

C4 Action Item Series: *How to Start Bird-Dogging Candidates*

[Start Bird-Dogging on Fair Trade](#)

Trade activists have a lot to learn from a good bird dog.

Our canine friends watch intently for the opportunity to act. When they see an opening, they jump into action. They point out potential prey, inciting others to join in the hunt. And they relentlessly hound the target, chasing, not letting up, until it is treed, exhausted, and has nowhere to go.

After working with elusive candidates on trade, these tactics are often the only ones that will move our agenda forward. We need to relentlessly bring up trade questions, with specificity, and demand an actual answer every time. Whether it is at a press conference, parade, fundraiser, church picnic or campaign speech, we have to hound candidates until we have them cornered, and lock down meaningful commitments.

[How to best begin? Use the START method.](#)

S -Start by asking something on trade policy. State a simple and specific question. Stay on subject. Send the message you are paying attention, and know this issue.

T -Task the target to respond. Give them time to tell you their take on trade. Make it clear you want an answer.

A -Ask again. If you don't get anything, ask once more. If they give an actual answer, ask a follow up question.

R -Record the response. Make sure you write down date and time, detail and nuances, and document rationale.

T -Tell everybody. Talk to trade activists. Share the response with media, voters and other decision makers.

[Not sure what to ask?](#)

Here are a few good questions for any federal candidate:

1. Do you support reviewing and renegotiating NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement? Follow up: *What about CAFTA?*
2. Do you support eliminating the Fast Track trade promotion authority, and giving Congress a larger role in deciding the contents of trade agreements?
3. Do you support enforcing labor rights and environmental standards the same way we enforce commercial provisions in trade agreements?
4. Will you cosponsor Senator Brown's TRADE Act of 2008?

Six Tips on Better Bird-Dogging:

- Grab the candidate's hand, look her right in the eye, ask the question, *and don't let go until you get an answer.*
- Listen for specific reasoning and logic, so you and other activists can better lobby that representative in the future.
- Think "*What would be a good follow-up question?*" whether they respond yes, no or don't give any commitment.
- Ask "*What will the audience get from this exchange?*" The listening public should learn from your question as they listen, regardless of how it is answered.
- Call the candidate's campaign office to get a schedule. Your newspaper may also list town hall meetings.
- Have multiple questioners go to the event, entering and leaving separately, and sitting throughout the room. Discuss priority questions in advance.

When trade activists are articulate, assertive and aggressive, our bird-dogging can persuade a good candidate to tighten up a position, get a middle-of-the road candidate to come over to our camp, or force a bad candidate to quit stumping on free trade altogether.

There's nothing to it but to do it: **Go out and bird dog on the trade issue!**