

Citizens Trade Campaign

working together for social and environmental justice in trade policy

C4 Action Item Series: *Advanced Bird-Dogging Tips*

What is Bird-dogging?

Candidates frequently campaign in public locations, in front of the media, and open them up to questions from the public. These events provide opportunities to get commitments on trade policy. By raising questions, fair trade activists can:

- raise the issue of fair trade with the candidate;
- find out what positions the candidates currently hold;
- push the candidate to make their positions more specific;
- inform members of the public about the issues; and
- inform reporters about the candidates, the issues, and the fair trade movement.

If candidates are subjected to questions on an issue in multiple locations, over an extended period of time, they will understand that this issue is important to voters, especially the active voters who attend political events (and might become donors or volunteers).

This strategy has come to be known as “bird-dogging,” as the activists “hound” the candidates until we have them cornered, or treed. When activists are articulate, well organized, persistent, assertive, and coordinated, bird-dogging can persuade good candidates to strengthen or emphasize their positions on your issue, get middle-of-the road candidates to shift in your direction, and get bad candidates to de-emphasize their views on your issue.

Opportunities for bird-dogging:

- Campaign speeches at universities, senior centers, the Rotary Club, to Church groups, etc
- Radio talk shows
- District meetings
- On the street after the candidate has left the building or when he/she is mingling. Whenever you have the opportunity to shake a candidate’s hand, do not let go until you have asked your question.
- Press Conferences
- Sporting events, concerts, parades, etc

Formulating your approach:

- Call the candidate’s campaign office to find out what appearances they will make.
- The website, internet or newspaper may have a listing.
- When you think of a question, ask yourself: *What would be a good follow-up and what will listeners learn from your question regardless of how it is answered?*
- Plant multiple questioners to better your chance of asking questions and to provide more opportunity for follow-up questions.
- How would you adjust your approach based on the forum, e.g. talk show, town meeting, coffee shop, street, house meeting?
- How do you anticipate bird-dogging would change over the course of the campaign?
- Role play - it is very important to be comfortable with the questions and to be able to ask them clearly.

Assessing each encounter:

- How did the way the question was framed affect the way the candidate responded?
- How would you adjust your approach based on your knowledge of the candidate’s views?
- What did other people in the room learn about trade policy? About the candidate’s views?
- What would be a better way to ask the question?
- Are there any opportunities to use the information gained? You might write a follow-up letter to the candidate or a letter to the editor.