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# Show and tell advocacy: how advocates convince policymakers by showing them the work they do

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Show and tell advocacy is the lobbying tactic that many advocates use to promote their interests and build relationships with policymakers. This tactic has a long history, for example John Muir took President Roosevelt on a camping trip to lobby for the president's support in improving management of Yosemite. Many organizations engage in similar practices today. However, it has not been well-described in the literature. In this paper, we highlight a few cases to draw attention to this activity and offer several theoretical explanations for why it may be successful. We offer this paper as a call to practitioners and academics to do more collaborative research that unpacks different lobbying strategies so that we can study their effectiveness which is important for grassroots organizations operating on tight budgets and for academic research to better understand influence and political power.

## KEYWORDS

lobbying activity, advocacy, environment, Congress (US), representation

## Introduction

Advocacy in the US takes many forms, from organizing letter-writing campaigns to expert lobbyists work drafting legislation and much more in between. Political scientists often make a distinction between inside and outside lobbying (see e.g., [Victor, 2007](#); [Weiler and Brändli, 2015](#)). Outside lobbying is a strategy to gain broad public support for the group's goal and to apply grassroots pressure on policymakers. Inside lobbying describes the close relationships advocates form with policymakers by providing information and serve as what some describe as a legislative subsidy ([Hall and Deardorff, 2006](#)).

This paper looks at a particular type of inside lobbying—what we call show and tell advocacy. Across policy domains and levels of government, organized interests sometimes engage in a lobbying tactic that involves hosting an event or trip so that policymakers can experience firsthand, rather than just being told, the impact the entity has and why the policymaker should support their preferred policy outcome. Like other forms of lobbying, show and tell advocacy is about transmitting information to policymakers. It is, however, different because it allows for richer information flow and more meaningful relationship building. Richer information and more relationship building also likely facilitates persuasion in addition to the provision of information.

One of the authors of this paper was a staffer for a state senator and participated in many of these types of legislative days with other staffers and members of the state legislature. These trips included touring magnet schools for advocates to make the case for greater flexibility in education; nursing homes where the regional association hosted a tour of the facility as a way to argue for policy changes to improve resident's lives (and the business model);

conservation districts organizing a bus tour to show how money appropriated by the legislature was being spent in the area to improve soil conservation and agricultural output. Despite how common this type of advocacy seems to be, it has not been well-described in the literature and we offer this short “practitioner” paper to encourage further research into this form of advocacy.

We focus on the environmental policy domain to describe show and tell advocacy. While organized interests use this tactic in many if not most policy areas, focusing on environmental policy affords the possibility of making clearer distinctions and comparisons. This short paper proceeds in two main sections. First, we conceptually define show and tell advocacy and provide examples from historical cases. Then we provide some potential explanations for why show and tell would be an effective way to advocate for policy. We conclude with some suggestions for moving this research area forward.

## What is show and tell advocacy and why might it be effective?

Like [Baumgartner et al. \(2009\)](#) we prefer the term advocacy over lobbying because it better reflects who is engaging in this behavior. Not all advocacy is done by paid lobbyists and much in fact, is performed by other government officials. [Hall and Deardorff \(2006\)](#) focused on lobbying in Congress and we expand this to include other venues following ([Boehmke et al., 2013](#)). Thus, show and tell is performed by advocates outside and within government and target members of congress as well as government scientists and other bureaucrats. Because of the broad number of groups that use show and tell, there is no existing dataset that demonstrates how widespread the activity is. Again, we hope this short paper will spur additional research into this area.

We define show and tell advocacy as the tactic policy advocates employ when they directly show policymakers the issue they work on. This could be as commonplace as a member of the legislature visiting a charter school in their district to learn more about how charter schools work. Or it could be much more involved and require significant long-term planning.

Why would policymakers and their staff devote such time and resources to engaging with advocates on show and tell outings? One way to answer this question is to think of elected officials as [Mayhew \(1974\)](#) does, as single-minded seekers of re-election. Participating in one of these show and tell trips, particularly if it is in the district, allows elected officials to claim credit and stake a position on an issue that is important to a key constituent group. Moreover, elected officials care about making good public policy ([Fenno, 1978](#)) and learning about issue areas through show and tell could be a way to promote good decision making. Elected officials are not the only people who make policy, and other policymakers may participate in show and tell advocacy. Unelected bureaucrats and political appointees want to keep their jobs and are motivated by the public good ([Perry and Wise, 1990](#)). To do their job well, they need information—and these trips provide rich and detailed information. Thus, the information gained would be worth the time spent with the advocates. In other words, policymakers gain an information subsidy ([Hall and Deardorff, 2006](#)) by attending show and tell sessions.

To illustrate, we draw on a few cases from environmental policy. Environmental policy, like many policy domains, is complex and involves many stakeholders. Advocates of greater environmental protection are often pitted against well-organized, well-resourced interests that benefit from the status quo. This necessitates advocacy strategies that are especially effective at providing information and being persuasive.

Perhaps the canonical example of show and tell advocacy is President Theodore Roosevelt’s trip to Yosemite with naturalist and Sierra Club founder John Muir. In March of 1903, President Roosevelt wrote a letter to Muir, asking Muir to take him on a tour of Yosemite National Park, which lies in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. Roosevelt had previously read some of Muir’s writings detailing the unsettling changes taking place in the American wilderness and was inspired to see it first-hand, writing to Muir, “I do not want anyone with me but you, and I want to drop politics absolutely for 4 days and just be out in the open with you” ([Carter, 2016](#)).

Muir’s writings drawing attention to wilderness conservation and naturalist philosophy, were gaining national popularity ([John Muir: A Brief Biography, 2020](#)). Considering Muir’s recognition as an important naturalist at the time, it makes sense that Roosevelt reached solely out to Muir in his quest to explore the U.S. wilderness. At first, Muir was reluctant to camp with a government official; however, he hoped President Roosevelt would push for laws to protect the wilderness ([Carter, 2016](#)). Thus, Muir and Roosevelt spent 4 days in the wilderness together, trading stories about the natural history of California and witnessing some of the most beautiful sights in nature. Roosevelt commented, “There can be nothing in the world more beautiful than the Yosemite, the groves of the giant sequoias...our people should see to it that they are preserved for their children and their Children’s children forever, with their majestic beauty all unmarred” ([Theodore Roosevelt: Influential People in the Life of John Muir, 2020](#)). On the third night, Muir’s focus of conversation was on the need for forest preservation, raising his concern that the California State Grant of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove be receded to the federal government for inclusion in Yosemite National Park ([Theodore Roosevelt: Influential People in the Life of John Muir, 2020](#)).

Reportedly, Roosevelt returned to our nation’s capital enthusiastic about conserving America’s natural spaces and wilderness ([Carter, 2016](#)). What followed President Roosevelt’s return was a series of wins for the conservation movement; over his presidency, Roosevelt created 5 national parks, 18 national monuments, 55 bird sanctuaries and wildlife refuges, and 150 national forests ([Theodore Roosevelt: Influential People in the Life of John Muir, 2020](#)). In 1905, he established the U.S. Forest Service to specifically manage and protect our forest reserves ([Carter, 2016](#)). The conversation between Muir and Roosevelt on the third night prompted the President to sign the Yosemite Reversion Bill in 1906, a joint resolution withdrawing the Yosemite Valley Grant and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove from the state of California’s protection and into federal protection as a part of Yosemite National Park ([Theodore Roosevelt: Influential People in the Life of John Muir, 2020](#)). The entire camping experience planned by Muir, from thoughtful discussion to breathtaking views, motivated President Roosevelt to push Congress for stronger laws protecting wilderness. Because of the policy outcomes that resulted

from this monumental trip, it is dubbed as “The Most Important Camping Trip in U.S. History (Knowledge Window, 2019, August 23).”

So, while Roosevelt was an easy ally for Muir and preservationists, historians link the trip and subsequent policy changes pushed by Roosevelt. According to Roosevelt’s own words, the direct experience of Yosemite was pivotal in his decision to champion many (but not all) of Muir’s ideas for preservation. This case shows the mutually beneficial aspect of show and tell advocacy. Roosevelt came to Muir, but Muir used the opportunity to push for greater conservation and Roosevelt returned to Washington DC and was effective in passing his conservation agenda.

Drawing on this history, the Soda Mountain Wilderness Council led by Dave Willis, takes elected officials, their staff, bureaucrats, and journalists into the wilds of Southern Oregon and Northern California to show what can be saved under stronger land management protections (Tobias, 2017).

Willis organizes between 10 and 20 trips per year over the summer months into the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument and surrounding areas that are under consideration for further expansion of the monument.

*The Guardian* reported (in 2017) that Willis had spent 34 years advocating for the Cascade-Siskiyou. He worked throughout the Clinton Administration, and it wasn’t until Clinton’s final days in office that he used the Antiquities Act to establish it as a monument. It took 17 more years, through the George W. Bush Administration and into the final year of the Obama Administration to get the monument’s acreage expanded. That expansion was identified by the Trump Administration, under pressure from logging and grazing interests, for potential downsizing. However, Trump’s Administration came to an end and no action was taken to reduce the size of the monument. While some battles have been lost, such as grazing and mining permits given for adjoining Bureau of Land Management land, for now at least, the group, and Willis’s show and tell advocacy is credited by many for getting the monument created and expanded (Rosen, 2017). The group’s most recent policy victory came in November of 2022 when the Bureau of Land Management reversed a Trump Administration rule that allowed logging in the area after fires without a permit (Battaglia, 2022).

In a slightly different vein, we consider Congressional Delegation trips (CODELs) as a key example of show and tell advocacy. A CODEL is a congress-funded trip (often) abroad designed to give lawmakers a first-hand look at matters relevant to legislation. Notably, Republican Senator from Alaska, and then Energy and Natural Resources Chairwoman, Lisa Murkowski led a bipartisan group of four senators to tour the Arctic in 2019, displaying the devastating effects of climate change on Arctic communities in hope for stronger climate legislation. Additionally, Senator Murkowski highlighted opportunities for energy production and trade in the Arctic to Senators John Barrasso (R-WY.), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), Joe Manchin (D-WV), and Maria Cantwell (D-WA) who joined her on the trip (Sobczyk and Koss, 2019).

Senator Whitehouse, an advocate for climate legislation, commented on the implications of the trip even though it might not have immediate legislative outputs: “I thought it was extremely significant that the chairman of the Energy Committee and the

chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee and a leading coal-state Democrat were all willing to make a difficult trip—six countries in 5 days—knowing that they would get a full and heavy dose of climate change” (Sobczyk and Koss, 2019).

After a similar previous trip, Congressman Bob Inglis (R-SC) became convinced of climate change’s dangerous impacts and the need for government policy. Coming out in favor of climate legislation put him in hot water with some in his party, however. When Inglis ran for his seventh term in 2010, he was met swiftly with a defeat in the South Carolina Republican primary. Inglis was rejected by his former constituents, colleagues, and friends because he believed that climate change is real and proposed a carbon tax as a policy solution (Rainey, 2018). However, as we discuss below, he has continued to be advocate for conservative climate policy.

We distinguish show and tell advocacy from the more notorious examples of business lobbying through congressional junkets. Junkets serve to primarily wine and dine lawmakers to curry their favor (see e.g., Laband, 1986; Dabros and Nelson, 2016) rather than focusing the trip on the advocates’ policy area of interest. Junkets such as these, were restricted and regulated with passage of Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007. On the other hand, show and tell advocacy is about experiencing the policy issue first-hand, they are not a gift-like luxurious trip, but an immersive experience.

We also distinguish show and tell advocacy from the social lobbying described by Grose et al. (2022). Show and tell and social lobbying are similar in that they rely on direct communication with policymakers outside of congressional or governmental offices. Social lobbying as described by Grose and colleagues revolves primarily around social settings, such as Washington DC happy hours. So while this type of advocacy may be effective at persuasion in a similar way as show and tell—fostering relationships in a less formal setting—social lobbying does not include showing policymakers the work or problem of interest to the advocate.

Our focus in this short paper was how organizations can use show and tell advocacy to promote their interests with policymakers. However, the tactic could be flipped around and organizations could potentially use it to win public support or further engage their membership. It would be difficult to scale-up because these intense outings work well for a small group of stakeholders. However, organizations could show and tell their rank and file members what they are doing in order to move them up the activist ladder (Han, 2014). Indeed, research has shown that engaging members in offline activities promotes longer term activism (Han et al., 2017) and show and tell trips could be one way to do this. In this case, it would not be show and tell advocacy, but rather, show and tell organizing.

## Why would show and tell advocacy be effective?

Why would advocates engage in this type of lobbying? Or put another way, why would show and tell advocacy be successful? We argue that show and tell advocacy may be successful for two reasons. First, it fits within Hall and Deardorff’s (2006) framework of lobbying as legislative subsidy. Under this theory, lobbying

is mostly seen as a grant to lawmakers who are already allies, providing expertise, and sometimes contributions, to members as a way to improve the chances of their preferred outcome. Second, the rich information and relationships that can develop in this setting provide a good opportunity for advocates to persuade policymakers to support their position (Awad, 2020).

We offer several complementary explanations for why this form of advocacy may be effective. We hope to see more research in the future that examines the effectiveness of this type of lobbying as well as investigations into the mechanism for why show and tell advocacy is successful (if indeed it is).

First, we consider that show and tell advocacy may be a substantially effective way for advocates to build trust and relationships with policymakers. Show and tell goes beyond the typical short office meeting by having advocates and policymakers spend more time with one another in settings outside the office. Building relationships through trust is central to effective lobbying and advocacy (Wise, 2007). The extended personal contact, along with effective communication (McGrath, 2007) made possible show and tell trips may be a big reason why they are often used. Think about Muir and Roosevelt, conversing by themselves around a campfire. Or BLM scientists in the wild with Willis. Or Senators on extended trips to Alaska. All of these examples point to prolonged contact that would build trusting relationships.

One of the cornerstones of show and tell advocacy in the environmental domain is building strong continued relationships both between stakeholders and lawmakers, and between lawmakers and the environment. These connections are impactful and reflect the necessity of strong relationships for effective lobbying. Research on productive lobbying has focused on advocacy as a relationship market (Groll and McKinley, 2015). Repeat interaction, support for legislative actors, and image preservation are key components of a good relationship. The case studies presented above highlight how show and tell advocacy capitalizes on relationship building and management in an open way that establishes a clear advocate identity.

Beyond relationship and trust building, show and tell may also be a particularly useful way for advocates to convey information to policymakers. Scholars note that information is a key product provided by lobbyists to policymakers (Austen-Smith, 1993; Hall and Deardorff, 2006). A great deal of information can be provided by taking policymakers to actually see the target of their advocacy efforts. While a PowerPoint slideshow or policy report can include a lot of information, an immersive trip—like horsepacking with Willis or touring the Arctic for several days—demonstrating the policy area can be much more effective at conveying rich information.

Moreover, to extend that mechanism, direct experience can change how people think about the policy area. This mechanism suggests a psychological process for understanding why show and tell advocacy may be effective. This psychological theory is known as construal level theory, primarily advanced by Trope and Liberman (2010). Direct experience makes it easier to think less abstractly, and more concretely about a referent object, in this case a policy problem. Research in this area has primarily focused on the public (see for example, Feinberg and Willer, 2011; Zanolco et al., 2018) and has also been applied to foreign policymaking (Krebs and Rapport, 2012).

Getting a policymaker to think less abstractly and more concretely may work for the advocate in two ways. Concrete thinking seems to make it easier for someone to connect a specific solution to a problem (Sparks, 2021). This is because concrete thinking is definitionally more detail-oriented. In other words, directly experiencing a policy problem can provide detail-rich information about it, and when advocates connect that to a policy solution, the policymaker may be more able to see how the policy proposal actually addresses the problem.

Secondly, concrete thinking may make it easier to cut across ideological barriers. Take climate change for example. Thinking about it abstractly makes it easier to connect it to other abstractions such as ideology. If someone is thinking abstractly about climate change, they are likely also thinking about it in terms of ideology. Contrast this with thinking concretely. Thinking concretely about climate change also means thinking less ideologically and more pragmatically about how to deal with the challenge. This may explain Bob Ingliss's conversion to pro-climate advocacy, albeit while remaining committed to conservative principles.

Further, once partisan or ideological barriers are broken down, advocates may be able to partner members of different communities to enhance persuasion of like-minded people. So, while Ingliss did lose his seat, instead of stepping away from politics he started his own non-profit organization, RepublicEn, dedicated to convincing other conservatives to come to grips with climate change (Rainey, 2018). He attempts to appeal to those on the right by assuring them that their conservative values should not be displaced to protect the environment, but rather that these values are the key to solving climate change. In bold, red type across the bottom of the page, Ingliss calls Republicans to action: "Let's get this right before big government gets it wrong" (What We Stand For, 2020).

Ingliss carved a path for Republicans concerned about climate change to have a voice and convince others to join the movement. Republicans speaking out against their own partisan interests on climate change are more likely to persuade someone on the fence about the issue, rather than Democrats or scientists (Benegal and Scruggs, 2018). Engaging in more costly behavior, such as speaking out against climate misinformation that has spread by and through the Republican party, lends conservatives more persuasive value when talking about the issue. Researchers suggest that citing Republican elites in support of the scientific consensus around climate change is the most effective way to convince the public that anthropogenic climate change is a serious policy issue (Benegal and Scruggs, 2018). As highlighted above, direct experience with climate impacts may have made it easier for Ingliss to think more concretely and less abstractly about climate change.

## Conclusion

Whether it be a backpacking trip in the wilderness or a congress-funded CODEL, all three cases provide extended time for advocates to build relationships with the policymakers they are trying to influence. Policymakers are also able to see, first-hand, what the advocates are talking about when they make an argument for a policy solution. In the case of Bob Ingliss, the trip played, at least in part, a role in convincing him to go against his party and back climate solutions. Joe Manchin eventually came around to



supporting the climate policy provisions of the Inflation Reduction Act. And President Roosevelt returned from his trip with Muir to further champion conservation.

Practitioners and researchers should be aware of potential ethical and legal considerations when engaging in and studying show and tell advocacy. Trips and visits, particularly more lavish ones, may run afoul of the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007. The regulation stipulates that organizations may not give travel or gifts if they are not allowed by House or Senate Rules (H.R.2316 - 110th Congress, 2007-2008). In addition to federal law, scholars and advocates should review state and local rules before engaging in show and tell advocacy and research. In the cases we describe, there does not seem to be any foul play. Typically, these events are publicly promoted to garner media attention as part of a broader advocacy strategy.

With these ethical considerations in mind, we suggest a path forward for research in this area. First, it is important to quantify how common show and tell advocacy is. We envision this as a collaborative endeavor between academics and advocates. A crowd-sourced database could be constructed that summarizes policy domain, advocacy group (whether an interest group or governmental workers), targeted policymaker(s), and policy success (not necessarily change, because some advocates may be in favor of the status quo) across time and levels of government. Because of how wide-scale the phenomenon of show and tell is, we think crowd-sourcing would be the best way to go about collecting the data. Once a database exists, further analysis would be possible and could explore potential questions such as: What level of government is most frequently engaged in show and tell advocacy? Under what conditions does show and tell advocacy lead to policy success? From these more descriptive questions, further research could then explore causal mechanisms by doing detailed process tracing and observational case studies. Surveys could also be used to determine why advocates adopt show and tell as a tactic as well as surveying policymakers who participated in a show and

tell trip. Show and tell is an important tactic for advocates and political scientists have an obligation to better understand how policy decisions are made, thus we call for research into this area.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

AS lead research design and writing. SA and NC equally contributed to writing literature review and one case study each. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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