

# Legislative Strategies

By Kevin B. Zeese

President, Common Sense for Drug Policy

These are strategies to win legislative victories. These are not flag-waving strategies to rally the troops. Of course there is need for public education on non-legislative issues through demonstrations, advertising, media campaigns -- those are different issues. That type of work will create legislative issues in the future. The strategies below are for passing legislation. This list is not meant to be a complete review of legislative strategies, rather they are some key points to follow when pursuing legislative change.

1. Know which issues are winning issues: you know this through polling and other research. Pick issues that can win as it is easier to build on success.
2. Be disciplined in your message: you do not have the bully pulpit of the presidency or the Congress. This makes message discipline even more important as it is difficult to get your message out. If there are a lot of different messages coming from allies decision makers and the public will be confused and not understand your point. Develop a clear message and make sure everyone lobbying to support the legislation is saying the same thing.
3. Activate your base: While polling can show your position is popular if a politician goes to a town meeting and gets questions from the opposition it will undermine their confidence in the poll. They will hear the squeaky wheel and think that is how their constituents think. Get your base active and outspoken at public events, town meetings and in the media to support your legislative goal.
4. Focus on the end result: The public wants to know why the change in policy will make things better. They are not interested in the process of getting there. They want to know what the end is and how it will make their life safer, healthier, happier.
5. Be bi-partisan: Nothing gets passed unless it has support from both parties. It is better not to introduce legislation with the wrong sponsor or from members of a single party; wait until you are able to get the right sponsors. Strange political bedfellows (e.g., like the forfeiture reform bill passed in 2000 of Henry Hyde, John Conyers, Bob Barr and Barney Frank) make good co-sponsors.
6. Get the staff for the key politicians into the project. They are the ones who push things through and educate their bosses. Staff learns the issues, keeps the politicians informed. Politicians cover a lot of issues and do not have the focus. Therefore they rely on staff.
7. Build coalitions: no one organization can push legislation alone. (Ideas on coalitions are described in another part of this disk.)
8. Know what you want so you can make sensible compromises. You will have to compromise but be careful what you agree to -- you may get it.
9. Talk to your opponents so they are either convinced to join you or convinced not to oppose you (neutralized).

10. Fill voids of information with your spin.

11. Figure out ways to create the illusion of a groundswell, e.g., celebrity concert, active base, petitions, sign-on letters.

12. Figure out who the elected official listens to, e.g., a local businessman, president of local university, member of the clergy, police official. Get that person involved in your legislative efforts by meeting with the elected official, writing an op-ed or speaking at a forum in the community.

## **Coalition Building**

By Kevin B. Zeese

President, Common Sense for Drug Policy

The importance of building coalitions cannot be understated. Change happens when it becomes clear that a wide breadth of the community supports the proposed legislation. The importance of coalition building is especially true in work for sensible drug policy as the reform movement is small and does not have a lot of political influence. In addition, elected officials have assumed that there is broad support for harsh drug law enforcement. Therefore, they need to see that different groups from their community, e.g., clergy, women's rights advocates, civil rights advocates, lawyers, academics, education groups, physicians and other health officials and business leaders. A strong coalition is harder to stop – it is easy to break one stick but impossible to break a bundle of sticks. This is a brief summary of how to develop coalitions.

1. Develop a team with different skills and different political connections. Build interesting coalitions of strange bedfellows (e.g., NRA and Hand Gun Control, police and defense lawyers).
2. Develop mutual respect and trust among coalition partners.
3. The coalition must know what it wants, agree on the end result they want. Get this out of the way early so the coalition can focus on tasks. To get consensus be flexible. Set priorities in your goals so you know what is most important and least important so compromise will be easier.
4. The coalition must be unified, speak with one voice. A coalition partner should not go to a politician privately with its own deal -- everyone needs to agree to the goal.
5. A unified coalition will be critical in getting fence-sitter politicians and in avoiding compromise to the lowest common denominator.
6. Keep the coalition task oriented, e.g. letter to chairman of committee, scheduling a meeting with key politicians, organizing a public event. Tasks must be assigned at each meeting to a specific person and must be followed up on. FOLLOW-UP IS THE CHARIOT OF GENIUS. (I capitalize this because I find this to be true in almost every task we face, not just coalition building.)
7. Keep meetings short -- one hour is a good goal.
8. Give credit to your coalition partners for success.
9. Take blame for your coalition partners for failures.
10. When you add one coalition partner, find out who they work with and get them to introduce you to other potential coalition partners.