

Setting the Public Agenda

Every year, thousands of political issues are raised in America: issues about health care, education, equal rights, the economy, the environment, crime, national defense, science and research, poverty and homelessness. Some issues become subject to widespread public debate leading to legislation, executive action, or famous court cases. These issues are said to be part of the public agenda and often receive media attention.



Choosing the best way to set the public agenda can be a challenge. Questions arise about what method would be the most effective. What benefits does a particular approach offer? What are its potential costs? Not everybody agrees.

Here are some examples of civic actions people often use to get issues on the public agenda. Consider what might work best given your issue. Your group may think of additional civic actions that you think would be most effective.

Write to Officials

Most people in power keep close track of letters and emails written by the public. It's one of the ways they gauge public opinion. Although U.S. senators, CEOs, or the heads of nonprofits may not personally read your email or letter, they have assistants who read them and tally opinions. Your email/letter will be read, and it probably will be answered.

- **Tell who you are.** Give your name, address, and who you are. The people who read your email or letter want to know who you are, why you care, and how to reach you.
- **Focus on one issue.** Don't try to fight crime, air pollution, and unemployment all in one writing.
- **Keep it short and simple.** State your ideas in the first paragraph. Get your idea across in a page or less. People who read a lot of emails and letters don't have much time.
- **Be polite.** You can disagree, but *never* be aggressive or insult. Let your ideas do the talking.
- **Include supporting material.** If you have any newspaper articles, letters to the editor, or other written material supporting your position, include it.

Letter-Writing Campaigns

Writing an email is a civic action, but writing a letter is a civic action *and* generally has more impact than an email. A letter delivered in the regular mail shows that you took a little more time to get your message across, and it stands out from the hundreds of emails that policymakers typically receive. Also, if politicians and corporations pay attention to one writing, think of what many letters can do.

- **Get permission to set up a table in the mall and ask passersby to write letters.** Hang a poster that shows what you're doing. You can hand out fliers, talk to people, and get those interested to write a short letter right there. Provide clipboards to write on.
- **Plan your target.** Who should receive the letters? All the members of the city council? The members sitting on a particular committee? Just one member? Decide.
- **Prepare a leaflet.** Explain the problem. Give the address of the person to write to. Include all the information a person would need to send the letter.
- **Don't send form letters.** A handwritten letter shows that a person really cares. Some groups organizing letter-writing campaigns at malls often use a variety of pens and paper and envelopes. That way all the letters look different.
- **Get people's names, addresses, emails, and phone numbers.** People who write letters care about your problem. They are potential supporters.

Petitioning

A petition is like a letter with a thousand signatures. It's easier to get people to sign a petition than to write a letter. Officials know this — that's why they pay more attention to a letter-writing campaign. But a petition will help spread the word about your project and the issue or problem you want to address. Be sure to check with your local government to see what the requirements are for creating, distributing, and handing in a petition.

- **Give your petition a clear, simple title.** Tell what you want.
- **Address the petition to an individual or group who can help you with your problem.**
- **Write your petition like a short letter.** Briefly describe the problem, your plan, and your reasons.
- **Provide numbered spaces for people to write their signature, address, email, and telephone number.** The numbers will help you count the signatures you have collected.
- **Include your group's name on the petition.**
- **Make every page a separate petition.** That way more than one person can gather signatures. Also it makes it clear that people knew what they were signing.
- **Get permission to set up a table at school or at the local mall.**

- **Be able to tell people about the problem and your strategy in clear, simple language.** People will want to know more before they sign.
- **Let people make up their own minds.** Deliver your message and let your ideas speak for themselves.
- **Get your friends to sign first.** People will feel better if a lot of others have already signed.
- **Set a deadline.** Energy for the drive will last a short time. Make the drive short. You can then claim, “In only a week, we collected 500 signatures.”
- **Make copies of the petition before you deliver it.** You may want to contact the signers.
- **Do something special to deliver the petition.** Present it at a public meeting or at a politician’s local office and invite the media.

Email and Telephone Campaigns

Politicians keep track of emails and telephone calls, and a flood of phone calls or emails may get a politician’s attention as quickly as a stack of mail. It’s easier for most people to call or email than to write a letter.

- **Target the swing votes.** Unless your supporters will call everyone, it’s best to call those lawmakers who have not made up their minds.
- **Prepare a brief message.** For example, “I hope you are supporting the proposed new park. It’s very important for everyone in the city.”
- **Prepare a leaflet or flier that tells supporters who and how to call or email.** It should include:
 - ✓ The name, title, phone number, and email address of the official.
 - ✓ The message to deliver.

Demonstrations

Another approach for influencing the public agenda is holding nonviolent demonstrations. A nonviolent demonstration can include marching, picketing, and walkouts. *Contact your local government to find out about how to file for permission to hold a demonstration, such as a picket line.*

- **Potential Upside:** Capture the attention of the news media and draw attention to the issue or cause.
- **Potential Downside:** Disrupting peoples' lives can cause resentment and alienate those who might be supportive. *Never use or encourage violence or property damage to get your message across.* If violence, property damage, or any other kind of ugly incident occurs, it can also sway public opinion against you and your supporters.
- **Consider:** The 2006 nationwide student school walkouts protesting proposed changes to federal immigration law serve as an example. Supporters argued that the demonstrations drew media coverage, focused greater public attention to the issues involved, and showed that many students strongly opposed more restrictive immigration laws. They argued that the demonstrations showed that the young people involved were committed to their cause and exercised the rights of free expression and assembly nonviolently.

Critics of the demonstrations argued that the walkouts were illegal and disrupted schools and the education of the youths involved. They also pointed out that some of the schools affected could lose funding because students were not in school, and those students could face discipline for walking out. Others also criticized some demonstrators, claiming that unruly behavior could actually hurt the cause supported by the students.