Could Advocacy Solve the Looming Knowledge Gap in Congress?

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By: David Lusk

Midterm elections will escalate the number of House and Senate members who know little about association issues. Plan your outreach and education strategy now.
Primary season is over, and we’re heading full steam into November’s congressional elections. The 2018 races are already considered monumental and part of a “change” election.

The Congress sworn in next January will be one with significantly less experience than the 115th. Why? Several members of the House and Senate joined the administration, are seeking another office, have died, or resigned due to scandal. And, a record number of House Republicans have announced retirement, including Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI). According to the House Press Gallery’s “casualty list,” these departures total 80 seats in the House and Senate and were from both major parties. Plus, Ryan’s departure means that regardless of who wins control of the House, a new speaker will be elected who will choose new committee chairs and other leadership positions.

Don’t forget, some incumbents will lose reelection bids in November, regardless of party. While predictive models haven’t been as accurate lately, history tells us the party in control of the White House (Republicans in this case) loses seats in midterm elections. Opinion pollster FiveThirtyEight’s research predicts Democrats will pick up between 17 to 59 House seats. They also note some Democratic Senate incumbents could lose reelection in spite of this potential “blue wave.” We could easily see 100 to 125 members (or more) of the 116th Congress, around a quarter of the institution that oversees lawmaking for the world’s largest nominal gross domestic product, seated in January having less than two years’ experience (with the majority of these seats being filled by incoming lawmakers).

For comparison, the “Republican revolution” of 1994 elected 97 freshmen (18 percent of Congress), while 107 freshmen were elected in 2010 (20 percent of Congress). It’s not unimaginable that a handful of legislators will decide they’ve had enough of DC and retire between November 6 and the first few months of 2019, having “held the seat” through the election so a governor of the same party can appoint a new member (especially in toss-up races). That would bump this “experience and knowledge gap” even higher.

Even the largest lobbying shops will find it a struggle to build rapport with so many inexperienced lawmakers during the first six months of 2019, prime Capitol Hill fly-in season for many associations. This looming knowledge gap means constituent meetings with lawmakers will center around issue education, not issue advocacy. Can Capitol Hill staff, whose average tenure has now dropped from two years to 18 months, buffer this knowledge shortfall very much? How do associations and other interest groups successfully achieve their policy goals in such an environment?

What’s Next for Associations

Just like exercise and personal health, a healthy federal policy effort isn’t built on an activism spike that occurs just once each year, particularly in the coming scenario. But a number of associations will enter this environment confidently in 2019.
For years, some associations and nonprofits have been instructing their members and supporters on 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, both in DC and back home in the district, extending the enterprise by empowering advocates with policy responsibilities once reserved only for staff. They have created an “evergreen” advocacy effort with relationships in place regardless of which party leads a chamber of Congress or which individual member leads an issue, or when.

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Rest assured, these key contacts will engage incoming legislators shortly after the elections, sharing their stories and helping them understand how federal policy affects the communities they will represent as of January. Some issue ambassador programs are so proactive that their volunteers have been approaching those running for office all year, working to make their issues a part of the candidate commentary leading up to November 6.

These aren’t your basic “online activists” who just click a mouse and send a message. Rather, associations invest deeply in these key contacts, helping them understand how to engage at a higher level and be an asset to legislators. Performance-based metrics gauge the success of each advocate.

Join the Discussion

Register for ASAE’s Midterm Election Review: Impact on Your Government Relations Strategy, taking place Thursday, November 8, from 3–5 p.m. at ASAE headquarters in Washington, DC. Deconstruct election results and learn how to align your government relations tactics with evolving political realities.

Many of these organizations witnessed the fruits of their labors over the last few years, achieving unprecedented legislative and regulatory victories. Having dozens or hundreds of volunteers at the ready to boost lobbying efforts should prove invaluable with a legislature that will lack even a basic
understanding of most associations’ issues.

Has your association considered how it will address the looming knowledge gap in Congress and advance your policy agenda in 2019? Extending the enterprise and leaning on your members via a key contact program could be one of the most effective investments to make for next year—and beyond.

Tags:

- **ADVOCACY**
- **LEGISLATION**

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