Power Analysis for Nonprofit Advocacy

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In today’s nonprofit world, there is only a limited supply of time and energy that can be tapped for advocacy activities. How do you make the decision whether or not to invest in advocacy surrounding a particular policy issue? And once you do decide to weigh in, how do you decide where best to direct your advocacy efforts?

Choosing Whether or Not To Invest

There are five questions for your organization to answer that can help you decide whether or not to invest in a particular policy issue. How much to invest is contingent on responses to these questions, along with a review of readily-available resources (staff time, volunteer time, funding), and the timing of the policy issue’s track.

Answer these questions about the policy issue you are considering:

**Question 1:** Does it affect our organization’s clientele, mission or broader constituency in a significant and tangible way?

**Question 2:** Do we have any direct experience in this policy area that enhances the prospects we can help?

**Question 3:** Can we make a difference if we do get involved?

**Question 4:** Can we make new friends or build important ties with other groups by working on this policy issue?

**Question 5:** Do we pass the ostrich test? In other words, can we stay out of this fight and still maintain our credibility, or will we be accused of burying our head in the sand?

Selecting Targets for Your Advocacy Activities

Once you have decided to invest in a particular policy issue and developed a sense of how much you want to invest, the question you need to answer is here can you “get the most bang for your buck” in advocacy terms? Who do you need to try to influence? How much of your time should you direct to any one actor? How can you target your limited resources to maximize your impact? You can help identify this with a PSP Analysis: Position, Salience, and Power.

It’s not so difficult as it seems. Identify the key set of legislative actors involved who are now or are likely to be, engaged in shaping the legislative outcome. For those actors, fill in the following matrix according to the steps noted below.
### PSP analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Actor</th>
<th>Issue Position [score -5 to +5]</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Issue Salience [score 1 to 5]</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Issue Power [score 1 to 5]</th>
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<th>PSP Score</th>
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Step 1 – List key legislative actors involved in the specific policy issue of concern.

Step 2 - Assign each actor an issue position using -5 for most opposed and +5 for most supportive.

Step 3 - Assign a weight for issue-salience based upon how important the actor is likely to see this policy being to him or her. Use a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 to indicate not very important at all and 5 to indicate very important.

Step 4 – Assess the actor’s power to shape the outcome of this particular policy issue (note: power to shape outcomes will vary from issue to issue!); e.g. Does this actor hold a key committee post? Have the ear of key party leaders or legislative officers? Seem likely to sway the votes of other legislators? Use a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 reflecting little power over the outcome and 5 to represent a great degree of power over the outcome.

Step 5 – Multiply across the rows to obtain each actor’s PSP score

Step 6 – Use the PSP Scores to help target where your advocacy efforts will be most effective, taking into account potential “costs” of your investment, likelihood of success in changing the actor’s view and payoff toward the goal of altering the potential outcome of the policymaking process.
From Assigning Values to Strategy: Using the PSP Chart to Help Target Your Advocacy Efforts

Once you’ve completed information on each of the key legislators, total all PSP scores on your chart. Your ultimate aim is to have your **PSP Chart Total** be a positive number—preferably as high a positive number as possible. What does a positive **PSP Chart Total** tell you? It tells you that the key legislative players involved carry a combination of power (ability to influence the decision arena), position (supportive orientation toward your issue stance), and high salience (the issue is important enough to them to actively engage) that make it more likely than not that your favored view will prevail. (Remember this is not an exact science!)

Don’t let a positive chart total make you complacent! Or a deeply negative one make you throw in the towel. Keep in mind your aim is to build as high a positive chart total as possible, given the advocacy resources you currently have available.

Once you have completed the chart, where do you go from here? How can you make decisions about advocacy strategy? The **PSP Chart** can help you decide where to target your limited advocacy resources. It makes visible and tangible a lot of hidden intuitive information that can help.

Look at your completed chart and consider what kinds of changes could significantly boost the **PSP Chart Total** (remember you want it to be a high positive number). For instance where your chart identifies an actor who has high power over this issue (4 or 5), but is neutral or displays only weak support or opposition, you may get a great deal of “bang for your buck” in attempting to influence them to support your stance. Conversely, you may choose to **omit** from your advocacy efforts those actors whose high negative position (-4 or -5), and high salience (5) mean you are unlikely to be effective in altering their posture enough to make a difference in the outcome.

You may instead want to target your efforts toward deepening the support of weak supporters (position score +1 or +2), **and/or** raising the salience of those who don’t currently consider this issue to be very important (low salience score of 1 or 2). These individuals will prove to be especially fruitful targets if they also carry significant power in this issue area (score 3, 4, or 5 in the power column). By bringing information on the policy to the attention of these individuals, and by showing them how people in their district are being affected, you may well be able to move them into a significantly more active supportive stance (salience of +3 or +4). At a minimum you will have put this issue on their radar screens in a way they are likely to remember when the issue comes up for a vote.

Using the PSP chart, you also can consider who is **not** in the picture but might be induced to enter in. For instance, is there a major powerful actor who is currently outside the group of core actors you have identified, but who might be willing to help champion your cause? Is your own district’s legislative representative a potential positive contributor who is unaware of this issue completely? Even as you consider how to allocate advocacy resources among the players on your PSP chart, consider who else might be able to be directly engaged on this issue, and who else not on the chart might be tapped to help you behind the scenes to influence those who are!

Two final notes: **First**, don’t neglect your allies!! Make sure you are not focusing so much on altering the positions of opposing or weakly supportive actors that you neglect your own strongest supporters! While you probably don’t need to spend a lot of your limited advocacy dollars on them, remember that even those who are strongly in favor of your position and fully engaged can use a timely reminder of how much you appreciate their active support.

**Second**, keep in mind that using the PSP chart to build your advocacy strategy is not an exact science. Even your best estimates of an actor’s position, power, and salience may prove faulty; people may hold positions that are not amenable to change no matter what you say or do; power is constantly shifting; and new issues can emerge that bump everything out of kilter. Still, using the PSP approach offers some important advantages. By providing a structure that helps to tap a lot of intuitive, “street knowledge” about politics and put it to use in a manageable way, and by prodding you to think about your advocacy investments consciously and strategically, it provides an important place to start.
Reviewing Other Relevant Considerations

A few other pieces of information are worth collecting. Some additional considerations may shape the way you choose to approach your targets of influence. Having thought through these considerations ahead of time can enhance your prospects of having significant impact on policy issue. Be sure to fill out the following:

Legislators representing my organization’s home district and their perspectives on this particular policy issue:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

Other organizations who are also “issue stakeholders” with whom we might coordinate strategy:

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
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Resources we might tap (people, information, institutional ties) that have potential to help in our work with the key legislators we have identified:

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