



Advocacy
in Washington's
New Normal



Washington is operating on a fundamentally different advocacy operating system. A second Trump administration, deep polarization, hyper-centralized White House power, and shrinking venues for bipartisan policymaking have transformed how influence is wielded—and who can wield it.

Advocacy is simultaneously more important, more resourced, and more scrutinized than ever, but also more constrained, less predictable, and less tolerant of missteps. Traditional beltway basics—broad national messaging, organic social, earned press—are no longer sufficient.

To understand what works now, Purple Strategies and POLITICO conducted a survey of 340 advocacy professionals and in-depth interviews with senior public affairs leaders across companies, trade associations, and lobbying firms. Together, their experiences reveal a common conclusion:

You cannot win without meaningful direct engagement and strong coalitions—but you cannot win with those alone.

Success in this era demands speed, precision, credible collective voice, strategic patience, and a new theory of influence anchored in how decisions are really made.

This combined analysis offers a roadmap for advocates navigating Washington's New Normal and the Trump 2.0 landscape.

The New Operating System of Advocacy

Power Has Centralized—and the Rules Have Changed. Advocates describe this moment as a “volatile inflection point” in which former norms—bipartisan compromise, agency-led policymaking, predictable process—no longer apply. Several forces now define the landscape:

01 The White House is the Dominant Center of Gravity

Nearly every major policy question eventually runs through the administration, even issues that historically relied on agency discretion or bipartisan congressional action.

One expert summarized the shift:

“This isn’t Trump 2.0—this is Trump Year Five.”

The administration is faster, more transactional, and more sensitive to criticism than its first iteration.

02 Agility is No Longer Optional

Velocity has increased dramatically. Advocates must be able to pivot quickly as decisions move through unconventional channels—or risk irrelevance.

03 The Traditional ‘Agree to Disagree’ Era is Over

Under Trump 2.0, public disagreement—even on unrelated issues—can jeopardize access. Advocates must manage criticism carefully or risk being shut out entirely.

04 New Influencers—Not Always in Government—Have Outsized Impact

From tech leaders to campaign-aligned consultants to informal MAGA-adjacent figures, decision-making now flows through an expanded and sometimes unpredictable constellation of personalities with direct access to the President.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS:

Advocacy's Current Impact Ladder



Direct Lawmaker Engagement Still Leads—But with New Friction

Across the survey, direct engagement with lawmakers is the top-rated tactic for impact. Yet lobbyists—those closest to lawmakers—are notably less bullish than their corporate counterparts. They feel the constraints:

- Fewer unscripted interactions
- More decision-making in leadership or the White House
- A greater share of consequential moves in courts, agencies, and states

Direct engagement remains necessary, but is no longer sufficient.



Coalitions and Associations: Peak Power and Peak Pressure

Associations and coalitions are experiencing unparalleled influence:

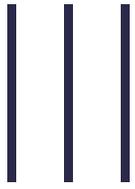
- Higher visibility (+40% net visible)
- Higher aggression (+12% net aggressive)
- Higher funding (+33% net increase)
- Stronger perceived impact than nearly all other tactics

Associations are more likely than corporations to increase spending, take aggressive stances, and engage visibly in the 2026 cycle.

But their strength comes with risks:

If strategy and governance are unclear, coalitions can drift, lose credibility, or create false internal expectations of what they can deliver.

Coalitions are no longer “nice to have.” They are strategic assets that must be purpose-built and fit for the moment.



The New Realities Shaping Advocacy Strategy

01

Transactional Influence Is the Currency

Policy arguments alone rarely move decision-makers. Advocates report success when they:

- Demonstrate electoral consequences
- Highlight how issues affect the administration's reputation or re-election narrative
- Show district-level pressure, especially in red states and local media
- Use proprietary polling to make political stakes explicit

As one advocate put it: *"It's not a threat—it's reality."*

02

MAGA Fluency Is a Required Skillset

Organizations are reassessing their teams to ensure someone can credibly communicate with MAGA-aligned actors. Relationships matter deeply—and cannot be built overnight.

03

Strategic Patience Beats Pressure Campaigns

Loud opposition is counterproductive. Advocates describe winning through:

- Timing influence to natural inflection points
- Staying at the table long enough to secure carve-outs
- Avoiding moves that could trigger retaliation

Patience is not passive. It is *disciplined, proactive*, and *deliberate*.

04

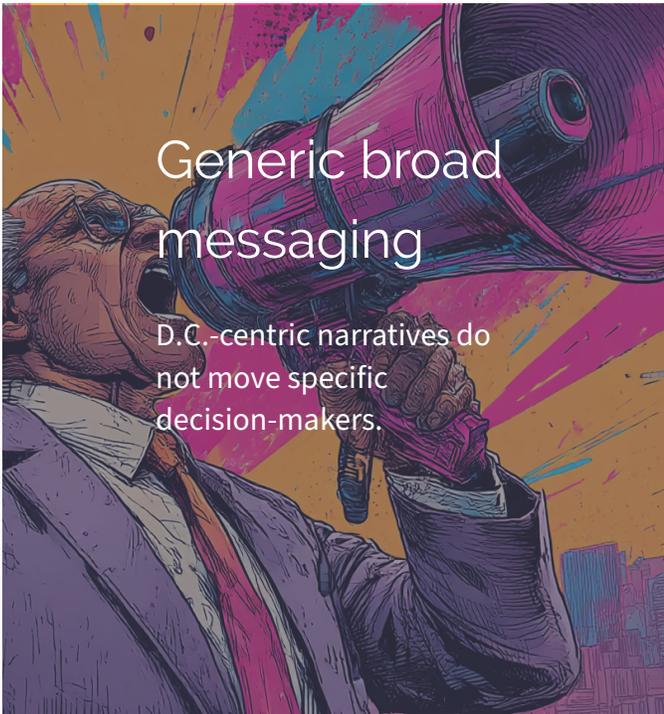
Some Fights Are Shifting Away From D.C.

Statehouses—especially in very progressive or conservative states—have become critical battlegrounds as groups bypass the administration entirely.



IV What No Longer Works

Advocates are nearly unanimous: several staples of the traditional playbook have outlived their usefulness.



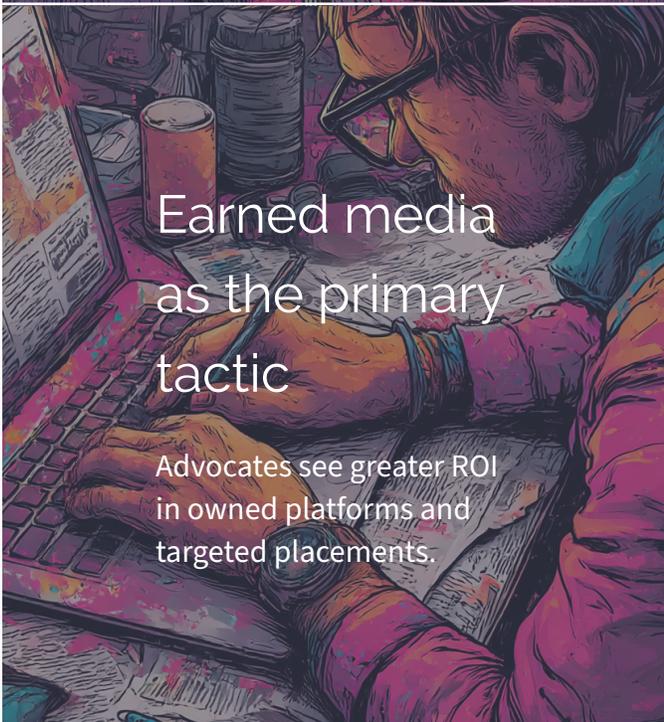
Generic broad messaging

D.C.-centric narratives do not move specific decision-makers.



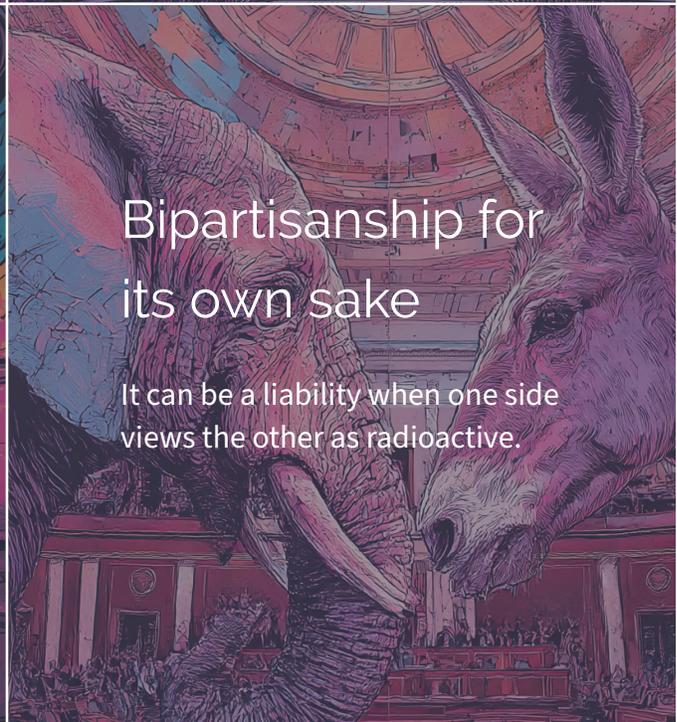
Lobbying firms without direct White House connectivity

Generic relationships are insufficient. Advocates need niche, real influence.



Earned media as the primary tactic

Advocates see greater ROI in owned platforms and targeted placements.



Bipartisanship for its own sake

It can be a liability when one side views the other as radioactive.



What's Working: The Emerging Playbook

Taken together, the data and interviews reveal a set of shared strategies that define high-impact advocacy today.

01. Coalitions Designed for Impact, Not Optics

Coalitions should answer four questions clearly:

- **Purpose:** What near-term policy outcome is the coalition built to achieve?
- **Positioning:** What can it say credibly that members cannot say alone?
- **Composition:** Do we have the right mix of validators to reach key audiences?
- **Governance:** How fast can we decide to act—and who decides?

Coalitions must become high-performance engines, not umbrella brands.

02. Rebuild Influence Around Real Decision Pathways

Start not from tactics, but from power mapping:

- Who holds actual influence (White House actors, advisors, states, courts)?
- What specific actions—hearings, rulemakings, leadership decisions—will determine outcomes?
- Which coalition, grasstops, research, and media assets best shape those inflection points?

Direct lawmaker meetings become precision tools, not volume plays.

03. Make Coalition + Lawmaker Engagement Mutually Reinforcing

Coalitions should:

- Create district-level cover for lawmakers
- Frame issues beyond corporate self-interest
- Provide bipartisan validators when relevant
- Build visible momentum that makes lawmaker asks seem aligned with constituents

04. Translate Advocacy Value in Ways Leadership Understands

Executives increasingly ask:

- “What are we getting for this spend?”
- “Why can’t we just call Senator X?”
- “Why aren’t we louder like Group Y?”

Advocacy leaders need clearer frameworks showing:

- What works now (and what doesn’t)
- How influence flows today
- Why certain tactics require patience
- Evidence of progress beyond policy wins (e.g., risk mitigation, access, narrative)

VI

LOOKING AHEAD:

Preparing for 2026 and Beyond

The 2026 midterms will be a major test of whether these advocacy dynamics persist. Associations and lobbyists are preparing to engage aggressively; corporations are more cautious.

Yet many experts believe a Democratic House—or any divided government—may do little to change the fundamental structure of Trump 2.0 policymaking.

This environment is likely to last. The organizations that thrive will:

- Build coalitions with purpose
- Design advocacy around actual centers of power
- Adapt faster than the system changes
- Communicate impact with transparency and discipline
- Maintain access while navigating political volatility
- Invest in MAGA/populism fluency where needed

VII The Combined Takeaway

Advocacy has never mattered more—and has never required more precision, agility, and strategic alignment than in Washington's New Normal.

Organizations that cling to the old rules will fall behind.

Those that update their playbook now—before the next wave of hearings, crises, and election cycles—will shape outcomes rather than react to them.

Purple Strategies, a strategic advisory firm focused on reputation, issues and advocacy for many of the world's most important companies and organizations, brings together deep strategic insight and campaign-style execution to help clients manage risk, shape perception and achieve their business objectives.