



## UNDERSTANDING ELECTIONS & CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY ENGAGING WITH CANDIDATES AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

Presenter: Lex Paulson, Professor of Rhetoric and Political Thought, Institut d'Etudes Politiques - Sciences Po, Paris

### Transcript

[TEXT: YOUNG AFRICAN LEADERS INITIATIVE  
ONLINE TRAINING SERIES]

Hi, my name is Lex Paulson and this is “Engaging with Candidates and Elected Officials.”

In this lesson, we’re going to review how to engage with a candidate or elected official on an issue that matters to you. We’ll discuss the specific steps you should take to prepare for your meeting. We’ll also look at best practices for how you should conduct yourself and your business during the meeting. Ultimately, our goal is to get candidates and elected officials to take the actions you want and need.

Now, advocating for your cause is a job that lasts 12 months a year. But elections are an especially important time because politicians are most focused on earning your support. Many politicians will just make general promises and ask for your vote. Your job is to get them to make specific commitments to help your community, and then follow up, again and again, when the election is done.

Build relationships with every politician and political party you can, so that whoever wins – now and in the future – you will have an open door to the people making decisions.

Before you meet a candidate or official, you have to do your homework. Here are four ways you should prepare.

First, be specific on what your government can do to help the issue you care about. For example: If you care about giving more children access to primary school, the government can raise the education budget to build more schools and hire more teachers.



Second, find out who the specific officials are who need to act and what you want them to do and by when. For example: To raise the education budget by 25 percent, the president and speaker of parliament may need to agree to include this in the budget law for the coming year. So you need to know when the budget law is written and whose input will matter.

Third, identify the key officials who have acted on this issue previously. Know what their record is and what promises they have made. Make sure you know what they have done or not done on this issue so you can build on their efforts. For example: A key official made promises to “make education a priority” in the last election. He also voted two years ago to reduce school fees and raise teachers’ salaries by 10 percent, but hasn’t acted since. If this official gave a reason why, you’ll want to know so you

Fourth, craft ideas on how the community, including associations, businesses and media, can strengthen the action you think government should take. For example: Construction companies could donate materials to build schools. Community associations can partner with the Ministry of Education to train parents on how to prepare children for school.

After you’ve done your homework – identifying the problem, the key actors and your specific request – you’re ready for the meeting.

Getting a meeting with a candidate or elected official very much depends on circumstances where you are. But here are a few suggestions. You can visit their offices or contact their staff. Use personal connections, like someone who knows the candidate or official. And look for public meetings they’re scheduled to attend and seek them out there. In general, in-person requests tend to be the most successful; phone calls the least.

Prepare your conversation with these five steps. It’s a good idea to practice with a friend or colleague beforehand. You should be clear and direct, but also friendly and natural when you speak.

First, introduce yourself and thank them for meeting with you. Explain how your organization works to serve your community on this issue. Be sure to thank them for their past actions on the issue and be specific.

Second, talk about the problem in your community that you want their help with. Tell a story of someone impacted by this problem. And use facts and figures to show the size of the problem.



Third, propose your solution to the problem, including ideas for immediate actions by the government as well as a longer-term vision. Share your thoughts on how all of society can be mobilized around this issue.

Fourth, make “the ask.” Be specific about what action you want the official to take and by when. Express how their support of this issue will gain them recognition and appreciation in the community. Ask them politely but directly, “Can we count on you?”

Finally, wrap up your meeting with a follow-up discussion or action in mind. No matter what their answer, smile and thank them for their time. Make a specific plan to talk again. And always get contact information, both for them and their staff.

A good way to keep an official engaged on your issue is to invite them or their staff to events that show the impact your organization is having in the community.

Now this may seem like a lot of steps, but you can do them all in five minutes if you need to. The most important thing is to ask them to take a specific action and to give the impression that you are well-organized, friendly and determined to gain their support.

Don’t be discouraged if you don’t get a commitment the first time. The goal is not to solve everything in one conversation, but to build a relationship based on mutual respect. If you are well-informed and well-organized, they will begin depending on you for information and asking you for your advice. So be patient, be specific and be creative. Follow these steps, and you can become a powerful advocate for your community.

After you’ve completed all the lessons in this course at [YALI.state.gov](http://YALI.state.gov), you can test your knowledge and earn a YALI Network certificate.

[TEXT: Test your knowledge  
[YALI.STATE.GOV](http://YALI.STATE.GOV)]

[TEXT: Select photos provided courtesy of  
National Democratic Institute and © AP Images]

