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# Advanced Member Advocacy Can Help Overcome Change and Uncertainty

David Lusk

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## Advanced Member Advocacy Can Help Overcome Change and Uncertainty

Change is in the air with the arrival of fall, cooler temperatures, and the 2024 elections (finally!). For Washington, there's a strong possibility that November brings about a change election, when one of our federal power centers - the White House, US House or Senate - flips party control. With over 60 open seats in congressional races, majorities in either chamber are tough to predict. But change isn't just the product of a different party taking over. Change is guaranteed at the White House, regardless of November's outcome, with President Biden deciding against seeking a second term. The elections will also produce widespread change for North Carolina at the federal and state level with a term limited Governor and both retirements and primary losses wiping out one-third of our congressional delegation and over two dozen state representatives and senators. When we consider that some officials are likely to lose reelection next month, AENC member associations will enter 2025 needing to create and cultivate a significant number of new relationships with those in Washington and Raleigh, and do so quickly. That's a heavy lift for even the best government affairs departments and contract lobbyists. But there is a path to success in this challenging environment for North Carolina's associations. Like many of their national affiliates, savvy AENC member organizations should consider developing an action plan that enables them to invest in and leverage member advocates like never before. Implementing a grassroots, key contact or ambassador program – whichever term you wish to use – into your advocacy strategy provides a way to broaden your outreach and rapport building efforts, extending the reach of the enterprise early in 2025 and in ways that will pay dividends for years to come.

### Political Volatility & Endangered Influence

Change in elections can have far-reaching consequences, from altering which policy priorities or whose or what regions or states, are driving the legislative agenda. As we all know, policy advocacy so often depends on who you know, how well you persuade them, and just how powerful they are. Given how vital relationships are to successful policy advocacy, it's important to consider the volatility North Carolina's political landscape experienced over just the last year.

Realigned state and congressional districts already posed obstacles, forcing officials seeking re-election to garner support from new constituencies. Summer 2023 saw Tim Moore, North Carolina's longest-serving Speaker of the House of Representatives, announce he was leaving Raleigh after more than two decades in office. This time last year, North Carolina's influence in Congress seemed to be rising considerably with the Republican ouster of House Speaker Kevin McCarthy. This move led to Patrick McHenry (NC-10), my Congressman, managing the search for a new House leader as speaker pro tempore, then be floated as the new Speaker when a Republican consensus proved elusive. Not two months later, McHenry made the decision to leave Congress entirely at the end of the current term. In less than 60 days, I went from almost being the constituent of a Speaker of the US House, someone second in line to the Presidency and a post not held by a North Carolina lawmaker for over 200 years, to being represented by a freshman in the 119th Congress. How's that for political volatility?

Taking into account how other leadership positions in Raleigh are being victimized by retirements, from a key House budget negotiator to a Senate Finance co-chair, plus the other state and federal lawmakers not running for re-election, so much uncertainty is on the horizon. An underlying theme for North Carolina's state and federal legislative landscape next year will understandably be figuring out just who will be the new power players and whose influence will be endangered? And we still have a general election to conduct.

### Emphasize Member Advocacy in Your Mission

So much political upheaval makes it irresponsible for associations to rely solely on political insiders in pursuit of their legislative priorities. Over ten percent of state and 30 percent of federal lawmakers will be new to their roles. Is it really conceivable that paid staff can build rapport with so many inexperienced officials in the first few months of 2025, prime season for Capitol Visit Days? This looming knowledge and experience gap means associations will need to emphasize issue education over issue advocacy. Use the remaining time before the next legislative sessions start to foster growth in member advocacy by making it fundamental to your organization's culture, explicitly referencing it in your pillars and purpose. Have association leadership regularly talk about the importance of member advocacy. Let members know how valuable their input and efforts are to advancing your organization's policy objectives.

### Offer Stronger Advocates More Responsibility

As both an employee of and consultant to many state and national associations, I've witnessed countless executives ask too little of stronger advocates, especially those willing to do more than just email a lawmaker. We message a member and get their attention, yet we miss an opportunity to get the most out of that interaction. Instead, survey members to delineate between grassroots (those who will only participate in email advocacy or phone call campaigns) and grasstops (aka key contacts - those members comfortable performing advanced advocacy concepts, who have relationships with lawmakers, or will try building such relationships). Sequester these stronger advocates from grassroots campaigns. Then, offer them more responsibility as their confidence and competence grows, such as organizing in-district activities or entrusting them to build relationships with key lawmakers. Some members tire of mass email campaigns and crave a new challenge. Offering your stronger advocates more accountability for their own association awakens their interest and keeps them engaged.

### **Engage Young Professionals to Avoid Advocate Burnout**

Many association government affairs offices have a set of "go to" member advocates they rely on, those who will answer any call to action, on any subject, at any time. This can eventually place a heavy burden on those members where they feel pressured to always say "yes" even when they have significant personal or professional obligations. Depending on the same association advocates again and again can discourage others from taking an active role in legislative affairs when it's "always Member X's job," preventing the association from cultivating the next generation of thought leaders. More structured and advanced member advocacy roles provide opportunities to those young professionals ready to represent the industry but unable to secure formal leadership positions. And, sharing the load among a larger pool of members makes for a lighter lift for all involved and can deter advocate burnout.

### **Think to the Future**

Just like exercise and personal health, a healthy association policy effort isn't built on an activism spike that occurs just once each year, particularly in the coming scenario outlined above. But a number of organizations will enter this environment confidently in 2025. Some associations and nonprofits have been instructing their stakeholders how to interact with lawmakers on a recurring basis, creating relationship-based advocacy programs fueled by "super advocates." These volunteers are trained in advanced advocacy techniques and deployed throughout the year, including just after an election, extending the reach of their enterprise by empowering advocates with policy responsibilities once reserved only for staff. In doing so, they have created an "evergreen" advocacy effort with relationships in place regardless of which party leads a chamber or how many new faces are elected.

While this does require a new take on member engagement, including additional staff resources to train, support and manage advanced advocates, this doesn't have to be an insurmountable undertaking. Technology makes it easy to interact and train members no matter where they are located. Starting small by identifying your best candidates equipped for growth in engagement allows you to build momentum quickly and scale the initiative at a later date. And don't forget there is a community of consultants experienced in how to develop and cultivate nationwide or statewide volunteer advocate armies who can customize an existing curriculum to the specific needs of your organization.

This change and uncertainty impacting North Carolina's legislative arena may not be a regular occurrence in Raleigh, but it has become the norm in Washington. Signs indicate such political upheaval may continue. The good news is I see a way for AENC member organizations to successfully navigate this impending sea change: a different approach to member engagement that emphasizes relationship-based, advanced advocacy rather than just grassroots efforts and an annual Advocacy Day at the Capitol. The question is, will your association spend 2025 on issue education or issue advocacy? Rethinking and retooling your approach to member engagement now can make your association a more influential organization, no matter what political uncertainty or upheaval lies ahead.

**David Lusk is the Founder and CEO of Key Advocacy, a public affairs firm providing highly customized training and consulting for Capitol Visit Days and conducting 365-engagement. Since 2010, David has been inspiring tens of thousands of association members, nonprofit volunteers and C-Suite executives to become powerful ambassadors for the policy changes they seek. Located in Davidson, NC, David may be reached at [David@KeyAdvocacy.com](mailto:David@KeyAdvocacy.com) or 571-308-9539.**

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