



CHAPTER X:

*Incumbency Protection:
Preparing for Your
Next Victory*

Congratulations! You ran a targeted and well-executed campaign for public office, and you've been elected to represent your district. You have just one question: Now what?

As an elected official, you must manage the dual roles of serving your constituents as an effective and principled legislator while also remaining politically focused on winning re-election or preparing yourself to run for and win election to higher office. Above all, you must remain committed to fighting for progressive change while remaining visible and accessible to your constituents, communicating regularly about your work on their behalf, and keeping yourself focused on preparing for your next election.

Following are proven strategies for making sure that your progressive values, legislative work and political priorities go hand in hand.

◆ **Say Thank You.** Waste no time after Election Day in saying thank you to the hundreds of people whose hard work put you in office. From your high-level donors and house party hosts to your volunteer canvassers and envelope stuffers, everyone should be thanked in the month following the election with a letter bearing your personal signature or a kind note written by hand. Recognizing those who made your election possible will ensure that they continue to support you and your work.

As a legislator, you should make it a habit to express thanks to those with whom you meet or do business. Sending a constituent a note of thanks after a meeting, recognizing the work of progressive leaders on your sponsored legislation, and thanking fellow legislators are great ways to facilitate relationships of mutual respect.

◆ **Assess Your Campaign.** Along with your campaign staff and kitchen cabinet, review your overall electoral effort. What was your margin of victory? How would you change your strategy, your message, your scheduling priorities, or your budget? Work with your team in the weeks following the election to document your successes as well as those areas that could have been improved. Doing so will help make sure you learn from your mistakes in the next campaign.

◆ **Develop Your Networks.** It is important to develop relationships with other progressive legislators and smart political leaders. Join organizations such as the National Conference of State Legislatures and participate in its Caucus activities. Join progressive legislators' networks, such as the Center for Policy Alternatives, the Center for Women Policy Studies, the EARN Network of the Economic Policy Institute, and Women's Action for New Directions (WAND/WiLL). Assess who the most effective progressive legislators are in your state and learn from them.

◆ **Get the Lay of the Land.** Get answers to the questions that will ensure a smooth transition in to public office and guide your legislative and political work. Understanding the rules early will help you plan accordingly and avoid costly and embarrassing mistakes down the road. Questions you will want to consider include:

- ◆ Who are the key players in the state capitol, including party leaders, committee chairpersons, lobbyists, reporters and opinion leaders?
- ◆ What are the rules on sending official, state-funded mail to your constituents touting your legislative work?
- ◆ How many staff can you hire in your legislative office?
- ◆ What are the laws governing your political activity and fundraising during the legislative session?
- ◆ Can your legislative staff engage in political activity?
- ◆ When are your financial reporting periods?

◆ **Establish Office and Hire Staff.** In most states, you will share an office with fellow legislators both in your district and in the state capitol, and you will be allotted a budget only large enough to hire (or share) one junior to mid-level staff person. Ideally, this individual will be someone who understands both politics and policy, can represent you diplomatically in the state capitol and among your constituents, and can effectively manage the competing demands of your legislative and campaign schedules.

Once you've hired staff and established your office(s), send everyone in your campaign database a letter announcing your new contact information and welcoming them to visit. Consider hosting an open house for your constituents and supporters shortly after you're sworn in and at regular intervals thereafter.

◆ **Establish Systems.** As with your campaign, you will want to establish systems for your most important recurring tasks. Doing so will be important to ensuring you are being as responsive as possible to your constituents and maintaining information in such a way that it can be integrated into your campaign effort. Systems you should establish may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- ◆ Providing and documenting constituent service on local and legislative issues;
- ◆ Tracking and returning calls;
- ◆ Filing, tracking and responding to constituent letters and emails;
- ◆ Capturing names in your database for later outreach and solicitation;
- ◆ Vetting all official documents, and
- ◆ Getting events on your schedule.

◆ **Fundraise, Fundraise, Fundraise.** Working within the boundaries of your states' fundraising rules for legislators, lay out a plan for raising money for your next electoral effort. As an elected official, you should reassess and expand your circles of benefit," as there will be power givers and others that may have supported your opponent during the campaign but will now have an interest in working with you.

If you have campaign debt, you should work quickly to raise the funds necessary to pay it off; if not, you should plan to send your first fundraising appeal within 90 days of taking office, depending on the rules for solicitation during the legislative session. While your next campaign may still be years away, developing your war chest early will be important in order to diminish the likelihood of potential political challengers.

◆ **Build and Maintain Relationships with the Press.** You will have greater access to media as an elected official than you did as a candidate, but your work will also be under greater scrutiny. Remember that the same rules regarding developing friendly yet professional relationships with reporters still apply. If you treat reporters with respect, honor their deadlines, and tell the truth, you will enjoy productive and mutually beneficial relationships with members of the press.

Remember that staying on message is just as important now that you are a legislator as it was when you were in the heat of the campaign; it will be critical to building support for your initiatives, developing your reputation as a legislator and leader, and building support for your future electoral efforts.

Use tools of the trade such as press releases and press conferences wisely to promote your progressive agenda. Consider being a regular contributor to your local paper, either through letters to the editor or a guest column keeping your constituents abreast of legislative developments.

◆ **Stay in Touch.** Make sure your constituents know about your good work on their behalf, and keep an open door policy that reinforces the people-driven nature of your work. By staying visible, you won't be a stranger to your voters when its time for the next election, and you will have provided tangible reasons why you deserve the votes of your constituents. Following are some ideas for staying in touch:

- ◆ Send an intermittent newsletter with updates on your work and general legislation from the state capitol. Your legislature may allow for and fund such mailings as official government business; if so, you should make the best use of these mailings within the rules.

- ◆ Send targeted mailings to segments of your list announcing your work on legislation of particular interest to them. For instance, if you are promoting a bill to increase teacher salaries, make sure you share the news with educators in your district.

- ◆ Host town hall meetings and/or open houses to give citizens a chance to interact with you and express their concerns, and to demonstrate your commitment to meeting the needs of your constituents.

◆ When meeting with constituent groups, take photographs that can be used in your newsletters and on your website, and mail copies to each individual with a handwritten note of thanks following the meeting.

◆ **Track Activity.** Keep track of your constituent calls and visits, town hall meetings, legislative votes, and constituent service successes. Being able to quantify your work and give specific examples of your accomplishments will help you assess the strengths and weaknesses in your legislative operation and promote your work politically in future races.

◆ **Be a Good Legislator.** As a progressive, you ran for office so that you could be a part of a greater good and affect people's lives for the better. Let this guide your work each day. Taking your work seriously by reading the bills you're voting on, using opportunities for floor statements wisely, developing relationships with committee chairpersons and party leaders, giving careful ideological consideration to your negotiations and compromises on the issues, and looking for opportunities to forge coalitions and sponsor legislation are all ways to ensure that you're doing your most important job – effectively working for progressive change in government.



I was first elected to office after I was told that I couldn't make a difference because I was just a mom in tennis shoes. Well, that made me even more determined to fight. Since that day, I've been elected to the school board, the state senate and today I'm the only former educator in the U.S. Senate. When you run for office, just remember that anyone with the right values who is determined enough can and will make a difference."

- U.S. Senator Patty Murray (WA)