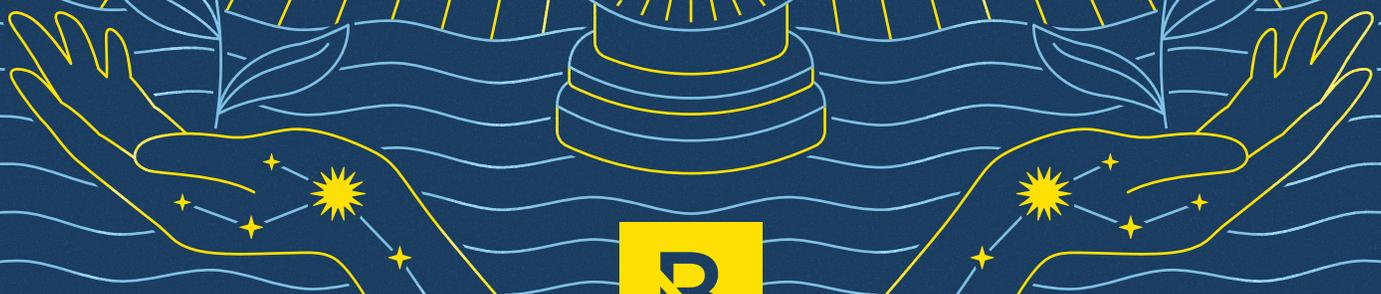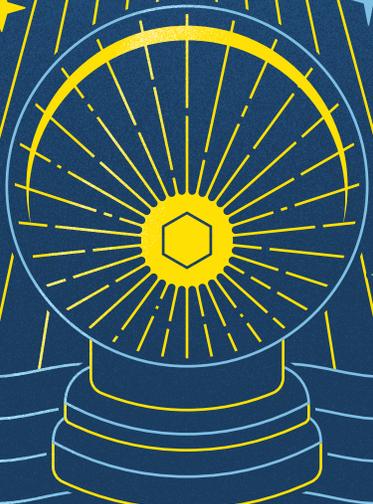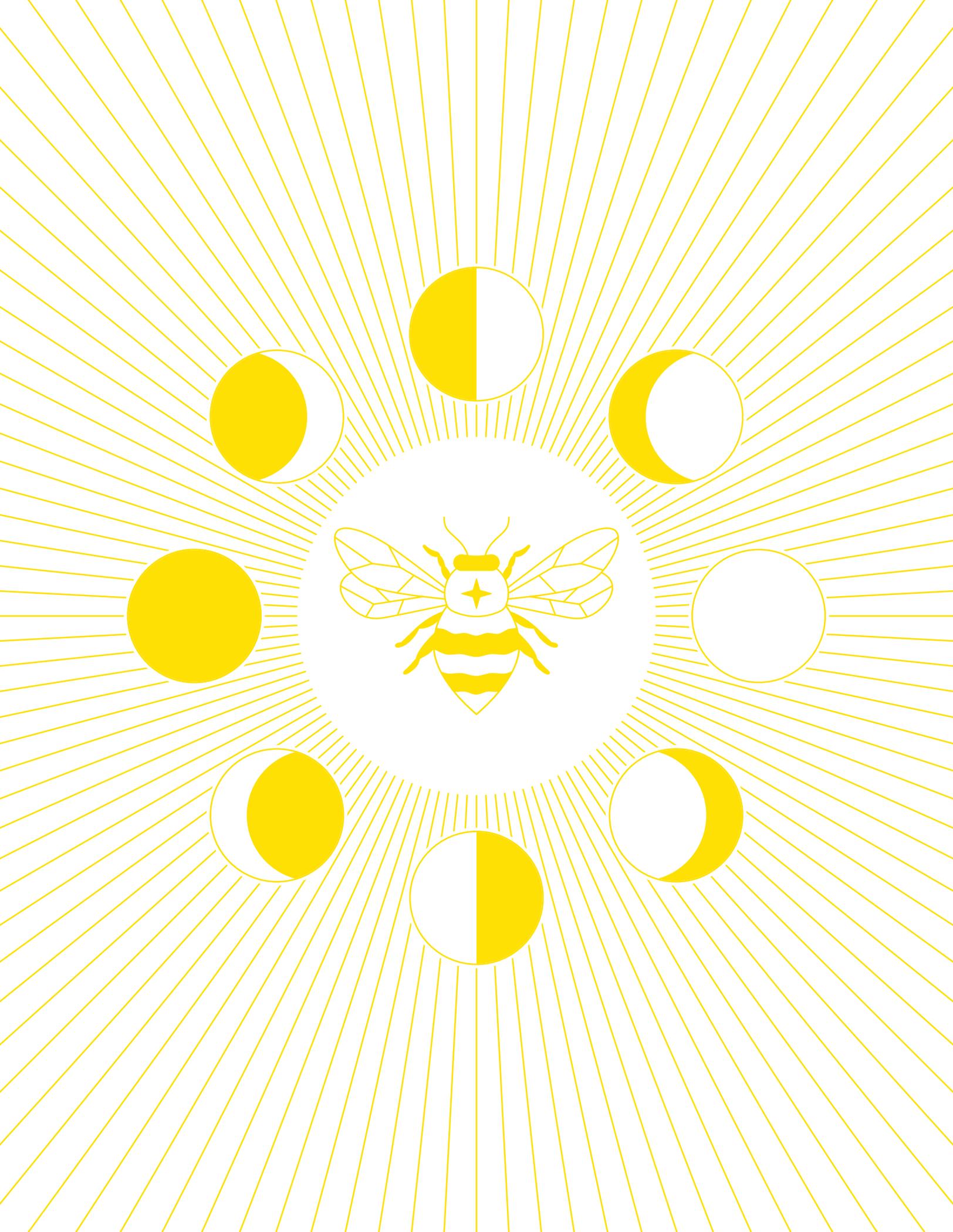# THE FUTURE OF ADVOCACY

RESEARCH REPORT

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THE FUTURE OF ADVOCACY

RESEARCH REPORT

Insights prepared from survey research conducted by Beekeeper Group in December, 2025.

Beekeeper Group

About Beekeeper Group

Beekeeper Group is a Washington, D.C.-based public affairs and communications agency built around the core belief that advocacy is most effective when strategy, creativity, and technology work together. Our practice brings together a range of capabilities under one roof, allowing us to deliver integrated campaigns that share opinions, engage stakeholders, and achieve measurable results.

Our work spans digital advocacy and campaign strategy, creative and visual communication, web design and development, content strategy and copywriting, social media and digital advertising, stakeholder engagement, and community building, as well as research and strategic insights.

Over the past year, Beekeeper expanded its research and strategic insights practice, investing in partnerships with national pollsters and digital testing platforms. These tools have allowed us to bring measurement and experimentation into the earliest phases of campaign planning, giving clients confidence that their strategies are grounded in evidence. This further development of our research and strategic insights practice was part of the catalyst for this research report.

If you're new to our work, you can learn more about us at **www.beekeepergroup.com** and **@beekeepergroup**.

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The Question

I sense a question on your mind. Something is bothering you about the state of advocacy, though you may not yet have the language to name it precisely. Perhaps it's the flood of AI-generated campaigns filling inboxes and generating no meaningful response, each one blurring into the next until they become indistinguishable background noise. Perhaps it's the widening gap between activity and measurable impact—more emails sent, more petitions circulated, more social media content deployed, but consistently fewer results to show for the escalating effort and investment. Perhaps it's the persistent and unsettling sense that strategies which worked reliably even five years ago are now failing in ways that are difficult to diagnose but impossible to ignore; leaving you wondering whether the problem lies with your execution or with something more fundamental that has shifted beneath the surface of how advocacy functions.

You're not imagining it, and you're not alone in sensing that something has changed. Advocacy has reached an inflection point, though most organizations have not yet fully recognized it or understood its implications. The conditions that have historically driven people to take action—trust in the organizations making asks, relevance of those asks to their lived experience and immediate concerns, and credible follow-through after participation that demonstrates their involvement mattered—are eroding faster than most programs have acknowledged or adapted to address. As artificial intelligence accelerates the scale, speed, and volume of outreach that organizations can deploy with minimal human intervention, it is simultaneously and quietly undermining the very foundations that make advocacy effective rather than merely efficient.

This is the paradox facing advocacy professionals today: the tools have never been better, but the outcomes have never been less certain. You can reach more people than ever before. You can personalize messages at scale, optimize send times based on behavioral data, A/B test subject lines to maximize open rates, and automate follow-up sequences that would have required entire teams to execute manually a decade ago. The operational capacity is genuinely extraordinary. And yet something isn't working the way it should. The conversion rates are declining. The engagement is more shallow. The people who do act seem less likely to act again. The movement you're trying to build feels more like a series of disconnected transactions than an actual movement with momentum and staying power.

The question you're grappling with is what comes next. If the old playbook is failing, what replaces it? If AI can be both a solution and a problem, how do you harness its capabilities without falling into the traps it creates? If people are still willing to act but increasingly selective about when and why they do so, what separates the asks they respond to from the ones they delete without opening? And most fundamentally, what does advocacy look like in an era when efficiency is abundant but trust, relevance, and meaningful connection have become genuinely scarce?

What does advocacy look like in an era when efficiency is abundant but trust, relevance, and meaningful connection have become genuinely scarce?

To ease your worry and provide clarity about what's shifting and what it means for how you structure your work, let's consult the cosmos together. Not for prophecy or prescription, but for diagnosis—for understanding what's present in the current landscape, what's changing beneath the surface, and where the opportunities and risks lie for organizations willing to see them clearly.
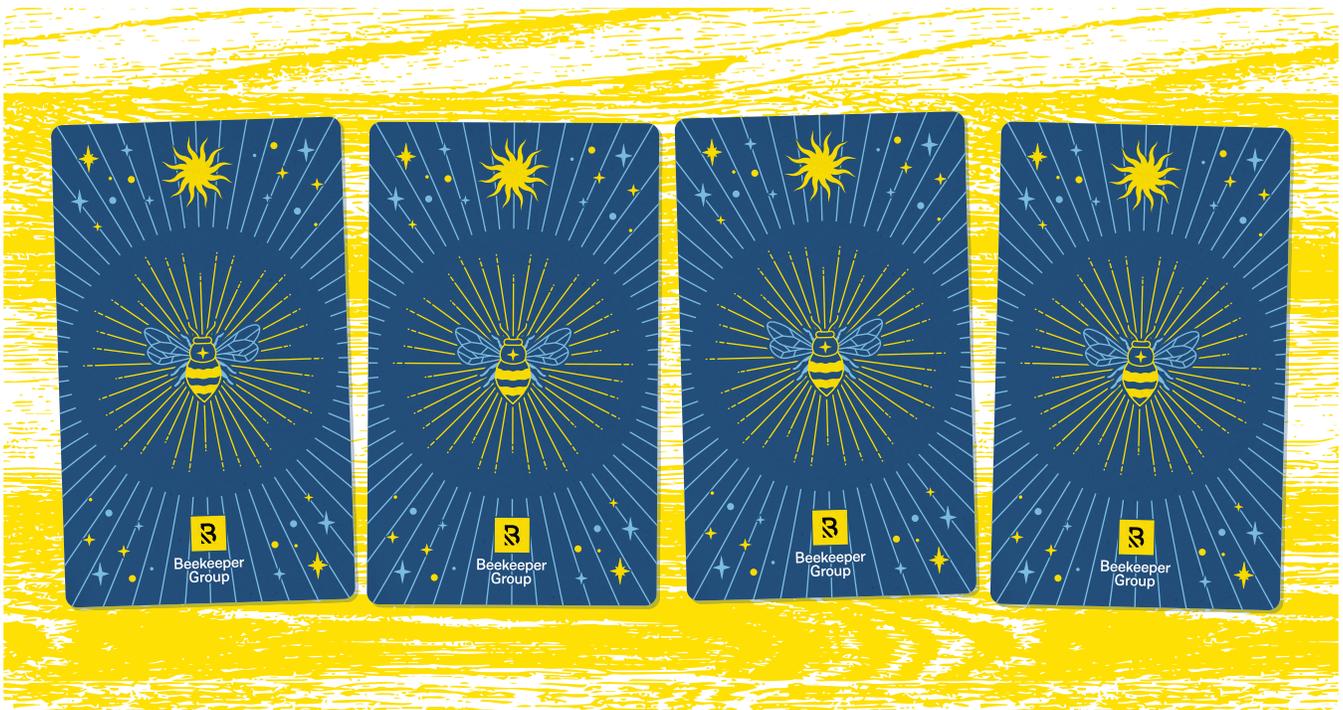
Before us, a four-card spread. Each card has been drawn from Beekeeper Group's proprietary research into how American voters currently perceive and respond to grassroots advocacy strategies—research that reveals gaps between what organizations assume about their audiences and what those audiences actually experience, between what gets measured as success and what actually creates lasting change, between the efficiency of modern tools and the effectiveness of the outcomes they produce. Each card represents a signal about what is shifting in fundamental ways, what continues to work despite rapidly changing conditions, and where programs are losing ground without fully understanding why or how to reverse the decline before it becomes irreversible.

The question guiding this reading is both simple and profound: What is the future of advocacy? Not what you hope it will be or what it should be in some idealized version, but what it actually will be for organizations that adapt to the conditions emerging now versus those that continue operating on assumptions that no longer hold. The cards are ready. Let's see what they reveal.

The Methodology

From Wednesday, December 10, through Monday, December 22, 2025, Beekeeper Group worked alongside J. Wallin Opinion Research to conduct an online survey throughout the United States. We interviewed 1,000 respondents. A survey of this size yields a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence interval. The sample is stratified, meaning the composition of those we researched reflects the demographic and geographic composition of the nation.
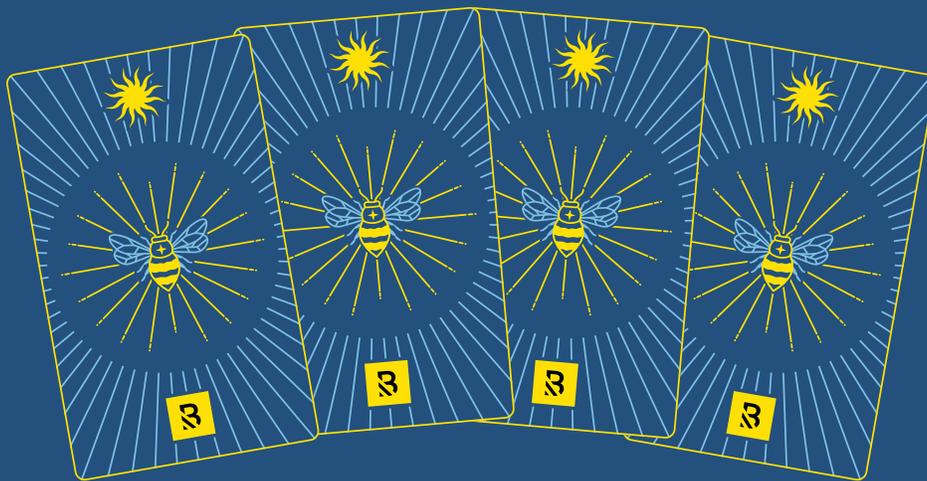
Key Takeaways From The Reading

The biggest finding is not about whether people will act. It is about what they do next.

The data undercuts the familiar story that "people won't engage anymore." When voters are asked to take action on a social or political issue, **76% say they actually do**.

That is a remarkably high conversion rate, and it changes the diagnosis. The problem is not getting people to raise their hands; it is what happens after they do.

Because after the first action, people do not disengage. They lean in. **80%** of people who took action say they **went on to research the issue or cause further**.

That is the post-action moment: a spike in curiosity, attention, and openness to context. It is also the moment most programs squander by treating conversion as an endpoint.

People are also telling us, explicitly, that they expect and want follow-through. **78%** of people who took action **expect to hear from the organization again**, and **62%** say they **want some kind of follow-up**.

In other words, the audience is not asking to be left alone. They are asking to be brought along.

This is where the playbook flips. Traditional grassroots strategy over-indexes on cultivation, meaning deepen the people you already have. This research points to a different engine: **recruit through action, then deepen from there**. The first action is not the finish line. It is the trigger, and it is the best recruiting moment you have because it is the moment when people are most receptive to learning, orienting, and deciding whether they belong in the effort.

If your program is optimized only to generate the first action, it is optimized for leakage. The programs that win next will be built for post-action behavior, with credible context, clear pathways, and meaningful follow-through that turns a one-time click into durable engagement.
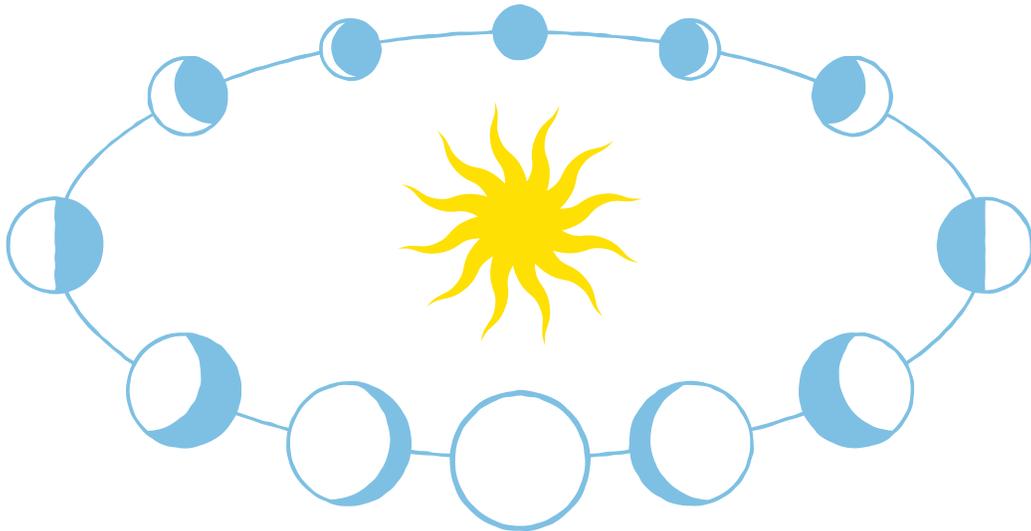
The Spread

Advocacy has never been easier to execute—and simultaneously, never harder to make genuinely effective. This is not a contradiction but rather the defining tension of the current moment. The mechanics of asking people to act have been reduced to algorithmic simplicity: draft a message, identify an audience, deploy at scale, measure the response. AI has fundamentally lowered the cost of content creation, outreach infrastructure, and activation campaigns in ways that would have seemed impossible even five years ago. What once required weeks of planning, significant budget allocation, and substantial staff time can now, for better or worse, be accomplished in hours with minimal resources and almost no human intervention beyond the initial setup.

The efficiency gains are real and significant, but they obscure a more consequential shift in the underlying dynamics of how advocacy functions. Nearly half of American voters (45%) report having been asked to take action on a social

45%

Nearly half of American voters (45%) report having been asked to take action on a social or political issue in recent memory.

or political issue in recent memory. The sheer volume of asks circulating through inboxes, text messages, and social media feeds has reached a saturation point
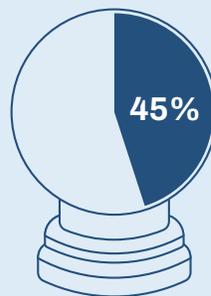
that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. People are being activated constantly—multiple times per day in some cases—and yet the gap between this frenetic activity and measurable impact on the outcomes advocacy is meant to produce continues to widen in ways that conventional metrics often fail to capture.

This is the structural tension at the heart of contemporary advocacy, the problem that most organizations have not yet fully confronted or understood: efficient execution is not the same as meaningful impact. Organizations can now reach millions of people with minimal friction, deploying sophisticated targeting and personalization that makes each recipient feel individually addressed. But reach alone doesn't translate into the outcomes advocacy is actually designed to achieve: sustained engagement that persists beyond a single action, political pressure that decision-makers take seriously enough to alter their positions, or cultural shifts that change what's possible to say and do in public discourse.

The tools have improved dramatically, making it possible to do more with less and to operate at scales that were previously accessible only to the largest and best-resourced organizations. But the conditions that actually motivate people to act– and critically to continue acting over time–have become more fragile and harder to create. Those conditions are trust, relevance, and follow-through. Trust that the organization making the ask has genuine credibility and will use someone's participation responsibly rather than exploiting it for purposes they didn't consent to. Relevance that connects the ask to something people genuinely care about, framed in terms they recognize and understand rather than abstractions that sound important but feel distant from their lived experience. Follow-through that demonstrates their participation mattered and creates a clear pathway for continued engagement rather than treating each ask as an isolated transaction with no connection to what came before or what comes next.

AI accelerates everything except these conditions. It can generate more content faster, identify more potential targets with greater precision, automate more touchpoints across more channels, and optimize more variables to improve conversion rates. But it cannot manufacture trust where none exists, cannot create relevance without deep contextual understanding that goes well beyond demographic data and behavioral patterns, and cannot ensure follow-through in systems that are designed primarily for conversion and immediate response rather than relationship-building and sustained engagement. In fact, when deployed without careful attention to these dynamics, AI often actively erodes these conditions by prioritizing speed and scale over the nuance, authenticity, and genuine human connection required to build and maintain them.

As automation increases and becomes more sophisticated, the organizations with a genuine competitive edge will not be those that simply deploy AI to do more of what they've always done, only faster and cheaper. The edge will belong to organizations that recognize with clarity where efficiency serves their goals and where it quietly undermines the very outcomes they're trying to achieve. The edge will belong to those that double down strategically on what actually motivates people to take action in the first place and what keeps them engaged after that initial moment of activation—not what's easiest to automate or most convenient to measure, but what's most consequential for building durable power.

The four cards in our spread reveal where that edge can be found in the current landscape. Each card represents an insight emerging from research into how Americans currently perceive and respond to grassroots advocacy—research that makes visible the gaps between organizational assumptions and lived reality, between what gets optimized and what actually matters, between activity that can be easily quantified and impact that's harder to measure but ultimately more meaningful. Each insight indicates a condition that's shifting, a dynamic that's intensifying, or a gap between what organizations believe about their work and what people actually experience when they're asked to participate.

THE VILLAGE	THE SEEKER	THE MESSENGER	THE SIGNAL
The power of a local focus – People act where they feel their voice matters.	Curiosity after action – An ask doesn't end engagement, it starts it.	Direct connection makes a difference – Personal beats performative.	Grassroots still works – When the call to action is clear.

Together, these four insights offer a framework for assessing whether your advocacy programs are structured for the era we're entering or whether they remain anchored to assumptions and operational models from an era that's already passed. The question guiding this reading is direct: what actually drives people to act—and more importantly, what keeps them acting over time rather than burning out, tuning out, or opting out entirely?

The Village

THE VILLAGE

The power of a local focus –
People act where they feel
their voice matters.

THE FIRST CARD TURNS OVER.

Local focus is the new force multiplier.

People act where they feel their voice matters, and increasingly that place is not at the national level. The data on this point is unambiguous: voters report the strongest sense of impact and agency at the local and community level, followed by state-level engagement. When asked directly where their voice makes the

biggest difference, 69% point without hesitation to their local community. State-level advocacy follows closely behind as a context where individual participation feels consequential. National issues rank last, suggesting a fundamental disconnect between where advocacy programs concentrate their resources and where people actually believe their participation creates change.

This pattern doesn't necessarily reflect cynicism about federal policy or broad disengagement from national political debates. It represents something more fundamental about how people understand and experience their own agency. People know intuitively where their individual action translates into visible, tangible change because they've lived it. They've seen a pothole fixed within weeks after calling City Hall. They've watched a school board reverse a controversial decision after parents showed up to multiple meetings. They know their state representative by name, have perhaps met them at a community event, and believe with some justification that the representative knows something meaningful about them and their community in return.

Nearly three-quarters of voters (72%) say that actions like contacting elected officials or signing petitions make a difference in shaping outcomes, but that belief is strongest and most durable when the issue feels close to home in geographic, social, and personal terms. The closer the issue to someone's daily lived experience, the more concrete and real its impact becomes. The more real the impact feels, the more likely someone is to act when asked—and critically, to act again when the next ask arrives. This relationship between proximity and sustained engagement has always existed in advocacy, but it's becoming more pronounced as national politics grows simultaneously more polarized and more distant from what most people experience as the meaningful texture of their lives.

Here's what this pattern means for how advocacy programs should be structured: national framing weakens an ask rather than strengthening it. For decades, the

prevailing instinct has been to scale up by framing issues as national crises requiring national mobilization. The logic seemed defensible and even obvious: bigger stakes should generate bigger urgency, which should in turn produce a bigger response. But that's not how people actually experience their own power or assess whether their participation matters. The broader the scope of an issue, the more abstract its impact feels to any individual considering whether to act. The more abstract the impact, the less someone believes their individual participation will make any meaningful difference. And if they don't believe it matters—if the connection between their action and any plausible outcome feels tenuous or invisible—they either won't act at all, or they'll act once as a symbolic gesture and never again because the experience confirmed rather than challenged their skepticism.

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As advocacy programs scale, they almost inevitably lose local relevance. This is a structural challenge embedded in how campaigns are operationalized, not a failure of strategic intent or political commitment. When you're running a national campaign with limited resources and tight timelines, it's operationally simpler and more efficient to deploy one message, one narrative, one call to action across every geography and demographic segment. Customization is resource-intensive. Localization requires intimate knowledge of regional issues, community power structures, and what forms of evidence or argument resonate in different contexts. For years, this trade-off between operational efficiency and local salience seemed not only acceptable but necessary, given the constraints most organizations face.

Then AI arrived and fundamentally altered the equation—but not in the way most organizations anticipated or hoped. AI accelerates the production and distribution of broad messaging, making it faster and cheaper to generate content, deploy outreach, and activate asks at unprecedented scale. But in doing so, it also flattens the contextual nuance and local specificity that makes messaging resonate rather than simply reach people. A templated email about federal climate legislation reads identically whether it's delivered to someone in rural Montana whose economy depends on extraction industries or to someone in Los Angeles whose primary concern is urban heat islands and air quality. The efficiency gains are undeniable and significant. The loss of resonance is equally real, even if it's harder to measure in conventional metrics.

AI can generate a thousand variations of the same core message with minimal marginal cost, but unless those variations are rooted in genuinely local stakes—articulated by locally trusted messengers and connected to locally visible consequences—they register as noise rather than signal in an already oversaturated information environment. And people are becoming remarkably sophisticated at tuning out that noise, whether consciously through deliberate filtering or unconsciously through learned patterns of what to pay attention to and what to ignore.
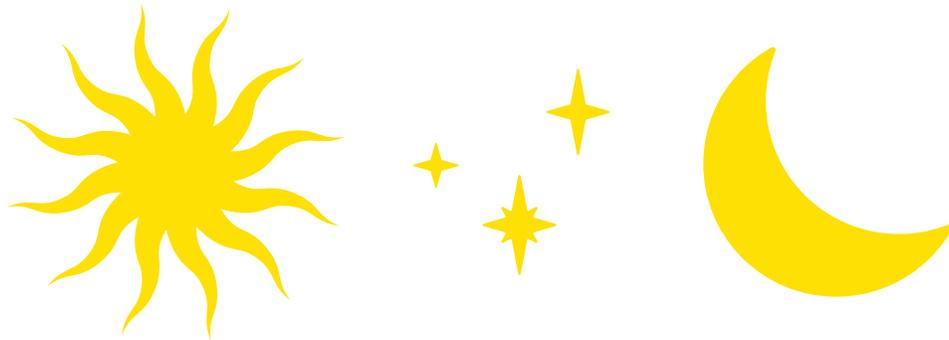
Winning programs will translate national goals into local terms with enough specificity and authenticity to feel urgent and actionable rather than abstract and symbolic. They will take a federal policy proposal and explain with precision what it means for Main Street businesses already operating on thin margins, for the regional hospital's ability to maintain current service levels, and for the school district's capacity to retain experienced teachers in a competitive labor market. They will identify and deploy messengers who carry genuine credibility within a given community—not celebrity spokespeople or national political figureheads, but neighbors, local organizational leaders, and people whose opinions matter because they're grounded in shared experience, mutual accountability, and sustained presence rather than borrowed authority.

And they will make consequences concrete and immediate rather than theoretical and distant: not "this will hurt American families" in some vague aggregate sense, but "this will close the clinic on Fourth Street where your daughter gets her asthma treatments, and the nearest alternative is forty minutes away by car." This kind of localization requires substantially more than inserting a city name or representative's name into an email template through merge fields. It requires understanding which issues carry weight in different communities and why, who carries influence on these issues, and what kinds of evidence people need to believe that acting is worth the time and potential social cost they're being asked to invest.

It requires infrastructure that supports meaningful customization without sacrificing the speed necessary to respond to rapidly evolving political moments and opportunities. And perhaps most importantly, it requires resisting the persistent organizational temptation to optimize purely for scale and reach at the expense of salience and resonance, even when that trade-off would make quarterly metrics look better or make operations feel more manageable.

The irony embedded in this dynamic is that genuine local focus doesn't actually limit reach or constrain impact—it multiplies both through different and more durable mechanisms than broadcast approaches. When people feel their voice matters in a context they understand and care about, they act. When they act and then witness tangible results that confirm their participation mattered, they share that experience with others in their networks. When those others observe someone like themselves—someone facing similar constraints and operating in similar contexts—making a measurable difference, they become substantially more likely to believe they can do the same and therefore more likely to act when asked. National movements have always been built from accumulated local action and locally rooted organizing, not imposed from the top down through sheer message volume or the force of abstract moral argument.

? The card asks: Where does your advocacy feel abstract instead of actionable?

Are you framing issues in terms that feel structurally distant from people's daily lived experience, using language and examples that resonate in policy circles but not in the communities you're trying to mobilize? Are you deploying identical messaging across different geographies and demographic contexts under the assumption that scale inherently equals impact? Are you measuring program success primarily by volume of outreach and breadth of reach rather than by depth of engagement or durability of activation over time?

The Village reveals a truth that becomes easy to forget in organizations optimizing for growth, efficiency, and the appearance of momentum: proximity remains a fundamental source of power in advocacy. The closer an issue feels to someone's immediate context and daily concerns, the more real and urgent its stakes become, and the more willing they are to invest limited time and social capital in

acting on it. If your program has lost that sense of proximity—if it's systematically trading local resonance for operational simplicity—no amount of technological acceleration or increased message volume will restore what's been diminished.

For organizations ready to conduct a more comprehensive assessment:

This question becomes the foundation for evaluating where your advocacy infrastructure is successfully creating genuine local power and where it's inadvertently generating asks that feel disconnected from the communities you're attempting to mobilize. A full diagnostic using the complete research behind this framework can map with precision where your program is losing traction due to insufficient localization, and what structural changes would be required to rebuild resonance without abandoning the operational efficiencies that scale provides when deployed strategically rather than reflexively.

The Seeker

THE SEEKER

Curiosity after action –
An ask doesn't end
engagement, it starts it.
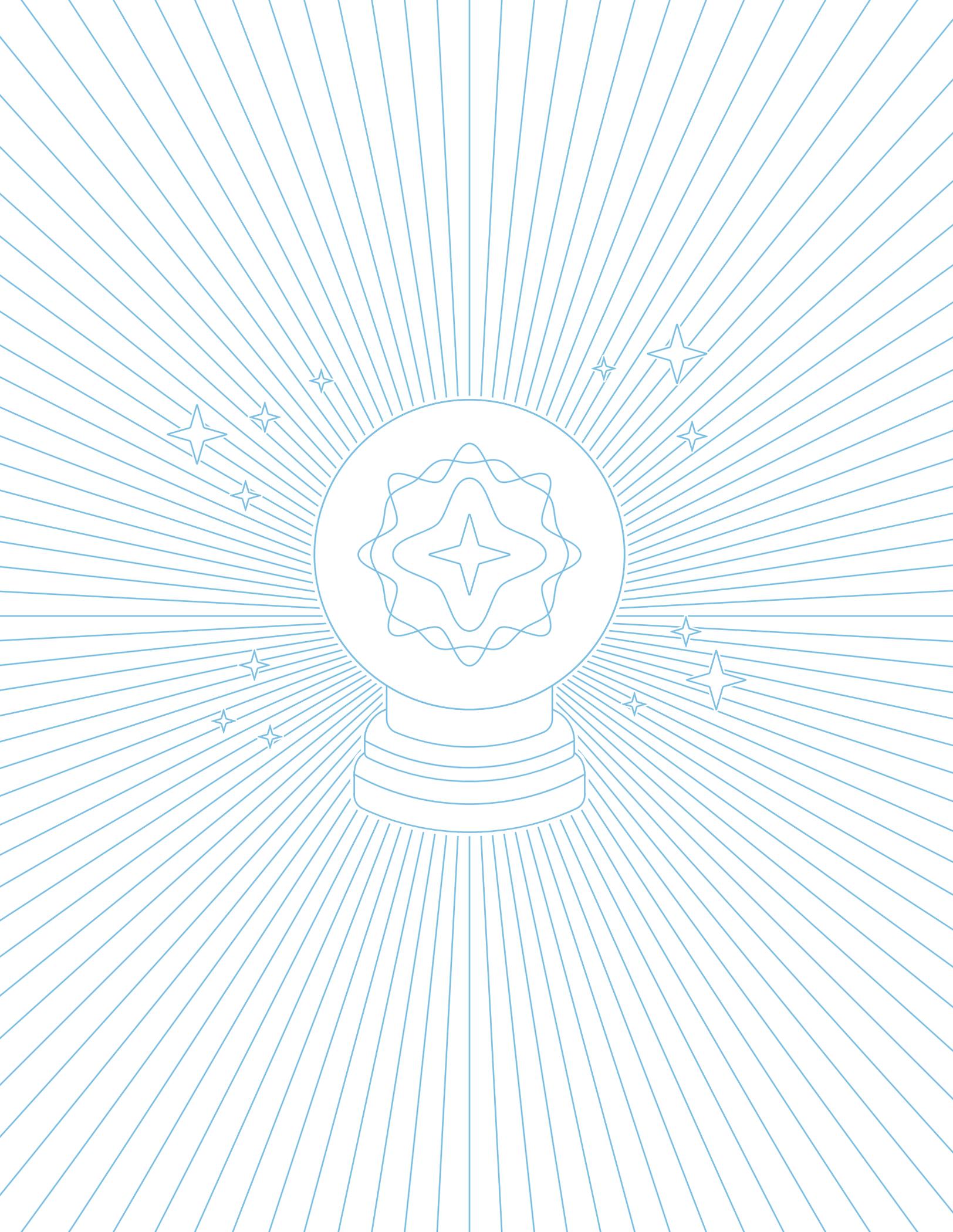
THE SECOND CARD TURNS OVER.

The ask is not the moment—it's the trigger.

Most advocacy programs are designed around a single operational assumption:
that success is measured by whether someone completes the action being
requested, and that the conversion itself represents the endpoint of engagement.
The ask goes out, the action is completed, the data is recorded, and the program

moves on to the next campaign. But this framing fundamentally misunderstands how people actually experience advocacy and what happens in the moments and days following their decision to participate.

The data reveals a pattern that should reshape how organizations structure their engagement infrastructure. Among voters who were asked to take action on a social or political issue, 76% report that they actually did so. This is a remarkably high conversion rate, one that suggests the central challenge facing advocacy is not persuading people to act initially but rather understanding what happens after that initial moment of participation. The ask, it turns out, is not the conclusion of engagement but rather its beginning.

> They did not treat their participation as a terminal event—something completed and then forgotten—but rather as an entry point into deeper understanding.

After taking action, 80% of people report that they went on to research the issue or cause further. They did not treat their participation as a terminal event—something completed and then forgotten—but rather as an entry point into deeper understanding. The act of signing a petition or contacting an elected official triggered curiosity about the broader context: what they had just supported, why it mattered, what else might be at stake, and whether their individual action was part of a larger strategy likely to succeed. This is the opposite of transactional behavior. It represents the beginning of a relationship with an issue, a moment when someone has invested enough time or social capital to want to understand what they've become part of.

And yet most advocacy programs are not designed to meet people in that moment of heightened curiosity and investment. The infrastructure stops at conversion. What should function as a threshold into sustained engagement becomes a dead end instead, not because people are uninterested in continuing but because there

is no clear pathway for them to do so. The organization has optimized for the ask and the immediate response, but not for what comes after.

The research makes this infrastructural gap painfully visible. 78% of people who took action expect to hear from the organization or person who reached out to them again. A clear majority—62%—say explicitly that they want some kind of follow-up. They want to know what happened as a result of their participation, whether the petition they signed contributed to a tangible outcome, whether the email they sent was read by the intended recipient, whether the collective action they joined achieved anything. They want context for what comes next. And they want to be invited back into the work, not as passive recipients of future asks but as people whose initial engagement demonstrated something worth building on and deepening over time.

> 78% of people who took action expect to hear from the organization or person who reached out to them again. A clear majority—**62%**—say explicitly that they want some kind of follow-up.

AI makes it extraordinarily easy to prompt that initial action. It can craft compelling asks, personalize outreach at scale, optimize messaging for conversion, and deploy calls to action across multiple channels with minimal human intervention. But curiosity without guidance leads to disengagement, and this is where the limitations of automation become most apparent. When someone takes action and then searches for more information on their own—which the data tells us most people do—what they encounter is unfiltered, uncontextualized, and often contradictory. They might find misinformation, opposing narratives that undermine

the position they just endorsed, or content designed to sow doubt about the very organization they just supported. Without structured follow-through from the organization that activated them, their curiosity can calcify into skepticism. Their engagement can dissipate. Their willingness to act again can erode as they learn, consciously or not, that advocacy asks are performative gestures rather than entry points into substantive work.

This is where most advocacy programs fall short, and it is a weakness that compounds over time in ways that become increasingly difficult to reverse. Each ask that is not followed by meaningful engagement trains people to treat advocacy as symbolic rather than substantive. Each action that disappears into an organizational void teaches people that their participation does not actually matter beyond generating a data point for the organization's internal metrics. Each conversion that is not nurtured into continued involvement represents not only a missed opportunity for deeper mobilization but active erosion of the trust and sense of agency required for long-term political engagement.

Advocacy programs must be designed for post-action behavior, not just for conversion. This requires anticipating the research people will conduct after they act and providing them with credible, accessible information that deepens their understanding rather than leaving them to navigate a complex and often hostile information ecosystem on their own. It means sending follow-up communications that are not simply another ask in a different guise but rather substantive updates on what their action contributed to, what has happened as a result of collective participation, and what the broader strategic landscape looks like. It means creating multiple pathways for continued engagement that acknowledge people have different capacities and interests—not everyone who signs a petition wants to become a regular volunteer or donate money, but they might want to stay informed about developments, share content within their networks, or take occasional actions that feel both meaningful and achievable given their other commitments.

Programs designed around this understanding treat the ask as a moment of introduction rather than a conclusion. They recognize that conversion is the point at which someone signals they care enough about an issue to invest a small amount of time or social capital, and that this signal should be met with infrastructure that rewards rather than ignores it. They build engagement journeys, not isolated transactions. They design for curiosity, for skepticism, for competing narratives, and for the reality that people's relationship with an issue will either deepen or fade depending almost entirely on whether the organization that first activated them proves worthy of their continued attention and trust.

The card asks: What happens after someone takes action in your program?

Do you have a structured plan for follow-up that goes beyond triggering the next automated ask, or does meaningful engagement end the moment the conversion is recorded in your database? Are you treating people's post-action curiosity as an opportunity to deepen their understanding and strengthen their connection to your work, or are you leaving them to navigate misinformation and contradictory narratives on their own? Are you measuring success by the number of individual actions you can generate, or by the durability and depth of engagement over time?

The Seeker reveals that advocacy's future belongs to organizations that understand the ask as the beginning of a relationship with both the issue and the organization, not the culmination of one. People are willing to act, and the data shows they are willing to stay engaged and invest more deeply—but only if the organization meets them in the moment of curiosity and investment that follows their initial participation and gives them substantive reasons to believe their involvement matters beyond the fleeting satisfaction of having clicked a button or signed their name.
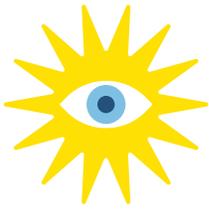
For organizations ready to conduct a more comprehensive assessment:

Understanding post-action behavior becomes central to evaluating whether your advocacy program is genuinely built for sustained mobilization or whether it is structured primarily around one-time conversions that inevitably decay over time. A full diagnostic assessment can map where your current infrastructure successfully supports continued engagement and where it inadvertently creates dead ends that train people to disengage from your organization and, potentially, from advocacy more broadly.

The Messenger

THE MESSENGER

Direct connection
makes a difference –
Personal beats performative.

THE THIRD CARD TURNS OVER.

Personal beats performative.

In an era increasingly saturated with polished storytelling, high-production video content, and algorithmically optimized creative designed to maximize engagement metrics, the channels that are actually driving the most meaningful advocacy action are not the ones most organizations would expect. They are not

the flashiest, the most shareable, or the most likely to generate viral reach. They are the most direct, the most grounded in existing relationships, and the most recognizably human.

Email and text messages are the most common channels through which people receive calls to action—59% report being contacted via email, 51% via text. But more significantly for program design, they are also among the most effective at actually generating action. Between 73% and 84% of people say they are likely to respond to requests that come through direct personal outreach, email, or text communication. These channels consistently outperform more indirect and visually elaborate forms of communication like social media, not because they are inherently superior as mediums, but because they arrive in contexts people associate with direct communication from individuals they know, and that contextual framing matters more than production value or creative sophistication.

This finding runs counter to the prevailing instinct in many advocacy programs over the past decade, which has been to invest heavily in storytelling campaigns designed for social sharing, emotional resonance, and the potential for viral distribution. The prevailing theory has been that the more compelling the narrative, the more beautifully it is produced, and the more widely it spreads across networks, the more people will be moved to take concrete action. And while compelling stories certainly have an important role in advocacy work—they build public awareness, shift cultural narratives, create permission structures for political positions, and generate moments of collective attention—they are not the primary mechanisms through which individual action is motivated and sustained. What actually drives someone to act is trust in the source making the request and relevance of the ask to their own concerns and context, and those qualities are most effectively communicated through channels that feel personal rather than performative.

AI is accelerating the proliferation of what might be called synthetic storytelling across digital spaces. It can generate emotionally resonant narratives at scale, produce video content that mimics human creation, optimize creative elements for maximum engagement, and deploy this content across platforms with unprecedented speed and efficiency. The result is an information environment increasingly populated by content that looks and feels authentic in superficial ways but lacks the grounding of genuine human experience, institutional accountability, or verifiable sourcing. Audiences are becoming more attuned to this dynamic, whether consciously through media literacy or intuitively through pattern recognition, and they are developing sharper instincts for distinguishing between content designed primarily to manipulate emotional response and communication that is rooted in actual relationships and mutual accountability.

> What actually drives someone to act is trust in the source making the request and relevance of the ask to their own concerns and context, and those qualities are most effectively communicated through channels that feel personal rather than performative.

This shift creates both a significant challenge and a meaningful opportunity for advocacy organizations. The challenge is that performative content—regardless of how skillfully it is crafted—is losing its power to drive sustained engagement as people become more skeptical of polished narratives that are divorced from direct relationships or institutional trust. The opportunity is that programs prioritizing direct, trusted outreach are gaining a competitive advantage precisely because their communications feel less manufactured and more grounded in the kind of human connection that cannot be easily replicated or scaled through automation alone.

> The opportunity is that programs prioritizing direct, trusted outreach are gaining a competitive advantage precisely because their communications feel less manufactured and more grounded in the kind of human connection that cannot be easily replicated or scaled through automation alone.

Personal communication, in this context, does not necessarily require one-to-one interaction, though that remains powerful when it is operationally feasible. What it requires is communication that feels like it originates from a trusted source rather than a faceless institution, that employs a recognizably human voice rather than language that has been algorithmically optimized for engagement metrics, and that demonstrates knowledge of the recipient as something more than a collection of demographic data points or behavioral patterns extracted from previous interactions. It requires prioritizing the quality and durability of relationships over the raw reach of any individual message.

The most effective advocacy asks, according to the data, come from people who already possess credibility and trust with the person they are asking. A request from a friend, family member, colleague, or respected community figure carries weight that no amount of production value or creative sophistication can replicate, because it is embedded in an existing relationship that includes mutual accountability, shared context, and social consequences for broken trust. This is why peer-to-peer organizing models remain among the most durable and effective forms of advocacy mobilization, even though they are among the most difficult to scale efficiently, and why organizations that can successfully activate trusted messengers within communities rather than relying primarily on broadcast communications from central leadership tend to generate higher quality engagement that persists for longer periods of time.

Organizations that understand this dynamic are fundamentally rethinking how they structure their communications infrastructure and allocate resources between different types of outreach. Rather than defaulting to broadcast campaigns designed to maximize reach regardless of relationship context, they are investing in relational organizing models that identify and activate trusted messengers who already have credibility within specific communities. Rather than treating email and text as purely utilitarian channels for delivering templated asks with minimal personalization, they are using these channels to create something closer to genuine dialogue—sending substantive updates rather than only asks, soliciting input and feedback rather than only broadcasting decisions, acknowledging and building on previous participation rather than treating each interaction as isolated from what came before, and demonstrating through consistent practice that the communication represents an ongoing relationship rather than a series of transactions.

They are also becoming substantially more strategic and intentional about who the messenger is in any given context and how that shapes whether an ask feels authentic and actionable or abstract and performative. A message from a national organization's executive director might carry institutional authority and signal the importance of an issue, but it does not carry the same motivational weight as a message from someone the recipient knows personally and respects within their own community. The most effective programs identify and empower local messengers who can translate national priorities and strategy into terms that feel personally relevant rather than abstractly important, who can make asks in ways that account for local political dynamics and community relationships, and who carry the kind of embedded credibility that comes from sustained presence and accountability within a specific place rather than positional authority within an organizational hierarchy.

This does not mean abandoning storytelling, creative content, or efforts to shape public narratives through compelling media. These tools serve important functions in building awareness, shifting cultural attitudes, creating political opportunity, and establishing the broader context within which more direct organizing happens. What it does mean is understanding where these different approaches serve advocacy goals most effectively and where there is a risk of substituting visibility for genuine connection or mistaking engagement metrics for actual mobilization capacity. A compelling story can raise awareness about an issue and shift how people think about it, but it will not necessarily drive individual action unless it is paired with a trusted messenger making a specific, concrete ask of someone within a relational context that includes accountability and follow-through.

As digital spaces become increasingly saturated with AI-generated content, the existing scarcity shifts from available information and creative content to trusted information and credibility. People have access to effectively unlimited narratives, unlimited data, unlimited emotional appeals, and unlimited calls to action. What they do not have unlimited access to are sources they believe are operating in good faith, with genuine accountability, and with sustained concern for the issues and communities at stake rather than extractive interest in their data, their money, or their participation as a metric. Organizations that build and maintain trust through consistent, direct, accountable communication—and that demonstrate this trust through practice rather than simply claiming it rhetorically—will have a structural advantage in an environment where performative content is abundant but meaningful connection has become genuinely scarce.

The card asks: Where are you mistaking visibility for connection?

Are you investing heavily in content designed primarily to be shared widely and generate engagement metrics but not necessarily to drive

concrete action or build lasting relationships? Are you prioritizing production value and creative sophistication over the credibility and trustworthiness of the messenger in the specific context where your ask is being received? Are you using email and text as transactional delivery mechanisms for templated asks rather than as relationship-building tools that demonstrate ongoing accountability and genuine dialogue? Are you measuring program success primarily by impressions, reach, and social engagement rather than by the depth and durability of trust you are building with the specific people you are trying to mobilize over time?

The Messenger reveals that advocacy's future belongs to organizations that understand personal communication is not a fallback strategy to deploy when performative content fails to generate desired results—it is the primary mechanism through which trust is built, maintained, and translated into sustained action. As audiences grow more sophisticated at filtering synthetic narratives and more skeptical of content that feels designed primarily to manipulate their emotional response or extract their participation, the programs that double down on authentic, direct, accountable human connection will find themselves with a competitive advantage that cannot be replicated through algorithmic optimization or production budget alone.

For organizations ready to conduct a more comprehensive assessment:

Evaluating the role of messenger credibility and communication channel effectiveness becomes essential to understanding whether your program is actually building the kind of trust that sustains engagement through political setbacks and competing demands on people's time and attention, or whether you are relying primarily on performative tactics that generate short-term visibility and engagement metrics without building the relational infrastructure required for long-term mobilization capacity.

The Signal

Grassroots still works—when you make it easy.

There is a pervasive narrative in contemporary political discourse about widespread civic disengagement, about populations overwhelmed by information and exhausted by constant crisis, about people tuning out of collective action

and withdrawing from public life into private concerns. The data does not support this narrative. The problem facing advocacy is not that people are fundamentally unwilling to participate in civic and political life. The problem is that participation has become unnecessarily complicated, confusing, and effortful in ways that have little to do with the substance of the issues at stake, and these structural and design barriers are being systematically mistaken for lack of interest or commitment.

Among those who are asked to take action on a social or political issue, three in four (76%) report that they actually do so. This is not a population that has checked out of civic engagement or withdrawn from collective action. 64% of voters already see themselves as active participants in civic or community life, and a majority—58%—believe that elected officials take grassroots actions like petitions and constituent contact seriously enough that these actions have the potential to influence policy outcomes. These are not the statistics of a fundamentally disengaged or apathetic electorate. They are the statistics of a population that is willing to act when the pathway to meaningful action is sufficiently clear, accessible, and credible.

The barriers preventing more widespread and sustained participation are structural and operational rather than attitudinal or ideological. People do not act when they are confused about what specifically is being asked of them, when the ask requires navigating multiple steps or platforms without clear guidance, when they are uncertain about whether their participation will be used responsibly and in accordance with their values, when they have legitimate concerns about privacy or safety that are not adequately addressed, or when the action feels performative rather than connected to any plausible theory of change. These are fundamentally design problems rather than motivation problems, and they are solvable through intentional attention to user experience, clear communication, and genuine respect for the time and trust people are being asked to invest.

AI can multiply the volume of calls to action exponentially, reaching more people with less organizational effort than has ever been possible in the history of advocacy. But volume is not the constraint that most advocacy programs actually need to address, and in many cases increased volume without corresponding attention to quality and accessibility simply exacerbates existing problems. If anything, the saturation of asks across email, text, social media, and other channels has made people more selective and discriminating about which ones they choose to respond to. What AI cannot do—at least not without significant intentionality and human oversight—is reduce the friction embedded in poorly designed actions or address the legitimate concerns people have about how their participation will be used and whether it will actually matter. If an action is confusing, requires too many steps, fails to explain its strategic purpose, or raises unaddressed questions about privacy and data use, then automating the ask to reach exponentially more people simply scales failure more efficiently rather than solving the underlying problem.

> The strongest advocacy programs design deliberately for clarity, ease, and follow-through rather than optimizing primarily for volume and reach.

The strongest advocacy programs design deliberately for clarity, ease, and follow-through rather than optimizing primarily for volume and reach. They understand that every additional step required in an action sequence represents a potential abandonment point where someone who was willing to participate ultimately does not complete the process, and they work systematically to eliminate unnecessary complexity that serves organizational convenience or legacy data collection practices rather than strategic necessity. They make the ask specific and concrete rather than vague and aspirational, because people need enough context to assess whether the action is worth their time and aligned with their values. They explain transparently

what will happen with someone's participation—who will see it, how it will be used, what it is meant to achieve within a broader strategy, and what realistic expectations should be for individual and collective impact—because this kind of transparency reduces skepticism and increases both initial action and sustained engagement over time. And they anticipate the legitimate concerns people have about taking action in an increasingly surveilled and polarized political environment, and they address those concerns proactively and credibly rather than ignoring them or treating them as irrational barriers to be overcome through more persuasive messaging.

One of the most significant barriers that emerges repeatedly in the research is concern about privacy and data security. People want to participate in advocacy, but they do not want their personal information mishandled, sold to third parties, or used in ways they did not explicitly consent to. They do not want their participation to result in an onslaught of unwanted communications from organizations they have never heard of and did not choose to engage with. They do not want their names publicly attached to positions or actions that could expose them to harassment, professional consequences, or physical safety risks in communities where political expression can carry real costs. These concerns are entirely legitimate, and when organizations fail to address them clearly, credibly, and with genuine respect for people's autonomy and safety, they create friction that prevents action even among people who are otherwise willing and motivated to participate.

Designing for ease and accessibility means understanding where friction currently exists within your program's infrastructure and making deliberate, systematic choices to remove it wherever it does not serve a compelling strategic purpose. It means testing the actual user experience of your actions from the perspective of someone encountering them for the first time without insider knowledge of your organization, your issue area, or the political context you are operating within.

It means questioning whether the number of form fields you require is actually necessary for the action to be strategically effective or whether it represents legacy data collection practices that prioritize organizational convenience over participant experience. It means being explicit and transparent about what you will do with someone's information, giving them genuine control over how they are contacted in the future, and demonstrating through consistent practice that you take these commitments seriously rather than treating them as legal formalities.

It also means recognizing that different people have vastly different levels of technical literacy, available time, comfort with public political expression, and tolerance for complexity or risk, and that the most inclusive and effective actions are those designed to accommodate the lowest common denominator across these dimensions rather than optimizing for the experience of highly engaged core supporters who already trust your organization and are willing to navigate significant friction. An action that requires downloading a mobile application, creating an account with password requirements, navigating multiple screens with unclear instructions, and publicly attaching one's name and location to a political position might be perfectly acceptable for core supporters who are deeply committed to your work. But it will lose the vast majority of people who are willing to act but not willing to invest that level of time, expose themselves to that level of risk, or overcome that many technical and cognitive barriers. The strategic goal should be to make the on-ramp to participation as low-friction as possible while still ensuring the action is meaningful, strategically valuable, and clearly connected to plausible pathways toward the change you are trying to create.

Clarity is equally essential to reducing friction and increasing action completion rates. People need to understand with specificity what they are being asked to do, why it matters in both immediate and strategic terms, what they can reasonably expect it to accomplish, and how it connects to broader efforts. Vague asks that rely on abstract language like "make your voice heard" or "stand with us" do not

provide sufficient information for someone to assess whether the action is worth their time or aligned with their values and priorities. Specific asks that explain the concrete action being requested, the political or social context that makes it timely, the decision-makers or systems it is meant to influence, and the realistic theory of change connecting individual participation to collective impact give people the context they need both to decide whether to participate and to feel confident that their participation is connected to substantive work rather than symbolic gesture.

Follow-through, as The Seeker made clear, is what transforms a single action into the beginning of sustained engagement rather than an isolated transaction. But follow-through also plays a crucial role in reducing friction for future actions and building the kind of trust that makes people more willing to act quickly and with less hesitation when time-sensitive opportunities arise. When people take action and then receive meaningful follow-up—when they learn what happened as a result of their participation and the collective participation of others, when they see that the organization respected their involvement and their boundaries, when they experience communication that treats them as valued partners rather than extractable resources—they become substantially more likely to act again when asked. And critically, they become more likely to act with less friction and hesitation because the organization has established a track record of taking their participation seriously and using it responsibly.

The inverse dynamic is equally powerful and equally consequential. When people take action and then experience poor or nonexistent follow-through— when they never learn what their participation contributed to, when they are immediately subjected to aggressive additional asks for money or time without any acknowledgment of what they already gave, when their stated preferences about communication frequency or channel are ignored, when they discover their information was shared with other organizations without their consent—they become less likely to act again for that organization and potentially for advocacy

more broadly. They learn through direct experience that this organization, or advocacy in general, does not respect their time, their boundaries, or their dignity as autonomous participants making choices about how to invest their limited political and social capital. That learning compounds across repeated negative experiences until the friction is not just operational but fundamentally relational and reputational.

AI can help reduce friction and improve accessibility if it is deployed thoughtfully and with genuine attention to user experience rather than simply to organizational efficiency. It can simplify complex language, optimize interfaces for clarity and ease of use, automate acknowledgment and confirmation communications, personalize asks based on someone's demonstrated interests and previous behavior, and identify points in the user journey where people are abandoning actions so that those specific friction points can be addressed. But AI can also introduce new and more insidious forms of friction if it is used to extract more data than is strategically necessary, to bombard people with high-volume low-relevance asks that train them to ignore future communications, to create actions that feel algorithmically generated rather than genuinely strategic and connected to human decision-making, or to prioritize organizational metrics over participant experience and dignity. The technology itself is neutral; the crucial question is whether organizations are deploying it in ways that genuinely make participation easier and more meaningful or simply in ways that make organizational operations more scalable without regard for how that affects the people being asked to act.

Grassroots advocacy remains one of the most powerful mechanisms available for creating political and social change, but only when it is designed and implemented with genuine respect for the people being asked to participate. Treating participants as means to organizational ends—as data points to be collected and analyzed, as conversion metrics to be optimized through A/B testing, as names and email addresses to be accumulated on petitions and then leveraged for fundraising—is not only ethically questionable but strategically counterproductive

in an environment where people have become far more sophisticated at recognizing when they are being valued for their participation versus when they are being extracted from for someone else's benefit. People can sense this distinction even when they cannot articulate it explicitly, and it shapes fundamentally whether they act once as a symbolic gesture or become deeply engaged participants in sustained collective work.

The card asks: How much friction does your program introduce before action becomes possible?

Are you requiring unnecessary steps, personal information, or technical capacity that filters out willing participants who lack time, comfort with technology, or tolerance for complexity? Are you being genuinely transparent about privacy, data use, and follow-through in ways that build trust rather than raise additional concerns that go unaddressed? Are you designing actions that feel strategically clear, concretely connected to plausible theories of change, and respectful of the investment people are making, or are you defaulting to vague asks that don't give people sufficient context to commit with confidence? Are you measuring program success by the total volume of actions you can generate through increasingly aggressive outreach, or by the percentage of people you reach who actually complete the action and remain meaningfully engaged with your work over time?

The Signal reveals that the future of grassroots advocacy belongs to organizations that treat ease, clarity, and respect for participants as strategic imperatives rather than operational afterthoughts or nice-to-have features that get deprioritized when resources are constrained. People want to participate in shaping the political and social conditions of their lives. They believe their participation can make a difference when it is structured well and connected to genuine strategy. The

question is whether your program makes it genuinely easy for them to act in ways that feel meaningful and aligned with their values—or whether you are accidentally scaling barriers that keep willing participants on the sidelines while simultaneously wondering why engagement rates remain stubbornly low despite ever-increasing outreach volume.

For organizations ready to conduct a more comprehensive assessment:

Evaluating the friction embedded throughout your current advocacy infrastructure becomes essential to understanding whether you are maximizing the engagement potential of the audiences you are reaching or whether you are inadvertently filtering out participation through poor design, unclear communication, insufficient privacy protections, or misalignment between what you are asking people to do and what they can reasonably accomplish given their constraints. A full diagnostic assessment can identify with precision where unnecessary complexity, ambiguous messaging, or inadequate attention to user experience and legitimate concerns is costing you action at scale, and what specific structural and operational changes would reduce those barriers without compromising the strategic impact or integrity of your work.
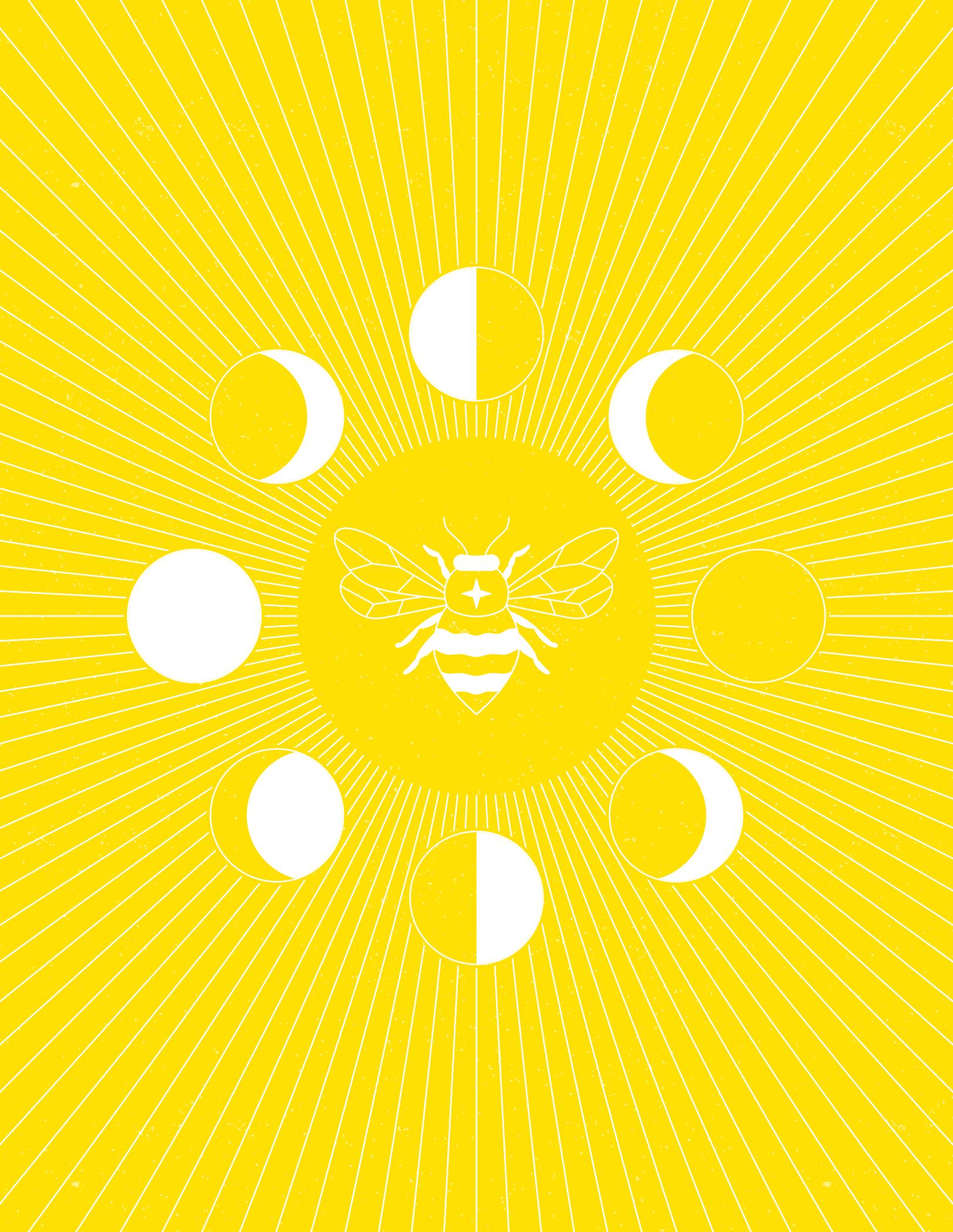
The Conclusion

Grassroots has not stopped working, but the old sequencing has. When the field was less saturated and asks were rarer, you could afford to treat participation as a transaction. Now, in an environment where people are inundated with messages, the organizations that earn engagement are the ones that treat participation as a doorway, then actually open it.

That is the change in front of us: recruiting through action, then deepening through follow-through. It demands different infrastructure, different metrics, and a different definition of success that rewards sustained engagement over raw volume.

We are ready to help you pressure-test your program against what the data is telling us. Not with generic "best practices," but with a clear-eyed evaluation of where your engagement journey turns into a dead end, where trust and relevance are being strengthened or quietly eroded, and what you can change to capture the post-action moment instead of wasting it. In this era, the question is not whether you can generate actions. It is whether your program is built to deserve the next one.