

Bird-Dogging: Make Them Talk!

Bird-dogging, though funny to say, is a necessary tool to use. To bird-dog means to scrutinize and investigate through questioning, hold accountable, and/or seek out with persistent attention. February 18–26 is the first congressional recess of the 115th Congress. For many of us, this will be the first opportunity as constituents to speak directly with our members of Congress (MoCs). Bird-dogging is an effective way to make sure that constituents get the answers to the questions that we are asking and to do it in a way that our representatives, other constituents, and the media can observe and get on record.

What is bird-dogging?

- Bird-dogging is a great tactic used to directly engage or confront candidates and MoCs on our issues at their public events. It lets them know how important these issues are to everyday constituents. The goal of bird-dogging is to put tough questions to MoCs and force them to answer when they are in front of their constituents, voters, and the media.
- Bird-dogging can be used to make sure MoCs can't escape answering questions about important issues and to ensure that we are setting the terms of the debate.
- Bird-dogging is fun and easy! Just show up at local events and make sure you are ready to ask questions.

How to bird dog successfully

- Arrive in advance.
 - You want to get a seat close to or in front of the stage or platform to make sure that you have the ability to ask a question and that your MoC can hear you.
 - If your group is protesting and is not invited in, make sure you find all the entrances and know where the parking lot is, if applicable, to try to map out the route your MoC will take in and out of the facility, to increase the chances that they see you.
- Don't give yourself away.
 - Do not wear clothing or wave signs that will let people know that you are coming to bird-dog your MoC. You want to make sure that you have an opportunity to ask your questions.
- Know your MoC's positions¹
 - Study your MoC's positions on your topic of issues. You want to make sure that they know that you know what you are talking about. Many times, in an attempt to dismiss and discredit, elected officials look for ways to make you seem less informed and thus not qualified to ask your question. However, it is your right as a constituent to ask your question, and being informed will make it harder for you to be dismissed.
- Have questions ready.²
 - You must be ready to ask questions early and accurately. Usually, asking questions early in the question-and-answer period will get the attention of the MoC. In addition, thoroughly vetting the facts within your question will also make it harder for your MoC to evade or discredit you.
- Craft your question.
 - Ask a yes-or-no question, not an open-ended question. Your goal is to get your member of Congress on the record about a critical issue. Here are some example questions:

- “Do you understand that by voting to take away the Affordable Care Act, you are taking away my health care?”
- “Can my fellow constituents and I count on you to vigorously oppose any cut to Medicare, including privatization, which would threaten by ability to retire?”
- Practice your questions.
 - Many MoCs are exceptional at evading questions and changing the subject. Practice with others and ask them to challenge your points. Sometimes, being challenged can be jarring and throw you off your rhythm. If this is you, practice! Even if you are a pro, practice. Memorize your question. Be ready to pivot back to your question if your MoC pivots away. Be ready to push back, calmly, to get a straight answer. Practice, practice, practice!
- Share your story.
 - As you are asking your question, share 1–2 brief sentences of your personal story. Remember the man who shared with Rep. Paul Ryan that the Affordable Care Act saved his life by enabling him to afford insurance for his cancer, before asking his question on [national TV](#).
- Be calm.
 - It is okay to be angry and even passionate, but remain calm so you can ask your question clearly and concisely and press your MoC to answer.
- Work in teams.³
 - It is good to go in teams of two or more people. One person asks the question while another writes down the MoC’s response and someone else videos or live-streams the interaction. Be prepared to ask a follow-up question if you feel that the question was dodged or you want more details. Come with multiple questions and be sure to rotate, so others in your group can ask questions too.
- Be aware.
 - Watch how staff are running the town hall. Sometimes they make participants submit their questions in writing, so they can select the questions asked. Take a picture of all the questions you submit, so you can show the media that if your side didn’t get any questions asked, it wasn’t because you weren’t there!
- Take pics, or it didn’t happen.
 - Be sure to take photos while at your MoC’s town hall. It’s important to get images of you and the members of your group to help tell the story of your experience at the town hall. Be sure to tweet using the hashtag #ResistanceRecess.
 - Use Facebook Live to broadcast your town hall meeting. Facebook Live is an easy-to-use way to amplify your town hall’s impact. By live-streaming your event, thousands more people will hear your stories, and the impact on the member of Congress will be multiplied.
- Take notes and follow up.

- The best way to track the responses of your MoC is to take notes. At least two people from your team should take notes, to reduce the chances that you'll miss something important. Holding your MoC accountable to their words is important in effectively bird-dogging.
- Be media ready.
 - Generally, journalists like to speak to folks who have asked the candidate a question. Remember to stay on message when talking to reporters by talking about the issue that is important to you. For example, if the reporter asks, "What do you think of Senator X?", respond by saying "I'd like him to justify his stance on repealing the Affordable Care Act without a plan to replace it." Don't be afraid to approach reporters even if they have not approached you. Try positioning yourself next to a reporter and striking up a conversation, again remembering to stay on message.
- HAVE FUN!
 - This is an opportunity to hold your MoC accountable to their own words and press them on issues important to you. This is your right and is completely reasonable. So have fun and make them talk!

We used SOA Watch and Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement Action Fund as templates.

1. "Bird-Dogging: A Tactic That Gets Candidates Talking," SOA Watch, <http://www.soaw.org/take-action/legislative/resources/709-bird-dogging-a-tactic-that-gets-candidates-talking->
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.