

Ten Rules for Talking to Union Members About Politics

Members tell us they support unions' active engagement in the political process, and agree with the labor movement's political and legislative priorities. From opinion research conducted for the AFL-CIO by Peter D. Hart Research Associates over the past few years, we know that:

- Three-quarters of union members agree that "unions need to invest time and money in politics and legislation today to counter the influence of corporations and wealthy special interests."
- Seven in 10 union members say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who "is supported by the AFL-CIO and national unions, and has strong pro-union positions on the issues."
- In 1996, 86 percent of members agreed with labor's positions on the minimum wage and Medicare.

But our members have real concerns about the way unions sometimes have pursued political goals. From the opinion research, we've learned two important lessons:

- **First, members want political action to be about them and their needs, not about candidates or political parties.** Unions need to make clear that our political and legislative decisions are based on what is in the best interest of members and other working people. Members often perceive that we are pursuing an "insider" strategy - to gain influence by cultivating relationships with party leaders or candidates. Because members believe that the political system is generally corrupt and hostile to the interests of working people, they have little confidence in insider strategies. They want their unions to give working men and women a voice in a political debate that currently excludes them.
- **Second, political action should focus unions to give them the information they need to be smarter voters and to make so they can be politically empowered.** Union members feel politically powerless today, and the traditional candidate endorsement model of labor political action does not work to empower them. What members want most from their union is more political information - and then to be trusted to make the right voting decisions, rather than receiving endorsement we merits that often seem like "marching orders." Members understand that knowledge is power, and they want their unions to give them the information they need to be smarter voters and to make a difference.

Today's unions must make clear at every opportunity - to our members and to all working men and women - that we are not just another special interest group, but a movement that provides a powerful voice for America's workers. When we communicate with our members about politics, we should keep in mind these 10 guidelines based on what our members have told us in surveys and polls.

1

Issues come first, candidates and parties second.

From the members' perspective, political action should be based on issues. Working to elect pro-worker candidates is a legitimate union activity, but only as a means to win on important issues-not as an end in itself. Union political decisions should be driven by a commitment to represent the interests of working families on the important issues that affect their lives.

This means we need to let members know consistently-not just before elections-what issues the union believes are important, where the union comes down on those issues and why. Members want to know about candidates' positions on those issues. Members recognize that they cannot keep track of all legislative and political developments on their own, and that the union has the resources and expertise to follow issues and make judgments in a way individual members cannot.

Members are very distrustful of information that comes from politicians, and are even skeptical of much they see in the mass media - so they are looking for *independent* sources of information. Our communications with members, therefore, should emphasize unions' independent perspective and respect workers' general skepticism. Union publications should feel like *Consumer Reports* for working people, providing an objective and independent view on important employment and economic issues. Most members already believe that their unions generally provide accurate and truthful information - a significant accomplishment amid today's cynicism.

2

In election campaigns, unions should provide members with information, not voting instructions.

Again and again, members tell us that information is what they want most from their unions. Members say they do not want to be told for whom to vote. Often they perceive endorsements as "instructions" on how to vote, to which they react with indifference or even resentment. Some also suspect that endorsements are driven more by unions' institutional interests than by what is best for members.

Before members will respect endorsements, they need to see what lead to them-such as issue positions and voting records. Members prefer union campaign literature that shows the positions of both candidates on key issues. They recognize that the material is designed to build support for one of the two candidates, but want to know that positions on key working family issues truly were the basis for the union's endorsement.

If we provide solid information, most members do not object to the union also making a formal candidate endorsement. But recommendations or suggestions - indicating we respect members' intelligence and good judgment - are received better than what our members perceive as commands. The first choice of many members is to have the union evaluate candidates, provide information and leave it to the individual to make the final call.

3

We have to present information credibly and objectively to overcome members' cynicism and distrust about politics.

When members say that they want to receive detailed information on candidates from their unions, they of course want that information to be accurate and fair. Although members tend to trust the accuracy of materials from the union more than that from many other sources, there is considerable skepticism regarding anything dealing with politics. So it is important that our direct mail pieces, pamphlets and other materials are credible - with information sources cited, for example, and without implausible claims about how good one candidate is and how bad another is.

Members tell us consistently that their favorite union political materials are voter guides that evaluate all candidates for an office. Side-by-side comparisons of the candidates and their positions and records on key issues allow members to make direct comparisons, which is very helpful in decision-making. Such pieces also suggest that the union actually evaluated all candidates, and didn't simply make a partisan choice.

4

Unions must downplay partisan rhetoric and stress their role as an independent voice for working people.

Whether they are Democrats or Republicans, members tend to be turned off by partisanship. In focus groups, when members read message statements or see television ads that seem to center on the political parties, many tune out and stop paying attention. Members do not want their unions to be drawn into the excessive partisanship that Americans generally believe is one of the greatest failings of the country's political system.

Our political communications with members should be based on our issues, not on parties. Members recognize that their unions may endorse Democrats more often than Republicans, but want reassurance that unions' support is a result of candidates' commitment to workers and their families, rather than a reflection of a pro-Democratic bias.

Speaking to members in ideological terms is no more effective than a partisan approach. Union members are no more likely than other workers to describe their own views as liberal - and they are more likely to feel that the Democratic Party is "too liberal" (39 percent) than to think it is "too conservative" (8 percent). We must recognize that *union members' political inclinations are much more populist than liberal*. It's much more effective to critique a candidate as being "anti-worker," "anti-union" or "representing wealthy special interests at the expense of working people" than to label the candidate "too conservative."

5

Unions should be watchdogs that approach politicians with healthy skepticism and work to hold them accountable.

We can't overstate how cynical our members are about politics and politicians, and how distant their daily lives seem from contemporary politics. At the heart of the problem is pervasive distrust of politicians, whom members see as pursuing narrow personal or partisan agendas at the expense of the public interest. Workers believe that politicians will say anything to get elected, but then frequently turn around and do something quite different. This is a major reason members believe that union political endorsements are ineffectual today.

Labor must make clear that it recognizes the danger of betrayal by politicians, and that it will hold accountable those it supports. Even as we attempt to restore members' belief that involvement in politics is important and necessary, we must speak to and acknowledge this deep political disaffection - or risk forsaking credibility.

Members want their unions to be "watchdogs" that work to keep politicians honest. In our members' eyes, the great divide in America's politics isn't the one between Democrats and Republicans - it's the distance between average working people and a corrupt, business-dominated political system. A forceful style and language that suggest unions are *fighting back* on their behalf is very effective among many union members (especially men).

Union communications also should feel, look and sound different from traditional political advertising whenever possible. The less the messages sound and look like a continuation of traditional partisan political dialogue the more they will be heard by the members. This is especially important in September and October, when people see and hear so many campaign messages.

6

Members want unions to represent them as workers, by addressing issues that directly affect them on the job and by advancing a populist economic agenda.

Labor's issue agenda should focus primarily on work-related and economic issues - the areas where our members feel unions have clear standing. Members trust unions to represent their interests on matters directly relating to their jobs, and in these areas our issue advocacy gets near-universal support. On issues such as workplace health and safety regulation, the 40-hour work week, overtime pay and pension protection, members not only accept the active engagement of their unions - they demand it.

Most members are also comfortable with the idea of unions representing their economic interests beyond the workplace. Members generally consider such issues as Social Security, Medicare, the minimum wage and tax fairness to be 'pocketbook' concerns within the proper sphere of union involvement. Our members see that large corporations and the wealthy have hugely disproportionate political influence, and believe that unions' counterweight on economic matters benefits working families. However, most members don't feel that it is appropriate for their unions to take positions on controversial social and cultural issues (such as abortion and gun control).

Union members are receptive to the idea that they should give more weight to their identity as workers when they make voting decisions. One of the most compelling messages tested in focus groups was that "if we don't start thinking as *workers* when we enter the voting booth, big corporations and the rich will continue to win out over working people."

7

Union political action should always be "of, by and for" the members.

Political action decisions, such as endorsements, have more impact when they are seen as emerging from-and responding to the membership and its concerns. We should demonstrate to members that the internal decision making process for union political action is consistent with the core goal of empowering working people. As much as possible, we should provide rank-and-tile members visible opportunities to be involved in the process, such as through membership surveys or public candidate forums. Members don't expect the union to make decisions by referendum-they understand that union leaders have important information and expertise to contribute-but they do want to have a role.

In addition, the evaluation and endorsement process should be as transparent as possible. When members know how and why the union has reached an endorsement conclusion, they respect the decision much more.

Our political action should not be seen as top-down work that unions do "for" members. It should mean mobilizing and involving the members themselves. Members believe that union political action should be about *empowering them to make a difference*. The starting point is asking people to do more-writing letters, signing petitions, calling elected officials. Members surely won't get involved if they are not asked, and union surveys show that many have never been invited to participate. Even members who choose to remain uninvolved feel better knowing that the union welcomes their participation.

One of the most effective issue ads run by the AFL-CIO in 1996 showed workers speaking at a public meeting on Medicare in Boston. In part, members responded to the substance of the testimony. But what made this ad powerful was showing real people speaking out and taking their message-via television--to a wide audience. By doing that, the Federation literally gave average people a chance to be heard, and that is exactly what members are looking for.



Mobilization is not fundamentally different from persuasion. Informing members is also the key to increasing participation.

Members strongly support union efforts to encourage them to vote on Election Day. Regardless of party, they feel this is an important and legitimate union activity. They especially appreciate appeals that explicitly say that the union wants them to vote *even if they do not support union-endorsed candidates*. This approach underscores unions' commitment to empowering individual members.

Traditionally, mobilization is thought of as a fundamentally different activity than persuading members to support particular candidates. Research suggests, however, that the most important barrier to participation is members' low level of knowledge. People who do not feel that they know much about the issues in a campaign, or where the candidates stand, are reluctant to walk into a voting booth. Members who are well informed are much more likely to vote.

Consequently, the best way to increase turnout is to educate members about the issues and candidates-to help them become well-informed voters.

9

Members are best reached by modern communication methods.

Labor newspapers and magazines effectively reach only a portion of our members. Unions should use a variety of other communication strategies in our political action efforts, including direct mail and radio and television advertising.

Union members consistently give high marks to the AFL-CIO's issue-oriented television advertisements. They appreciate the content, especially the focus on information about important legislative issues, but they also are Proud to see unions speaking out, being active and making their presence felt-action some believe can have the added benefit of helping unions' overall public image and members' strength at the bargaining table.

Focus group discussions of political direct mail provide these tips about how to make these communications effective:

- ***Use powerful visual images.*** Members have little interest in messages that arrive in standard envelopes, but find those with more colorful and graphically oriented presentations to be quite compelling.
- ***Positive images and information are important.*** Members get tired of seeing images of unhappy people complaining about economic problems. Negative information is often essential, but don't let it dominate your communications effort.
- ***Humor is effective, especially when strong families, respect for hard work, delivering negative information.*** Humorous images and clever tag lines can make your pieces stand out and grab attention in a sea of political mailings. Humor also is effective in delivering negative information about a candidate, because it seems less mean-spirited.
- ***Speak to members' core values.*** We should not get so caught up in talking about policies that we forget to talk about the fundamental values that drive union political commitments. When we need to educate members about changes in the OSHA budget or pension coverage regulations, for example, we must always communicate our underlying values: strong families, respect for hard work, keeping promises, doing the right thing and representing members.
- ***Use accessible language.*** Fight the tendency to use insider-speak, such as the formal name of legislation or agency acronyms. Most members won't know what you're talking about-and even if they do, the jargon will reinforce members' impressions that the union is part of a distant, impenetrable political culture that has little to do with their lives. Messages should be plain and clear: Talk about

the 40-hour week, not the "Fair Labor Standards Act"; talk about how often a candidate takes the side of working people, not about "COPE ratings.

10

We're more effective when we address the concerns of specific union audiences, instead of relying on a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

When you can, target messages to specific union audiences. Especially with direct mail, we often can reach subgroups among the membership, targeting them by characteristics such as gender, sector and age.

- In many situations, unions should consider using separate messages for *men and women*. A political direct mail piece addressed specifically to women, for example, was selected by nearly every female focus group participant as something she would be most likely to open and read. On the legislative front, communications with women might highlight education cutbacks and child care, while men might hear about tax cuts for the rich and U.S. jobs moving overseas. Even on a single issue, such as the 40-hour week, research shows that men and women respond to different arguments for labor's position.
- *Sector of employment* also is an important distinction. Construction trade members care passionately about preserving Davis-Bacon and other prevailing wage laws, while other union members rank this as a lower concern. Workers in manufacturing industries care more deeply than others do about foreign trade issues. Public employees understand that political figures are their "employers," and they can be appealed too much more in terms of the direct impact of politics on their incomes, conditions of employment and retirement security.
- In a diverse labor movement, sensitivity to *language differences* is essential. In focus groups, Spanish speaking union members express deep appreciation for Spanish language literature. Even those who are comfortable reading English are glad to see their union recognize the need for non-English educational materials.
- Research also consistently shows major *age variations* in political attitudes among union members. Unfortunately, younger members are less politically knowledgeable and less likely than older members to say they have received political information from their union (many of them are probably not even on union mailing lists). Clearly, reaching out to the young trade unionists who are the movement's future, and educating them about labor's economic perspective, issue priorities and political preferences, is a vitally important task today.

If labor only addresses the most broadly held concerns of workers, some of the most powerful mobilizing issues will be overlooked.