

Getting Personal with Improbable Politicians to Influence Policy for the Planet:

**How Identifying Covert Pro-Environmental Connections of Unlikely
Congressional Targets May Support Successful Bipartisan Advocacy Efforts**

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Abstract

This paper explores the need for readily available tools to inform strategic environmental lobbying. While guidance exists for contacting members of Congress (MOC) and narrowing targets, there is a lack of direction for how lobbyists can tailor their messaging to individual MOCs to maximize persuasiveness. The author posits that making personal connections between an MOC and the substance of the lobbyist's argument (i.e., species protection, climate change, sustainability, etc.) can increase their case's relatability and support positive policy outcomes. The author develops talking points and a sample lobbyist preparation tool to demonstrate this point.

Introduction

The practice of lobbying is extremely important to the conservation field. Lobbying allows both citizens and organizations to meet with members of Congress (or their staff) and make the case for and against policies which currently or may potentially impact the environment (Wright and Oppenheimer, 2003). Elected legislators are required to vote on bills which cover an array of topics. It would be impossible for members of Congress to possess strong personal opinions and expertise to inform their vote on every bill that comes their way. This uncertainty provides an opportunity for lobbyists (such as environmental advocates) to motivate legislative behavior and influence federal policy (Loomis, et al., 2011). If harnessed for advocacy, the deep expert knowledge possessed by scientists such as conservationists can be quite powerful and persuasive when it comes to impacting the legislative process. It is valuable for these professionals and researchers to gain an understanding of political decision making so that they are empowered to contribute to this process (Brownson et al., 2006). Conservationists carry (perhaps unknowingly) a toolbelt with a multitude of options and tools for congressional engagement (**Appendix A**). While all of these avenues can and should be maximally explored and pursued, this paper focuses particularly on direct lobbying communications with individual members of Congress and/or their staff.

Through my graduate research and experiences interning in government affairs teams at well-known conservation organizations, I've seen the tools and resources that both novice and career advocates are using regularly. I also witnessed firsthand what successful (and less successful) lobbying looks like. If a conservation organization has the means and capacity for a government affairs team (also often called legislative affairs, congressional affairs, or federal affairs teams), they may also have access to subscription-based advocacy tools such as CQ Federal. These (often costly) tools provide little information on individual lawmakers, besides their legislative activity, a short bio, and possibly notable involvement in recent news. Perhaps because these tools are geared toward advocacy professionals, prescribed strategies for engagement are not a feature of these accounts.

As for those with little to no advocacy experience, various online guidance materials currently exist to help citizens and other stakeholders have meaningful conversations with legislators. These include many “one size fits all” how-to fact sheets with tips and best practices. While the existing online how-to lobby guidance documents provide some helpful tips, they fail to substantively assist the want-to-be lobbyist in one of the most significant areas of conservation marketing and campaigning - knowing their audience. Much of the focus is placed on what the lobbyist needs to do (e.g. logistics, procedure, supplies needed, appropriate attire, etc.).

For this study, I’ve explored if and how a useful tool for strategic congressional engagement could benefit environmental advocates of any experience level. How can existing resources be enhanced to maximize impact to engagement? Aside from legislative behavior, how can legislators’ personal biographical information inform engagement strategies for environmental lobbying? I purport that the most effective strategy involves determining and understanding the individual background, values, and attitudes of the congressman (beyond their legislative history) and using that knowledge to strategically curate messaging. This type of information would be useful to both novice and experienced lobbyists and act as a potential game-changer for securing ever-so-critical bipartisan support.

For this study, I’ve collected qualitative data about Congress members’ personal biographical background and history. This information providing insight into the legislators’ individual values, priorities, and interests was evaluated for ties to the environment, and the data, along with curated messaging has been converted to a member profile book. This resource is different from existing tools for lobbyists as they focus on personal histories and biographical data (rather than voting record) and offer messaging strategies to make pro-environmental stances more relatable to congressional targets. This is especially important when engaging with members of Congress across the political aisle. By not engaging in a bipartisan way, some organizations pigeon-hole themselves and reinforce the misguided narrative that all

environmentalists are “radical” and the conservation agenda cannot complement Conservative values. Particularly in the face of climate change, we cannot afford to ignore any potential avenues for engagement.

Methods

I first did some preliminary research of what information is typically available to and/or utilized by lobbyists to inform congressional engagement. This was done with a combination of internet and literary research and learned knowledge from past internship experience supporting government affairs teams. I determined the information I wanted to learn about each member of Congress so that I may find connections to conservation and the environment to support engagement strategies. I created a Google Sheets table with the following categorical columns: *Name, Party, State-District, Committee, Year entered Senate, Caucus Membership, Childhood Background, Places Lived, Education, Hobbies, Interests, & Clubs, Past Employment/Investments/Private Businesses Owned (past or present), Environmental Stances, Endorsements, and Miscellaneous/Notes (including links, quotes, etc.)* (**Appendix B**).

Once the framework for my data collection was built, I worked on establishing a sample of legislators to focus on. According to Congress.gov, there are 553 members of Congress within both houses of Congress (House of Representatives & Senate) and all parties (Democrat, Republican, & Independent). At first I had decided to focus on all 51 Republican Senators. I quickly learned that the qualitative data collection process is slow and tedious so I narrowed my sample down further by determining which of those senators are members of two congressional committees: 1. *Energy & Natural Resources*, and 2. *Environment & Public Works*. I chose these particular committees because they often cover conservation issues in their daily work. My final sample size was 20 Senators as some are members of more than one of these committees.

NOTE: *The midterm elections took place during the Fall semester of 2022, when this project was being worked on. As November results came in, two additional data columns were added to the spreadsheet. One specified if the member would be going*

into the 118th Congress (by recent reelection or if their term was not yet up). The second new column provided space to add when the senators' terms were ending. This would be useful information for the upcoming lobbying tool action component. Members that were retiring or did not win reelection were highlighted yellow so that I would not draft content for them in the prospective lobbying resource.

After determining what information I wanted to collect and ascertaining my sample, I began data collection. For each legislator, I searched the internet to find information needed to complete each column. For each member, I started at their individual official websites (biographies), then Wikipedia, then keyword searches on Google for each data category (e.g., "Senator Barrasso investments"). Between all of these online search methods, I was able to obtain data for each category (besides Miscellaneous/Notes).

Once I finished compiling the qualitative data, it was time for analysis. For each legislator, I went through the gathered information to find positive and negative connections - both direct and indirect - to conservation, climate, the environment, etc. Font color for positive connections were changed to blue while negative connections were made red. When all the data was reviewed, the blue content was pulled into a Google document (**Appendix C**). There I developed curated talking points for the members possessing what I had deemed positive (or potentially positive) ties to nature.

Results

Of my sample of 20 Republican U.S. Senators in the 117th Congress, I found that every member had at least one bit of personal biographical information that could be positively tied to the environment. Some common connections included data from the Hobbies/Interests and Caucus Membership columns. As the senators participate in these groups and activities completely voluntarily, these categories serve to represent the senators' personal interests and values. 18/20 or 90% of legislators had positive connections ascertained from the Caucus membership category.



Figure 1. A sampling of legislators’ positive & negative environmental connections. Once biographical data had been collected, it was categorized. Potentially positive connections to nature, climate, conservation, outdoor recreation, air/water quality, or ecotourism were colored blue; negative associations, red.

These interests or attributes were used to develop simple, easy-to-remember talking points (**Appendix C**). For the members with children and/or grandchildren (all but one), lobbyists can make the case for a better quality of life and the environment for future generations – a particularly effective argument for politically conservative targets (Barnett, et al., 2019). Advocates can also make place-based connections to nature in states and regions that legislators live or have previously lived. In a few cases, the senators’ educational background could be tied to conservation issues (e.g., biology,

zoology, forestry, medical degrees, etc.). Caucus memberships and hobbies could be connected to the environment in a multitude of ways, often with parallels to outdoor recreation. Personal connections to cancer provide an opportunity to promote environmental protection efforts to ensure air and water quality. With endorsements being so influential to legislative behavior (van Winden, 2004), it's worthwhile noting whether the lobbyist's mission and messaging aligns with current or previous special interest endorsements. This may provide some insight into the receptiveness of the congressional target.

Although this project focuses on finding common ground to engage legislators (including those who may be more unlikely supporters of the environment) there were several (7) senators that would not be viable targets. This is due to their highly vocalized and extreme public stances against environmental protection or denying climate science and/or limited or weak pro-conservation connections. Also note that 2 of the 20 senators were removed from consideration for targeting as they are retiring.

Discussion

As the results showed that valuable and substantive information about members' interests and values could be drawn from caucus membership, I feel that in the future, it would be beneficial to collect similar information on all of the congressional committees and subcommittees that the member belongs to. This also applies to committees and subcommittees that senators were part of in the past. While the senator may currently have relatively little say-so in a committee they no longer belong to, even former membership provides insight into what the member may find important.

One issue that came up during data collection was inconsistent access to information. For example, one website that came up frequently when compiling the data via Google searches was Legistorm.com. For several members of Congress, I drew information from these hits. Unfortunately, after a certain number of visits to the website, I hit a pay wall. I would no longer be able to access the information unless I paid for a subscription. Registering for free was an option, which I did, but even logged into a free account, I could not obtain the data I was looking for - information that I had been able to attain

before getting locked out. Because of this change in data availability, more positive ties to nature may have been ascertained for members that were researched earliest, before the flow of data was blocked.

While it is possible for conservationists and other members of the scientific community to repeat my procedure (i.e., compile member data, identify positive connections, and create associated talking points curated for each member), it is a very time-consuming process and not a practical plan for want-to-be lobbyists. This underscores the need for an evergreen resource to inform strategic congressional engagement. Creating talking points as I have for this project could be continued for other members of Congress.

While it would be quite the undertaking to do this on a larger scale, once it was completed, it would only need to be updated minimally. U.S. Senators and Representatives of the House do not have term limits so the information would not need to be recollected and converted regularly. Only when new Congress members replace the incumbents, would an entire suite of new data need to be collected. Otherwise, besides possibly occasionally checking for new sources of information (for example, a new interview with a Senator or biography book was published), such a tool would require minimal management after its initial establishment.

Action Component

The action component consists of developing a model resource for lobbyists to inform congressional engagement strategies. While I anticipated that each member's profile would only take up half of a page, I had identified so many pro-environmental connections that one member profile can fill an entire 8.5 x 11 in page. These profiles would be uniformly designed in an easy-to-read infographic format. I customized a Canva template so that all profiles were consistent in form and function, and also visually appealing to the user.

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Biographical Details	Engage on...
Born in El Dorado, KS; Currently in Great Bend, KS	Environmental concerns in KS, midwest
Wife Laina and 4 children: Lauren, Victor, Matt, Cal	Quality of life/environment for future generations
5th generation "farm kid" Congressional Farmer's Cooperative Caucus Endorsements: KS Livestock Association, National Association of Wheat Growers, & the KS Farm Bureau	Incentives to regenerative agriculture, silvopasture, alternative cattle feed
Congressional Caucus on the Deadliest Cancers	Public health connections to the environment (e.g., water/air contamination, etc.)
Rare Disease Caucus, Senate Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases Caucus	Zoonotic spillover, connection to conservation
Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus	Outdoor recreation and related economic benefits
Congressional Veterans Jobs Caucus	Green jobs (incentives for veterans specifically)
Former Commissioner of KS Dept of Wildlife, Parks & Tourism, KS Office of the Governor: Member, Ecotourism Committee	Ecotourism opportunities
Friends of Australia Caucus	International conservation
Senate Western Caucus	Environmental concerns in Western U.S. states (e.g., drought)
Endorsement by U.S. Chamber of Commerce	Economic connections to conservation
Supports the federal renewable fuel standard, requiring corn-based ethanol to be blended w/ gasoline	Renewables/nontraditional energy sources

Figure 2. Sample profile from mockup pro-environmental lobbying resource. Such a tool would be invaluable for advocacy efforts, particularly when engaging congressional stakeholders who are not obvious targets (Appendix D).

I transferred the qualitative data and talking points from the working document (Appendix C) to the Canva template (Appendix D) in a way that was streamlined and intuitive. The top of the profile provides the senator’s name, official photo, and contact information. The bottom portion of the page is split into two categories: on the left, “Biographical Details” and right, “Engage on...”. The left side lists pertinent facts about

the member and the right side shows corresponding talking points with a linking arrow in between. If there are several facts which share the same positive connection to the environment, they are grouped and linked to their shared talking point. This helps streamline the document as it eliminates unnecessary duplication.

This straightforward format will simplify engagement for novice advocates yet still informative enough to benefit the most experienced lobbyists. A comprehensive resource like this would fill a currently unmet need for conservationists; encouraging environmental advocates to engage with targets on both sides of the political aisle, and providing empowering concrete tools to do so.

Conclusion

Conservationists and other members of the scientific community can and should make efforts to share the value of their research. Beyond the general public, it is especially impactful to engage with state and federal legislators. Neglecting to utilize all possible avenues to influence public policy would be a missed opportunity for scientists to enact real and pervasive change. In this paper, we explored how environmental advocates can strategically engage with Congress by making connections between Congressmembers' personal backgrounds, interests and values, and concepts like climate change, nature appreciation, sustainability, and conservation. In addition to learning about the legislative process, the scientific community can and should consider how their lobbying efforts can be most impactful.

While existing guidance may help with logistics or narrowing down target lists (e.g., League of Conservation Voters (LCV) scorecard), there is a deficit in directives for talking points and curated messaging strategies. By making an effort to “get personal” with legislators and finding common ground, conservationists and other science-minded professionals can be optimally persuasive. Advocating in a non-partisan way may require more message curation, but it is beneficial to the cause. Having one default “party for the environment” encourages the opposing party to approach a pro-environmental stance with disdain and contrarianism (Mason, 2014). Conversely,

targeting both sides of the political spectrum, protects the concern from being a strictly partisan issue.

There is space for new tools to assist both new and experienced lobbyists in this effort. The need is also there, although many potential users may not yet realize it. When these tools are developed and honed, there must be a substantive marketing campaign geared toward nonprofits and the science community. Also, while this study has focused on message curation based on biographical facts, it should be noted that appropriate moral framing should be considered and employed for targets of each party to ensure effective message conveyance (Kidwell, et al., 2013). While talking points address what advocates may say to congressional members, suitable moral framing would further inform *how* they say it and in what context. The application of marketing and psychology principles in lobby efforts – and perhaps even recruitment of marketing professionals – should be further explored (Gabel et al., 2011).

Literature Cited

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

How conservationists and other scientists can influence policy


Table 4. Actions across advocacy continuum

Raise the general awareness of issue ↔	Communicate findings to policymakers ↔	Actively lobby on behalf of particular issue
Publish a scientific article Publish a popular piece	Develop short policy summaries Transform epidemiologic data into forms readily understandable by policymakers Provide testimony at a legislative hearing	Form and activate community-based coalitions Learn and use media advocacy techniques
Present findings at a professional meeting Present findings at a community meeting Issue a press release	Educate legislative staff members on public health issues	Write for newspapers on a specific issue (letters to the editor and editorials) Meet with an elected official to get across a specific point of view Publicize the tactics of vested interests that are at odds with public health goals Support candidates who are of like mind

Source: Brownson et al, 2006.


Appendix B

Compiled qualitative data for Senate Republicans in the 117th Congress

 IAP 2022 - Member Profile Spreadsheet

Appendix C

Curated talking points for legislators' pro-environmental connections

 IAP 2022 - Positive Environmental Connections

Appendix D

Action Component: Sample member profile tool to inform strategic congressional engagement

https://www.canva.com/design/DAFTKsmOA-w/ZHjb0TL_kl6JfD5L5n6ELg/view?utm_content=DAFTKsmOA-w&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton