

WHY POLITICS MATTERS

First and foremost, politics matters because there is funding for the arts. In 2008, the state and federal governments combined to invest over \$500 million in the arts.

Second, new laws are passed every year. In Massachusetts, 7,000 bills are filed every legislative session. Very few of these bills will pass, but when they become law they can affect your life and livelihood. For example, an early draft of health insurance reform in Massachusetts could not accommodate musicians who combined income from multiple sources. Each of these “jobs” was considered part-time, until artists organized to explain that the combination of jobs amounted full-time work.

Finally, we as a society set our priorities through the budget process at all levels of government. Politicians may say they love the arts, but it’s not a priority until we invest money. When government establishes a priority, the private sector often follows its lead. For example, Massachusetts began a cultural facilities grants program that invested \$25 million in the first year for capital improvement, restoration and expansion for concert halls, museums, theaters and so forth. The private sector responded with \$575 million in matching funds.

Politics is how we establish our priorities in a democracy. If you’re not part of the fight, you will never become a priority.

Arts Voters—Remember that politicians respond to the issues raised by voters. So, the first step is to contact a candidate, elected official or her campaign to ask for their support for the arts. Tell them your story—the challenges you face as an artist or a presenter; how you contribute to the community through jobs, payroll tax or education; and what you hope the elected official will do in office: increase arts funding, create an arts district, support arts education or other issues.

If six arts voters ask arts questions, it will get the attention of a legislative candidate. If three dozen ask, it will get the attention of a Congressperson. As more arts voters ask, candidates will address the questions of arts policy. In 2002, as I mentioned, none of the nine gubernatorial candidates in Massachusetts had a policy position on arts and culture. Four years later, both major candidates issued position papers and discussed the arts on the stump.

State Advocacy Groups—You can amplify your solo voice by joining in a choir of voices. There are two key organizations to join: Americans for the

Arts and your statewide or local arts advocacy group. Americans for the Arts coordinates advocacy to the federal government. There are 46 state and local advocacy organizations advocating in 41 states. Join your state and local advocacy groups to learn the key issues and the coordinated message being delivered to politicians. Using a message coordinated statewide means that you and a thousand other arts voters are getting the attention of candidates by asking the same questions.

Becoming a Cultural Advocate—A cultural advocate works to establish a relationship with her elected officials so that the politician becomes an ally and supporter, not only of the arts but of your work and your organization. You and the elected official have a shared mission: improving the community. Through your relationship, you are teaching the elected official how arts and culture help to improve the community. Building a relationship with an elected official is similar to cultivating donors, convincing them of the value of your mission.

Invite the elected official to tour your

facility or to attend a concert (be sure to introduce her to the audience.) Prepare a one-page information sheet about your organization, detailing both the challenges and the contributions your work makes to the community—such as employment, children served, and vendor spending.

Most politicians won’t ever understand the arts unless we talk to them. We don’t need to convert politicians into music lovers. We only need to show them that there is political, economic, and community value in the arts. We do that through voting and raising our voices collectively and individually so that our issues are heard and our contributions are recognized.

As we become more effective cultural advocates, state senators will still go to banjo lessons and watch cowboy movies. But, along the way, they will support the arts—because we have made it politically valuable for them to do so.

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