

# The Youth Work Lobbyist

## *Shaping Government Relations and Making Politicians Listen*

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*Europe Goes Local: Supporting Youth Work at the Municipal Level*

Youth work is, in many ways, about **advocacy and representation**. First, youth work aims to grow young people's involvement and participation in society. Youth are encouraged to make themselves heard so they can overcome their marginal presence and influence public decisions. In this sense, youth work is about empowering active citizenship. Second, youth workers are themselves advocates and representatives. When they speak for and on behalf of young people as clients, youth workers **articulate legitimate interests and promote goals** for youth policy and youth-connected issues and causes. They help **organize and mobilize communities and constituencies**. An interest group has higher capacity for external influence.

Third, youth workers represent their own vocation. Their **professionalism** includes a responsibility to weigh in on public policy-making on behalf of their own vocation and colleagues. Youth workers aim to be publicly recognized for their qualifications and responsible practice, to protect their values and job autonomy, and to shape public decisions that affect their jobs and budgets that pay for them.

In all three areas, it is necessary to find **access and communication channels**. Policy-makers should receive accurate, complete, valid, fair, and persuasive information about beneficial or adverse effects of a policy decision at the right time. Moreover, because most policy-makers are not experts, there is a need for **continuous issue education and concrete advice** about youth issues. Working within the policy-making process, which is a competitive environment, requires a political mindset, political skills, and strategy. When they are combined for an attempt to directly influence institutional decision-making on a certain project with **persuasive communication**, then this is what, generally speaking, constitutes "lobbying."

It seems that lobbying is only what interest groups do from the outside of government. But parts of **governments also lobby each other**. They, too, build **networks, liaisons, and coalitions** with like-minded offices and external groups. They, too, try to shape **media and public perception** in order to gain legitimacy for their claims and demands. They, too, want support for policy positions, projects, programs, and budget requests for staff and money. They, too, rival with others for resources. Whether they call it lobbying or not, they pursue lobbying strategies.

Lobbying may work through various channels: inside or outside, more formal or more informal. Youth work may be represented on formal, **institutionalized platforms**, for example a **youth council or youth policy advisory panel** that works in

partnership with executive agencies or legislative bodies. **Form, format, and mission vary** across Europe's jurisdictions: A council may have unclear functions, or be tasked with formal consultation and report-making, or it may co-direct and co-manage youth programs from policy design to street-level implementation. It may be an ad-hoc board or loose caucus with floating membership, an appointed standing committee, or an elected parliamentary assembly with seats and votes allotted to certain groups. It may even be officially part of public administration, or exercise oversight over administrators.

Such formal mandates can enable youth work representatives to place formal motions for resolutions, ordinances, or budget requests on the table for public debate. Any comment or recommendation on proposed budgets or laws goes on record before final action is taken. This can make it easy to engage in "inside" lobbying, just as government departments or agencies lobby each other. Working a formal platform requires **familiarity with institutional rules and procedures**, of course; and the internal politics of such a body may be problematic. In any case, it does not guarantee success. More to the point, it is **just one advocacy channel among others**.

A formal platform can never substitute for the practice of **informal influence**. In an informal environment, it is purely the decision of the addressee whether to listen or not, get engaged in substantial dialogue or not, and be influenced or not. It is a **buyer's market**: the supply of petition and information typically exceeds demand, and it is easy to rebuff a lobbyist and ignore the advice. In other words, more people want to influence than people want to let themselves be influenced. In this **crowded room** full of influence-seekers, **lobbying must be competitive**.

## ■ POLITICAL MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Ideally, the addressee recognizes a useful, helpful service and advice that serves the receiver. A lobbyist offers expert content knowledge as informational benefits. However, such expertise must also be transported as practically useful advice to the right people at the right time and place, in the right format and context. The critical element is the perception of the **political value proposition** of the lobbyist's offer.

Political players live in a **universe of interests**. Generally, they accept that any advice will push or pull them in a particular direction—that's politics. Sorting out and balancing interests is the point of it all. Therefore, successful advice does not need to be interest-free, objective, and neutral. It is legitimate for the adviser to have "special interests," but they must, for the policy-maker, be **recognizable and compatible**. "Compatible" here means agreeable in terms of ideals and values, but also congruent with current work conditions, practical priorities, personal capacity, operational and political limits of the policy-maker's daily practice. Can they deliver? Lobbyists better do their homework before they approach their addressees.

The lobbyist needs to build political management skills, i.e. a capacity to process political information, develop planful activity, get into the play of the policy-making process, and win access and trust as a policy-maker's adviser. In order to grow professionally and make oneself (and one's house or group) welcome as an adviser, a **portfolio of four roles** will need to be filled:

1. the role of *analyst* who observes, analyzes, and evaluates the policy discourse, decision procedures, and broader issues and constellations of policy-making;
2. the *representative and advocate* who is not just a "technical" expert with youth expertise and experience but an active mission promoter, spokesperson, and diplomat who will translate, facilitate, and act as a group liaison;

3. the *negotiator* who views any external communication as a potential arena for transaction of information, advice, and support, and political arbitration; and
4. the *strategist* who spots any window of opportunity for a chance to engineer policy initiatives and resilience against threats and uncertain situations, and who is a creative, resourceful political thinker overall.

This portfolio reflects that all politics mixes substantial policy issues and power issues. Relevant advice accepts that there are **political rationalities**: the rationality of institutional, partisan, or personal competition; the rationality of bargaining for the price for a Yes or No or benevolent neutrality; and the rationality of signaling and symbolic communication. A truly political calculation will consider the balance of power, hierarchies, policy-makers' and opinion leaders' preferences and attention levels, process management and timing, public expectations, media agendas, and the necessities of political marketing (i.e. image-making and showmanship). The lobbyist is wise to pay attention to all of these factors because the policy-maker certainly will.

Obviously, the youth work lobbyist needs to be politically well-informed about ongoing proceedings and precedent cases, working agendas, the political calendar (including elections, legislative sessions, and terms of office), potential majorities, and predispositions of key players. In continuous conversation with officeholders and staff, the lobbyist will find out who and what is up or down, in or out, whose doors are open for new demands, and which windows of opportunity are opening or closing.

Lobbying policy-makers is an external activity, but the lobbyist also has an **important internal assignment**: advising his or her own organization and its leadership about how policy-making works and what this means for internal planning. The lobbyist is the organization's go-to external political environment expert who explains what is going on and acts as sounding board and feasibility checker for the organization's public strategy, development of policy positions, and its partnerships.

### ■ NEED HELP? CALL A LOBBYIST

As stated before, the influence market is a buyer's market. Representatives of interest groups or government offices compete for policy-makers' time and attention. This means, first, that the lobbyist's **message must be comprehensible and precise**. It must be easy to understand what the lobbyist wants the policy-maker to **do (or not)**, and why. Amateurs often confuse policy-makers with **muddy briefings and wishy-washy conversation**. A vague request or proposal will only receive a **vague echo**, or none at all. It must be clear what "**The Ask**" is that the lobbyist brings up.

Second, it also means that their lobbying must consider and satisfy the addressee's needs and expectations. Otherwise, the addressee will be unwilling to listen or take advice, or worse, listen to a rival lobbyist and take that other advice. As a practical matter, this means a **lobbyist should be useful, and lobbying should enable the policy-maker to do his or her job well**. The lobbyist wants to develop a **reputation as an extra resource or extended workbench**. Yes, there are situations when the lobbyist must criticize, object, protest, be annoying, and apply pressure. There are good reasons why interest groups are also called "**pressure groups**," and policy-makers may **feel the heat** in certain conflicts when group members mobilize the public (or certain publics), especially in election years. But **complaining is a bad way to start a relationship**. A better idea is to get friendly, interested policy-makers into the habit of calling the lobbyist for assistance and support. This requires **trust**,

**confidence, reliability, and speedy responsiveness.** The constructive, supportive lobbyist will

1. not just highlight problems but offer solutions, and identify factors, trends, and windows of opportunity which help turn theoretical options into real policy options.
2. point to problems which promise visible political rewards for the policy-maker who invests time and energy in solving the problems.
3. be on call to supply facts, data, and background fast and reliably, and fill knowledge gaps without piling up a mountain of information which is impossible to climb.
4. translate complex, abstract, dry policy material into clear, comprehensible, concrete cases and authentic stories that can be communicated in a plausible way.
5. educate the policy-makers with balanced persuasive argumentation, but without any attempt to manipulate, or coax him or her into a decision that can prove costly.
6. actively offer a network of contacts, and introduce potential new supporters, opinion leaders, and partners.

It is obvious that a policy-maker will take the lobbyist's advice because expertise is a valuable **medium of exchange in a relationship of exchange**. The policy-maker will listen and allow influence because he or she expects to **gain competitive advantage**. This benefit is exactly what the lobbyist wants the policy-maker to like.

But influence is, by definition, only a potential driver of changing attitudes or action. Lobbyists are normally **petitioners rather than power holders**, and they need to guarantee information service supply without any certainty that they will receive anything in return from the lobbied policy-maker. Productive partnerships with policy-makers will seldom start with an outright "do ut des." Instead, they require a venture capitalist's **patience and long-term investment**. On the other hand, if a relationship simply does not work and yields no substantial gain over time, the lobbyist may re-evaluate the sunk investment, and then turn to farming more fertile fields.

## ■ OPPORTUNITIES AND RESTRAINTS IN LOCAL POLITICS

It has been said that "**all politics is local**," but that is only partially true. There are differences in size and scope. Statewide, national, or European politics tends to be abstract, distant, and driven by often anonymous forces and large bureaucracies. There is also, by and large, a lower level of public trust in higher-up policy-makers. By contrast, local politics starts with familiar faces at the front door and at the neighbors' fence. It is more personal and concrete, less partisan, less often played by career politicians, less mass media driven, and less polarized, competitive and rivalrous.

Overall, **local politics is more unmediated and unfiltered**, and there are **fewer access barriers**. Therefore, it is often easier to step into a door and make voices heard instantly. But the opposite may also be true! In fact, it can be more difficult to break into a walled-off local policy-making arena than into a regional or national one.

Nevertheless, it is comparatively easy to make a connection with a region's prefect, county commissioner, city mayor, local government administrator, town

council member, or borough alderman. Local policy-makers often want to **prove that they are accessible** and listen “to the people.” In particular, the directly elected local executive may see value in making him- or herself more effective as an administrator, or in building an image as a big-tent communicator, family patron, and interest group moderator. **Local clubs**, church groups, chambers of commerce, trade unions, civic groups, charities, lodges, volunteer fire brigades, music or sports clubs—many of these are locally more important than **political parties**. The local pool of group activists and honorary officeholders may be quite limited. Political party work tends to be the extension of non-party work. Parties themselves tend to have less money and organizational resources for parliamentary and election projects than upper-level headquarters. **Candidates** must assemble their own resources if they want to win office. Local parliaments are filled with part-time amateur citizen-politicians who employ no staff. The number of locally influential people can be small. Competition and pluralism are limited. It is unsurprising that not every local community is a vibrant open marketplace of policy ideas and broad popular participation. Indeed, **local political elites and political culture** may discourage public confrontation over issues but prefer consensual, small-group, nontransparent, nondeliberative backroom deals as a routine standard mode of operation (not to mention nepotism, cronyism, and corruption).

**Closed-shop politics** may also be a problem in youth councils and advisory boards. In some jurisdictions, a youth council or commission may be a prime example for what political scientists call “**corporatism**.” It incorporates the representatives of certain interest groups in a broader governance structure, gives them an official channel and visible legitimacy, and links it as a consultative body with elected or appointed officeholders. This constellation has clear advantages. It has problems, too, because it creates **un- or underrepresented outsiders** and amplifies any existing **asymmetry of influence** among youth organizations. Some, but not all, have a seat, or more seats, and direct access to municipal administrators, public monies, and staff. Some organizations may befriend certain parties, politicians, or agency heads, and reap the benefits of such **favoritism and patronage**. Others find that they are being cut off.

Institutionalized youth platforms are, however, practically never a political power center in local governance. They have only indirect and limited authority, and its resonance and reach among the wider public may be very weak. Important budget and rules decisions that affect youth will be made elsewhere in the city hall or county house. Even the legislature’s youth committee or mayor’s office for youth may not be the focus of what the youth work lobbyist may need to do at any given time.

Generally, he or she should never assume that their specialized “**policy ghetto**” is what makes the political world go around. Seen realistically through the eyes of an ambitious, career-hungry politician or administrator, youth policy is a relatively **minor policy field** that lacks prestige, big budgets, media visibility, and other politically prized rewards and resources. It is rather unlikely that the city’s or county’s **political heavyweights, leaders and powerbrokers** command a reputation as youth policy experts and draw their political capital from this field. By contrast, officeholders who are in charge of youth policy are often minor figures who can get easily thrown under the bus. Therefore, the youth work lobbyist will tend contacts among specialist circles where communication is easy (because everybody agrees that youth policy is important), but also build and maintain access to non-expert policy-makers who can truly have an impact. The key challenge is to convince these “movers and shakers” is that youth issues are interesting and critical enough for investing their political capital.