic to good advocacy.

As citizens and voters, our job is to ask them to vote a particular way (and explain our reasons why); their job is to be asked. They can't represent you (your issue, your group) unless you tell them how you wish to be represented. That's basic.

...good advocacy shows that opposition is based on more than emotion.

It is easy to dismiss someone who has never spelled out their position as a “bleeding heart” or “all emotion, no brain.” A well-articulated position is harder to ignore. Besides, making your case to elected officials is good practice, because they often reflect the views of their voters -- people you also have to win over.

...they and their colleagues respect constituent pressure.

If and when you DO win your legislators over to your side, they'll need to be able to say their constituents pressed them to do it.

...even with opponents, good advocacy is a way to educate and build relationships.

Legislators take positions in part based on what they believe their constituents want and value. Your letters, telephone calls, and visits inform your elected representatives about your issues, while also conveying that there is strong support for your position. *Never give any elected official the right to say, “I never heard anyone support xxx; I'm just reflecting what my constituents want.”*

...people and minds change.

Even the most apparently immovable legislators have been known to change their position on issues -- particularly when the voters back home make clear they want a change. Twenty-five years ago almost nobody in public office was pro-choice, pro-diversity, or anti-tobacco; today, a strong majority of elected officials are. They didn't change by accident, and didn't change overnight: the persistent work of good advocates was key.

...never give up.

We have to be a presence. Elected officials should NOT be allowed to case votes affecting children, families, and other vulnerable people without ever having to face them or their advocates. They need to know that someone is watching, and that someone is us.