



BIRDDOGGING 101

What is “birddogging?”

Birddogging is the activist tactic of attending public appearances in order to win new policies from politicians. It usually involves asking an elected official or candidate a question in order to get a commitment on an issue. It can also involve showing up at town hall meetings and other events held by sitting legislators. This direct interaction between activists and decision makers rarely happens in Washington. In their home districts, it is easy to have a big impact through the simple act of bringing five people to an event, working together to raise your hands and ask questions that provoke an answer from the target politician. Birddogging has been particularly effective during electoral campaign seasons, when politicians are trying to impress the public to gain their votes. Through birddogging, we can make it known that our campaigns are voting issues, and get commitments from people who have to run for election.

Why birddog?

Many of us have at one point written a letter to our member of Congress, and some of us have even called their office in Washington. These are all important parts of a campaign to win new policies, because we are communicating our demand (and sometimes our strength in numbers) to decision makers – the people who have the power to give us what we want. But sometimes, when phone calls and letters aren't enough, directly interacting with the decision maker is a way to ensure that our demands are translated quickly into effective new policies and funding for people with HIV. All of these tactics can and should be used to win policy victories.

Birddogging can be particularly effective because it's a tactic where we directly reach policy makers when they are outside of the protective bubbles they surround themselves with when they are in Washington. Public events are especially valuable since activists can often gain direct access and get an answer in front of members of the public and media, putting them on record so we can hold them accountable for their promises.

How to birddog:

1. **GET TO EVENTS:** Make note of candidate or legislator events that will be happening near you. You can learn about upcoming public events by getting on legislators' e-mail lists, joining the lists of campus Democrats and Republicans,

and calling district offices. Keep your eye on local press, though, because often local reports will be the first to announce specific events.

- a. **CALLS:** Call district offices and ask when the next in-district event with your representative will be. During campaign season, call the campaign offices and say “Hi, I have a few friends who were wondering what the next couple of opportunities are to see Senator so-and-so?”
 - b. **EVENT FORMAT:** Ask the event organizers about the event: when do the doors open, do you need a ticket and where can you get one, and, most importantly, is there a question and answer period?
 - c. **ACCESS:** Sometimes you need a ticket – especially for high-profile campaign events. These almost always go quickly. Sometimes you just need to print a ticket off of the candidate’s website. If the tickets are gone or the event is a fundraiser, you can volunteer for the event to get in for free. It is perfectly fine to ask questions or even shout questions at politicians – even if you are a volunteer!
 - d. **THERE IS HELP!:** Let other SGAC chapters know when you are planning to attend an event in your area. Also, Health GAP may know of other people nearby who can come back you up!
2. **GET A POSSE:** It can be intimidating to go to a campaign appearance by yourself, no question. So bring a posse – just as simple as collecting a few friends will strengthen your effort a lot. Every single person can have a big impact when you’re bird-dogging. But four or five polite people armed with effective questions can completely alter the vibe of a question-and-answer period and win new commitments from the candidate! It is best to bring a group with you so you are better able to get your questions asked and answered and so that you can back each other up.
 3. **MAKE A PLAN:** It is very important to make a plan in advance with your posse. Truthfully, it seldom works to “wing it,” nor can we really just tell our team what to do and expect them to do it.
 - a. Important: Write your questions in advance – even the most experienced birddoggers sometimes stumble over their questions when the microphone is on and the cameras are pointing at them. Many regular folks who are interested in issues and who are not working with a team to win something will write their questions before asking them. (See below for help on good questions.) A posse of five to ten activists might write just two or three questions and then be ready to follow up when and if the target gives an incomplete answer.

b. Be sure to follow up on each other's questions. Birdoggers have been successful at large and small events simply by speaking with the decision maker on the way to the stage, or during the handshake line after the event. (See below for more on handshakes.)

c. If the event is large, like a rally with thousands of people, AIDS activists have gotten the candidates' attention by getting up to the front and holding up 11x17 posters with clear, short questions or statements they slipped into their pockets, and/or shouting a chant ten or fifteen times. If you're going to chant, one person will need to cue the chanting at the appropriate time, and the group will have determined in advance how long to chant. It's easy to run out of steam when all the cameras are pointing, but getting heard is the goal, right?

d. PRACTICE: Especially if you'll be chanting or shouting questions, it is very important to make sure you can be heard. In even a medium rally, you will need to be louder than you ever knew you could be! Even for simple Q&A sessions, practice with your teammates to strengthen everyone's efforts and avoid mistakes.

4. **GET GOOD SEATS** – which means arriving early! Good seats are in or near the very front row and/or near microphones placed in the aisles.

a. Most of the time, unless you have secured special tickets, there will be some sort of VIP area. Don't worry; clever activists can almost always slip into these areas to get to the front. Just walk in like you know what you're doing, and you will almost never get stopped. On the off chance that you do get stopped, just wait for the VIP section to open up to the general public – it always will!

b. Arrive early – around an hour early for a small meeting, half an hour early for a very small gathering at a coffee shop, and as much as three hours before the doors open for a big rally or town hall with a front-runner candidate.

c. If there are several people in your team, spread out. People sitting next to each other will not be called on. This is part of why it is important to have a plan in advance and to practice.

d. Make eye contact with the candidate or the staff who decide whether to call on you or hand you the mic.

e. Sit where the target can hear you and see you (right in front of the podium if you can)!

f. Applauding wildly and shouting supportive things during the speech can make it much more likely you will be called on.

5. GET YOUR HAND UP FIRST, FAST, AND HIGH: This sounds simple, but it is the most important thing to do to get called on! Most people will wait for the second or third question to raise their hand, and some only raise their hand half way. These people will rarely get called on. However, for some reason, if you are the first, fastest, highest person to get their hand in the air, you will almost always get called on!

a. Raise your hand before questions are called for – like before the candidate finishes inviting questions. Raise your hand even if there is not supposed to be a Q&A period—if you are in the front and have been applauding, the target will often spontaneously decide to give you a question.

b. Keep in mind - we are on a mission! Our job is to get an answer from the candidate, and our mission requires us to get heard. See below for help on constructing powerful questions.

6. Get a handshake – and a photo, and an autograph – and AN ANSWER! The handshake line is another chance to ask the target a question, in public, and usually near reporters. After the formal parts of an event, there is almost always a handshake line.

a. Anticipate where the handshake is going to be (usually near the stage) and quickly bring your team forward, even before the Q&A section is done (but only if you've gotten your question answered). Squish right up next to the rope, don't lose your spot in front, and wait for the candidate to come to you!

b. One important tactic: don't let go of her hand until you have your answer! Politicians are used to this, and they will rarely pull away. If there are a few of you, it can help to crowd around the candidate to prolong the handshake for as long as necessary until they have said "yes" to your team. If there are more than four in your team, you can get them twice!

c. Another way to get their attention, when grabbing their hand, is to simply say "Sen/Gov/Mayor ____, can I ask you a question?" Remember that even in the best situations, you only have a few seconds to ask your question, so make it short (just one sentence) and PRACTICE since you won't be able to read off a piece of paper!

d. Politicians – even the most powerful – are suckers for posed photographs. Getting a photo of you and your posse one at a time with the target while the questioning is going on is a good way to extend

discussion and/or seal the deal. They also like to autograph signs, clothing, books or whatever you have.

e. Have your video camera rolling! If the target answers your question, we want to have their answer recorded so that we can use the commitment (or lack thereof) to target them in the future.

7. **GET QUOTED:** After the event, talk to the press and get them to cover your questions and the politician's statement. The press will not come to talk to you – you've got to go to them. But they will be interested in what you have to say. Prepare your quote just like you prepared your question.
 - a. Important: when you're talking with a reporter, you'll want to keep the discussion to what YOU want to say about your issue, and not on other, less important items. You only have to answer the question you should have been asked! If a reporter asks you, "What did you think about Senator so-and-so's speech on Social Security?" or "How do you like the Senator's new hairpiece?" it's perfectly appropriate to dodge the question completely and respond with your quote instead ("The important thing here today was that the Senator made a clear commitment to support \$8 billion over 5 years to hire new health care workers that will save the lives of people living with AIDS in Africa"). Reporters are accustomed to people ignoring questions, and they have some obligation to report on what the public thinks at campaign appearances, so be sure to give them only what you want your quote to say — otherwise your quote might end at the point that you have filled in the blank in the story the reporter already has written in their head.
8. **REPORT BACK:** Birddoggers are networked across the country in many different states during important campaigns like this one – but it only works if we keep each other apprised of our efforts and progress. Our collective voices can be much more powerful if someone follows up on your birddogging ten states away. Send an email to SGAC so others can follow up!