



What Grassroots Ambassadors Need to Know

The Three Levels of Government

Starting with an understanding of which level of government can help you achieve your goal allows you to evaluate the political environment and develop a message that truly resonates. What are these three levels? First, there's the "local" level: think of your city council, mayor, county commission, local agencies such as transportation or housing or a regional organization. Government activity at this level is usually confined to very narrow geographic areas.

The next level is the "state" level: think of, well, your state government. This would include your governor, your state House and Senate (except Nebraska – you just have one) and state agencies. Policies discussed at this level will generally impact the entire state or large portions of the state. A few state level examples of government activity include funding for and management of state parks, building and maintenance of state highways and, of course, those lovely state income taxes that many people pay.

Finally, there's the federal level. This is where Grassroots Ambassadors interact with Congress, the President and federal agencies (think Department of Education, Department of Labor, etc.). Government activity at this level is generally very broad in scope.

In order to be effective, you must know which level of government can help you achieve your goal. Sometimes, that's easy. If you want to have your sidewalk repaired, that's almost always your local government. If you want to see changes at a state park, the state government is the place to go. And, if you want to see changes in national laws, I'm afraid you'll have to deal with the federal government.

The Three Branches of Government

Another important "three" to keep in mind is the three branches of government. These are the judicial branch, the executive branch and the legislative branch. The relative strengths and weaknesses of each have ebbed and flowed over the years, and scholars disagree as to which branch is the "most important." We will not be resolving that dilemma. Rather, our goal is twofold. First, we want to look at each of these branches through the "advocacy lens" to determine where and how Grassroots Ambassadors can have the most say.

Second, and perhaps most important, we need to understand why we are so focused on what happens in Congress, state legislatures and city councils. The short answer is that while citizen participation can and does occur at all levels and within all branches of government, citizens will find their strongest power lies in their interactions with the legislative branch.

That said, we ignore the other branches at our peril – so let's take a quick look at the judicial and executive branches before delving into the legislative branch.

The Judicial Branch

The judicial branch refers to the court systems of our country, either the U.S. Federal Courts or the court systems of the various states. Individual communities have local court systems as well, of course. These tend to be agents of, or managed by, the state judicial system. The job of the judicial branch at any level is broadly to interpret laws, but each system has very different jurisdictions. For example, because most laws that impact citizens on a day-to-day basis (criminal code violations, traffic laws, etc.) are state laws, the state courts have very broad jurisdictions. Most “garden variety” burglaries, traffic violations and interpersonal disputes play out at this level.

The federal courts, on the other hand, may consider only those cases that raise questions of federal law. These might include international cases where the U.S. is involved, issues related specifically to federal laws, such as maritime or bankruptcy law, or cases that involve large-scale disputes between residents of different states. Some of these issues might rise to the level of the federal Supreme Court, which interprets questions relating to the Constitution.

Those who constructed our nation’s government over 200 years ago intended the federal court system, and specifically the Supreme Court, to act as a “check” on the powers of the other two branches of government. The Justices of the Supreme Court can even find federal or state legislation or acts of the President to be unconstitutional – and nothing short of a constitutional amendment will change their mind.

The Executive Branch

The executive branch of government administers and implements the laws passed by the legislature. At the state level, the executive branch is comprised of the Governor and the various state agencies. At the federal level, the President of the United States heads the executive branch and is responsible for the actions and activities of the various federal agencies. When the state legislature or the U.S. Congress passes a law, it is the job of the various agencies and divisions within the related executive branch to set up the programs and processes necessary to ensure proper implementation of the law.

How do you know whether you’re dealing with an executive branch entity? Well, the terms “Department of…” or “Agency” usually offer your first clue. So if you’re dealing with the “[your state] Department of Transportation”, that’s usually the executive branch agency in your state responsible for implementing and administering transportation laws. In its role as administrator and implementer of the laws, an executive branch agency can enormously impact how individual citizens or businesses will be affected by legislative policies. In addition, unique executive branch powers such as the presidential or governor’s “veto” can serve to dramatically limit the power of the legislature.

The Legislative Branch

Legislatures at all levels create the laws that govern the jurisdiction that particular legislature serves. Local city councils develop laws that impact the city (such as zoning codes or housing policies), state legislatures work on laws that impact the entire state while the U.S. Congress is responsible for laws affecting the entire nation. In addition, legislatures often manage the “purse strings” of their jurisdiction. In other words, the other two branches of government rely on the legislature to provide their funding. As you might imagine, this often gives the legislature a great deal of influence over what goes on in the executive and judicial branches.

Local city councils, county commissions, state legislatures and the U.S. Congress are examples of legislative branch institutions. Most of the state legislatures are structured similarly to the U.S. Congress, with two “houses” (often called a House and a Senate). In some cases, either the organization traditionally thought of as the “House” or the entire legislature itself may be called a “General Assembly.” Despite these differences in nomenclature, for our purposes, it’s useful to think of most of the state legislatures as “bicameral” (i.e., two houses) institutions. One exception is the state of Nebraska which, for reasons of its own, decided to have a unicameral (i.e., one house) legislature. At the local level (such as the city or county), the law-making body is usually just one group.

The people who are elected are generally referred to as “council members,” “commissioners,” “legislators,” “members of the Assembly,” “Congressman or Congresswoman,” “Representative” or “Senator” depending on the level of government in which they serve, and their respective house, where applicable. When you hear these terms bandied about, you can feel fairly certain that you’re dealing with a legislature.

The most important thing for an effective advocate to remember is that while they may all have different structures, every legislative organization has one thing in common: each is comprised of people elected by citizens to represent their interests. As such, each is ultimately responsible to and reliant upon the perspectives of those they represent.

Granted, sometimes it seems like the elected representatives in our legislature do not take the responsibility to represent the views of their constituents very seriously. That’s where elections come in handy: if you’re not feeling as though the people in the legislature take their responsibilities seriously, don’t just sit back and complain – vote the bums out! In fact, your power to vote gives you an amazing hold over your legislators. The framers of the Constitution saw the ability of citizens to choose their own government as the ultimate “check and balance” on all three branches of government. Too bad so many of us squander that power – but not you, right?