

The One-Hour Activist

The 15 Most Powerful
Actions You Can Take
to Fight for the Issues and
Candidates You Care About

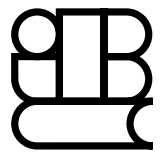
Christopher Kush



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To aid you in your activism, the worksheets in this book are available FREE on-line.

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Thank you,
Christopher Kush

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P R E F A C E

This is a tactical guide, not a civics class.

This is a book of action—a book you will put down to write, call, or meet with your elected officials or to engage in any of the twenty powerful grassroots actions explained in this book. These actions take you well beyond the voting booth and into the creation of substantive, influential dialogues with the people in power who represent you.

I understand that inspiration can be fleeting, so I have presented the core information you need to quickly and easily begin to have an impact on the issues you care about. This is a book with as little political theory and history as I could get away with. This is also a book you can grow with—and the deeper you explore *The One-Hour Activist*, the more sophisticated your actions will become.

Your first action to take, whatever your previous experience with politics is, should be to review exactly how grassroots advocacy works *and how it does not work*. This is the subject of the first chapter, Action 1. Americans harbor all sorts of misconceptions about the mechanics of grassroots advocacy, for example, that clicking on a prewritten e-mail is just as effective as a written letter because the only thing elected officials do with such communications is count them. In fact, some of the letters do get read, and the ones that do have a distinct advantage over those that are merely counted.

Take time to review the background information in Part One of this book—even if you just saw your representative saying something unconscionable on C-SPAN and you feel the need to immediately call or write her office. The initial chapters of this book form the foundation on which all of the subsequent grassroots actions depend.

The One-Hour Activist will help you understand what it is about a letter, or e-mail, or face-to-face meeting with a constituent that can influence the overall decision-making process in the offices of your lawmakers. Each action has a list of do's and don'ts. At the same time, I want you, the reader, to let go of white-knuckle adherence to mechanics in favor of more strategic considerations, like how you can individualize your letter, fax, or phone call to truly pique the interest of your elected officials. In any case, the primary rule of grassroots organizing is called “staying on message,” which I define in Action 1.

Each chapter explores an individual grassroots action and contains a One-Hour Activist Rule that relates an important strategic consideration for you to keep in mind when engaging in that action. Each chapter also relates advice from the field, where an assortment of elected officials, journalists, lobbyists, and national organizers share an additional insight as an insider.

Worksheets are provided in chapters where I felt they would be helpful guiding your thinking or keeping track of individual information. Internet tips are provided in most chapters. Use these tips on the condition that you promise never to sign an on-line petition again without sending a more substantive message to your lawmakers. Illustrations abound for the visual learners out there. My aim was to make the book as friendly and as accessible as possible.

A few real-life stories and current legislative issues are used to provide examples of effective letters, telephone calls, and e-mails, but I have kept the use of current legislative issues to a minimum. The readers of this book will cut across the full American ideological spectrum, and I have attempted to avoid endorsing any particular party or ideology.

I do poke fun at the political process throughout the book to help demystify the process and to encourage your participation, so let yourself relax as you read.

Part One of the book contains the conceptual and analytical actions that you need to be an effective advocate, including how to determine what your issues really are, who represents you, how to join an organized interest group that may offer a grassroots network ready to add your voice in the fights related to your issues, what a legislative agenda is, how to analyze a bill, and how to conduct opposition research without sacrificing your integrity.

Part Two explains how to communicate with your elected officials in a persuasive manner. I cover all of the classics: writing a letter that matters, making an effective telephone call, and even that new classic: sending an e-mail that does not immediately get deleted as spam. I also include tips about how you can get others to join your cause and augment your efforts by encouraging their participation.

After all that, I get to elections, which may seem a little counterintuitive. It is not that elections are unimportant, but the focus here is to help you advance the specific issues you care about, which by definition must take you past Election Day and into the legislative process. I have begun with the most substantive one-hour actions you can take to have an impact on the actual laws that might or might not get passed. I assume that if you care enough about a particular issue, you already are an active voter—but that, to be honest, is not always a good assumption in our country, even among activists. I do provide some ideas as to how you can maximize your vote on Election Day, and it is in that chapter that I will encourage you to register and vote if you are not doing so already.

I also discuss the best ways to fork over cash to candidates—something that many Americans find off-putting about politics. That's a shame, because until Congress passes dramatic campaign finance reform, being a campaign contributor is a powerful way to get access to your lawmakers. It remains your choice, and by the end of the chapter, you might very well

choose to avail yourself of this option for getting yourself and the issues you care about recognized.

Part Four focuses on how to be an effective consumer of and contributor to the news media. I cover the basics like keeping a file of news clippings and then focus on how you can effectively communicate with the news media. Action 15 explains how to write a letter to the editor or an opinion editorial that has a chance of getting published.

Together, the first four parts of the book represent the basic one-hour actions you can take to fight for the issues you care about. Part Five presents five additional grassroots actions you can take. To be honest, these are actions that will take more than an hour to accomplish, but it is time well spent. These actions are more sophisticated and potentially more influential. Action 16, “Have a Face-to-Face Meeting with Your Representative,” is about the most powerful grassroots action you can take as a concerned citizen, but it is not something that you can do in a single sitting in the privacy of your own home. Other skills that I describe are how to give public testimony, participate in a protest, volunteer for a local political campaign, and get on your local news by pitching stories and making yourself available for interviews. These actions provide a place for you to grow as an advocate as you become increasingly savvy about the political process and increasingly knowledgeable with the substantive details surrounding the issues you care about.

I wish you the best of luck discovering your issues, fighting for them, and coordinating your efforts with other like-minded individuals to have an impact on our government at the federal, state, and local levels. Our democracy is never so strong as when a lot of people, from a lot of different walks of life, with a lot of different viewpoints, all clamor over a single piece of legislation.

Cacophony signals health, not dysfunction, in a democracy. I encourage you to contribute to this noise but with a sense of perspective. Try not to characterize every legislative occurrence as any bigger a step toward true peace, freedom, justice, equality, and prosperity than it inevitably really is—tentative, piecemeal, stopgap, and fully rooted in sensible hope.

We live in a dangerous time, where people with deeply held beliefs increasingly sanction violence as a valid form of political expression. If our democracy depends on your participation, it also relies on your restraint. Dialogue is not possible if we nurture a belief that success can be characterized only by the annihilation of our opposition. Perhaps as you struggle to find your voice, you will also endeavor to be amused more than angered by a democracy that changes slowly and imperfectly in response to your efforts.

February 2004

Christopher Kush
Washington, D.C.

For my mother, who was not an especially political person but
loved books

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THE AUTHOR

Christopher Kush has trained thousands of citizens from all over the United States to effectively influence Congress as well as state and local governments. As president of Soapbox Consulting, he has helped design Lobby Days, grassroots campaigns, and training seminars for many national organizations, including the American Heart Association, American Cancer Society, Girl Scouts of the USA, American Psychological Association, Easter Seals, and Arthritis Foundation. He lives in Washington, D.C. He can be contacted through www.soapboxconsulting.com.

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens
can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has.*

—MARGARET MEAD

Each snowflake in an avalanche pleads not guilty.

—STANISLAW J. LEC

Democracy in Action

Why is it that any discussion about our system of government requires reverent and grave tones somewhere between a graduate dissertation and remembering the dead? Discussing American democracy always seems so, I don't know, serious. In this regard, it has a lot in common with sex education: if you sat in on a high school class dealing with the subject, you'd be convinced it wasn't any fun.

I recently watched a documentary on the U.S. Capitol where otherwise serious historians and battle-hardened journalists felt inclined to treacherously veneration and, worse, childlike amusement as if the Capitol was wonderfully fun, and impishly surprising, and well . . . harmless—as if these experts were not aware that our Congress met there.

You sometimes hear the Capitol referred to majestically as “The People’s House,” with suggestions that inside the Capitol, the work of “The People” gets done—perhaps not as efficiently as might be hoped, but in the long run in our best interests and occasionally with some fantastic oratory ringing off the walls. Let’s face it, for any given action in the Capitol while

some of “The People” may feel that their work is being done, others will feel that they are getting done in.

Architecturally, the Capitol is a grand structure in a lots-of-white-marble sort of way. The ceilings are far more colorful than you might expect. There are statues to look at. A beautiful rotunda. And the mazelike hallways and staircases perhaps beckon every American child to come in, explore, get lost in their Capitol—The People’s House.

I guess this is all innocent enough—except for one thing. As anyone who has been to the U.S. Capitol can tell you, particularly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks: the Capitol doesn’t really feel like *your house*. Even the most casual stroll through the interior, which is now strictly limited to citizens on official tours or with official passes, raises some obvious questions.

For one thing, who are all of the people with guns? Did someone invite them over? Ah, security, we are told; it’s now necessary. Okay, but what about exploring the mazelike hallways? It is immediately clear that the Capitol, that most central site in our most open and representative government, is characterized as much by places you, as a citizen, are not allowed to explore, as by the beautiful frescoes that illuminate the ceilings. *No unescorted visitors beyond this point* signs abound, as well as frequent admonishments against taking photographs or video.

And should you miss a sign, perhaps because you innocently begin to wander through “The People’s House,” there is an abundance of those guests with guns posted to keep you on the official tour or point you toward the exits.

We, The People, are not allowed on the Floor of the House or Senate chambers where representatives and senators debate, vote, and otherwise officially conduct the day’s business. You can, however, if you have a special pass, climb to the top of the Capitol chambers and watch the proceedings of the House and Senate from the galleries, after first surrendering all of your electronic equipment and passing through yet another metal detector. You are not allowed to read or take notes while you are there.

Welcome home, America.

The inescapable reality to even the most disinterested tourist is that the U.S. Capitol is a high-security, formal, byzantine game board where the dis-

tribution and exercise of political power take place in our country. This is real power—the power to commandeer your wages in the form of taxes, the power to declare war against another country, the power to attract the attention of the news media, the power to oppose or even impeach the president, the power to guide our freedoms in the form of laws. And the exercise of this power involves conflicts—major conflicts between ideologies, political parties, egos, and money. How this power is disbursed and how it is controlled is the genius of our remarkable system of government, but this is not necessarily an inviting place.

You are allowed—not compelled but allowed—to participate in this contentious mess if you want to. Why should you want to get involved? Because, honestly, once you get going, it’s a lot more fun than the official tour. Because the U.S. Senate recently designated April 21 through 27, 2003, as National Cowboy Poetry Week, “to recognize the importance of cowboy poetry for future generations.” And, most important, because if you don’t become involved, you may not be considered one of “The People” that “The People’s House” represents.

ISN'T MONEY THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS?

To understand how an everyday citizen can have an impact on our government takes some effort in a world where few of us have the energy or time to indulge in new pursuits. We have a complicated system of government that represents a complicated country. Sensing that, there are those among us who believe that the easiest way to deal with our government is to dismiss it out of hand by displaying all of the negative emotions, declaring, “Everyone else can be led around like sheep, but I know what is really going on, and I’m not going to waste one second on it.” The reality is usually that the average disgruntled citizen has no idea who his or her federal, state, and local representatives are, much less what they are really up to.

There are others who suspect that money—big money, more money than they have anyway—is what really determines the course of government and that most of us are left out of the process. This is a serious concern, and not entirely without basis. It is a well-documented fact that some

very big business interests invest lots of money during elections on candidates for public office, and after elections, they spend millions more on lobbyists and communications consultants because these interests have business before our federal and state legislatures.

How awful for the average American who does not, say, have controlling interest in a Fortune 500 company, and who does not receive dividends every quarter in part influenced by what lobbyists can secure, to be left out of a supposedly fair and open system of government in the United States.

And yet. And yet. If you pay close attention in the state legislatures and in Congress, you will occasionally hear grouching from those very industries: they do not always get everything they want despite all of those campaign donations and all of those retainers. Now how does *that* happen?

Here's one recent example. Maryland is bordered by other states that in recent years have relaxed their gambling laws to allow slot machines—and Maryland, like any other state, finds that it sometimes could use a little more revenue (or a lot more, depending on the year). Meanwhile, Maryland has had to endure the crowing of nearby New Jersey, West Virginia, and Delaware, all generating millions of extra dollars in tax revenue from slot machines. Maryland's historic concession to gaming, the horse racing industry, claims it is on the verge of collapse, in part because those in charge of Maryland's racetracks say they are no longer able to compete with the gambling options available within easy driving distance.

Indeed, there are a number of Marylanders who sympathize with the plight of the racetracks or are enticed by promises that public schools would be the primary beneficiaries of increased state revenues if slot machines were made legal in the state. Other Marylanders are resolutely opposed—including the former Democratic governor who was term-limited out of office in 2002 and replaced by a Republican who campaigned on a pro-slots platform and won.

Maryland experienced a change in leadership at the state level, public opinion was divided, the racetracks were crying for relief, the schools needed money, and the gambling industry was aware that slot machines could generate millions of dollars in revenue, even after the state took its cut. In

politics, this is what we call low-hanging fruit, and accordingly, in 2003, the gambling industry spent at least \$1.5 million to help pass a bill through the Maryland state legislature for the new governor to sign that would legalize slot machines in the state.

There was, of course, opposition. There is *always* opposition in America. Corporate America is not generally surprised that there is opposition. It just outspends them. In this case, the gambling industry outspent their opposition at least fifty to one, because when you looked at a business plan, \$1.5 million was a drop in the bucket compared with what the industry stood to gain.

Now we get to the part that is a little hard to believe. It may even seem a bit outrageous believing what we do about how money systemically corrupts our system of government.

The gambling industry lost, despite terrific odds and a whole lot of money.

It did not lose because one angry citizen wrote one angry letter. It lost for a number of reasons, in part related to the political infighting between the new governor and the state legislature. But there was also a nascent grassroots effort to be reckoned with. It was not well funded, but it was visible and able to effectively and compellingly demonstrate that a significant number of Maryland voters were truly and thoughtfully opposed to slot machines.

Several things are instructive from this example. *The opposition was active.* The opposition did not abandon their elected officials to weigh the pros and cons without their input. *The opposition did not need millions of dollars to access their elected officials or get the attention of the news media.* In some cases their elected officials came to them. The gambling industry's money may have guaranteed a hearing in the state legislature, but it did not in any way silence the voice of those who chose to speak up against slot machines. *It is not over yet.* Issues like these tend not to be resolved—ever. The gambling industry will probably try to legalize slots during the next legislative session and again the session after that. By that time, perhaps the grassroots opposition will have time to professionalize, do some fundraising of its own, and establish an ongoing effort to fight gambling interests in the state. On