

# Creative Caucuses in State Legislatures

Caucuses are groups of elected officials who voluntarily come together around shared policy goals. They sometimes serve as coalitions of legislators who share a common background, political affiliations or identities. Caucuses also function as study groups and policy incubators, leading action on issues that affect multiple standing committees within a state's legislative structure. Common examples of issue caucuses include those established to support rural development, manufacturing, disabilities, mental health, women's issues, veterans' issues ... and the arts!

Over the years, numerous states have established legislative caucuses to promote the arts. Whether they are framed as arts caucuses, creativity caucuses or cultural caucuses, such a legislative group provides a focal point for advocacy in the legislature on arts policy and budget issues. Caucus members are important allies for arts advocates, helping them to grow legislative understanding of the arts and exert political influence to advance cultural policy at the state level.

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This edition of the Practical Advocate explores how state level arts caucuses work, how they can be beneficial and challenges that can arise. Insights are based on research and interviews with advocacy leaders, legislative leaders and state arts agency staff as well as NASAA's observations of caucuses over time.

## Caucus Activities

### Issue Education

The primary function of many legislative caucuses is to educate policymakers about issues relevant to their constituents or the legislative agenda. Many arts caucus activities support these functions:

- Sharing information on the impact of the arts
- Building relationships and networks to broaden public understanding of and bipartisan support for the arts
- Sponsoring field trips or site visits to see the arts in action
- Hosting events (briefings, arts gatherings or "Advocacy Day" proceedings) that give visibility to the arts
- Providing a forum for constituents and lawmakers to discuss arts issues and trends

## Research

Working as an arts policy research group in the legislature, a caucus can examine any number of topics, like the community development or educational impact of the arts, the presence of the creative industries in the state, tax incentives, dedicated revenue mechanisms, entrepreneurship support for artists, issues relating to ticketing, the effects of disasters on the arts, and other issues. This research can inform the drafting and passage of legislation favorable to the arts.

The state arts agency, cultural advocates, creative industry experts, and state colleges and universities routinely supply data or provide expert testimony to caucuses. The caucus can then share information with other legislators. In that way the caucus becomes a credible, useful source of information on arts policy for elected officials at the state level.

## Promoting Legislation

The advancement of legislation is often a primary purpose of an arts caucus. Its members promote a legislative agenda for the arts and build consensus around arts budget and policy issues. The caucus can:

- set an agenda on priorities for arts legislation;
- advocate for funding of the state arts agency;
- advance other cultural policy legislation, such as bills promoting the creative economy or arts education; or
- organize efforts to scuttle troublesome legislation.

A caucus can advise the legislature on arts policy, promote worthwhile arts legislation and recruit sponsors for bills relevant to the arts. At certain times, disagreement within the caucus—or unrelated partisan divides affecting caucus members—may prevent a caucus from taking a formal position on an issue or bill. In these instances, caucus leaders will need to assess the political circumstances and proceed in the way that best sustains bipartisan support for the arts over the long term. In some cases, a powerful caucus member who chooses to sponsor arts legislation can, through the force of personal persuasion, gather a coalition of vocal supporters to move legislation forward.

## Caucus or Committee?

Elected officials organize themselves in various ways to pool expertise and facilitate policy-making. Although each state legislature has different rules and norms that govern the formation of working groups, some common distinctions among different types of groups are outlined below. This Practical Advocate focuses on caucuses because they are a highly flexible vehicle to build coalitions on behalf of the arts. But advocates also should prepare to work with special committees and standing committees because they, too, may play important roles in advancing cultural policy.

	LEGISLATIVE CAUCUSES	TASK FORCES OR SPECIAL COMMITTEES	STANDING LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEES
<b>Formation</b>	Informal and typically self-organized	Created by legislative leadership for a specific purpose	Permanently established within the structure of the legislature
<b>Membership</b>	Voluntary and generally open to all legislators	By appointment; can include legislators and subject matter experts	Members are appointed by chamber leadership, often reflecting party representation
<b>Purpose</b>	Issue education and policy promotion	Study specific issues and make recommendations	Review legislation and oversee regulations and appropriations within their purview
<b>Authority</b>	Lacks formal authority, serves primarily as a forum for discussion	Established with a specific mandate and assigned duties	Has formal legislative authority and decision-making powers
<b>Duration</b>	Ongoing, as long as there is participant interest	Temporarily formed for a specific time or until goals are achieved	Permanent, with continuity across legislative sessions
<b>Leadership Structure</b>	Informal leadership; chairs or cochairs are volunteers or elected by caucus members.	Leadership structure is determined when the task force is formed.	Typically has a formal leadership and rank structure, including a chairperson and other officers
<b>Public Engagement</b>	Often engages with external stakeholders and advocacy groups	Engagement varies; may hold hearings or invite expert testimony	Holds public hearings or accepts testimony according to legislative rules

## Formation

### Motivated Leadership

The initiative for establishing a creative caucus sometimes comes from the leadership of individuals within the legislature—elected officials with a particular interest in or vision around arts policy. Other times, arts advocacy groups can play a crucial role in catalyzing the formation of a caucus. Advocacy organizations may suggest the idea and encourage participation by prospective members, but the decision about whether to create a legislative caucus ultimately rests with legislators themselves.

The rules for caucus formation vary from state to state. In some states, caucuses must register with an administrative body or legislative leadership. (This tends to be true in states with laws prohibiting the use of state funds for caucus activities.) In other states there are no procedural requirements for the formation of issue focused caucuses.

However, a caucus is established, committed legislative leadership and ownership are fundamental to its growth and impact. Caucus leaders provide a strong and influential voice for the caucus, advocating for its mission and goals. Many arts caucuses are cochaired by members of each political party and/or each legislative chamber. They foster a spirit of bipartisanship and inclusivity, encouraging collaboration among members with diverse perspectives. Leadership is also crucial in navigating internal challenges and conflicts within the caucus. Although tenure and influence can be useful assets, the most important leadership attributes to seek are a genuine commitment to the arts and a willingness to make it a policy priority.

### Stakeholder Roles

While a primary function of caucuses is to build arts knowledge among legislators, caucuses also play a reciprocal role in helping arts constituents to understand more about the legislative context.

State arts advocacy organizations may facilitate the formation of a legislative caucus. These advocacy organizations often have established relationships with legislators who are supportive of the arts. They can leverage these connections to engage lawmakers interested in forming or joining a caucus. Advocacy organizations also can communicate about the economic, social and cultural benefits of the arts. This information helps lawmakers encourage peer participation in a caucus. Some advocacy groups have the capacity to help a legislative caucus to organize briefings, events or forums. And unlike state arts agencies, which typically are prohibited from direct lobbying, advocates can urge members of the caucus to vote in specific ways on pending legislation.

In some cases, the state arts agency also plays a role in developing a legislative arts caucus or supporting its work. The state arts agency may, for example, identify potential caucus members among legislators who represent districts where the arts are significant in the community. The state arts agency also can supply data and research to inform the work of the caucus and facilitate access to practitioners and experts that the caucus may wish to consult. In some states (especially states where legislators are understaffed or an arts advocacy group does not exist), the state arts agency may serve as adjunct staff for the caucus by supplying information, coordinating meetings/events or drafting memos—all at the direction of caucus leadership. In some states the

state arts agency role is limited by restrictions placed on executive-branch agency interactions with the legislative branch.

## Structure

### Advocacy Is Bipartisan

The arts are a bipartisan issue. All communities benefit from the arts, and support for the arts is not restricted to one political party. The membership of a legislative caucus on the arts should therefore include geographically and politically diverse elected officials, and care should be taken to keep all caucus activities nonpartisan. Including—indeed, recruiting—caucus members from diverse backgrounds who nonetheless share a common interest in the arts can strengthen the power of the caucus. In contrast, caucuses with a preponderance of members from one party may encounter resistance if members of the opposing party begin to perceive the arts as a partisan issue.

To maintain a firm bipartisan stance, some caucuses are cochaired by a pair of Republican and Democratic representatives. By working together, these individuals can embody the universal value and relevance of the arts to all communities across a state.

### Membership

Sometimes bicameral caucuses work across both chambers of the legislature; other times a caucus exists in each chamber that is bicameral, with the chamber cochairs coordinating joint activities. A caucus on the arts, in contrast with a special legislative committee, is usually open to any legislator who is interested in participating or attending programs sponsored by the caucus. Members can be recruited by the caucus chairs, by advocates or by constituents who urge enrollment in the caucus.

The stature of the legislators involved can be important to the credibility of the caucus. Members of finance and budget committees, who will make final decisions in drafting legislation on arts funding, can be especially valuable as caucus

### Cross-Sector Connections

Some states have found success by pinpointing the arts as the focus of a legislative caucus. Other states are organizing caucuses that draw in a wider spectrum of stakeholders and leverage the collective strength of multiple industries.

- Some states have "cultural" or "creative industries" caucuses that include the arts, humanities, historic preservation and other allied groups.
- One state has an Arts, Culture and Tourism Caucus to mirror the structure of state government (in which the arts council and tourism department are sister agencies).
- Rather than creating an arts caucus, two states have focused their efforts on connecting the arts to other caucuses, including the Black caucus, the veterans' caucus or the women's caucus. By hosting arts briefings and events for these other caucuses, advocates are hoping to expand understanding that the arts are relevant to many different aspects of public policy.

members. In a state legislature in which the members of the cultural caucus are not powerful, the caucus may be regarded as less influential.

## Caucuses in the Legislative Process

### Policy Consultation

Caucuses provide a forum through which arts advocates in the state can communicate directly with legislators. The opportunity for timely and informed communication is important to the development of reasoned policy and good arts legislation. Recognizing that, at times, the caucus and the arts community may disagree on how best to approach an issue, the caucus nonetheless is a key point of entry into the legislature for the state arts agency and other arts advocates.

One of the most important features of the relationship between a caucus and arts constituents is the chance to work together on legislative strategy. The caucus can be especially useful in convening meetings with the arts community to explore trends in the creative sector and gather perspectives on policy issues and resource needs. These sessions can provide a constructive forum for sharing information between legislators and the state arts agency, the state arts advocacy organization and other arts constituencies concerned with the development of public arts policy.

### Advancing Legislation

A voluntary caucus, by definition, does not have formal jurisdiction over bills moving through the legislative process. However, it still can play a very meaningful role in making sure that important legislation gets introduced and enacted:

- Members of the caucus can be (or can recruit) bill sponsors. As a result of their in-depth understanding of legislative arts policy, members of a caucus may take the lead in sponsoring or introducing legislation and drafting bills on arts issues that will then be taken up by other committees in the legislature.
- Once bills are referred to standing legislative committees, caucus members serving on those committees can galvanize support for the bills. Caucus members can supply information pertinent to committee deliberations, the preparation of fiscal notes, etc.
- The caucus can prepare and circulate "dear colleague" letters to generate support for a bill once it reaches the chamber floor.

## Challenges

### Leadership

Lack of influential leadership may result in the caucus's priorities being sidelined during legislative sessions. Recruiting cochairs who are passionate about the arts and are ready to invest their time in caucus activities is therefore critical for success. If the caucus lacks forceful leadership, it may not be capable of following through on advocacy issues. In cases when a singular, inspiring leader who has been central retires from politics, a leadership vacuum could spell the dissolution of the caucus. It is therefore essential to always be cultivating future leaders.

To ensure effective and cohesive operations, caucus leaders will need to navigate varying levels of engagement and political motivations among group members. Egos are real, and there is a need to navigate differing visions, especially when it comes to public activities. Systematic planning conversations may help to reduce communication gaps between cochairs and with external organizations.

## Role Clarity

Caucuses need a clear function to be effective in influencing policy and to combat member disinterest. A caucus lacking a clear focus may lose steam, veer off course, or create extra work for the state agency and advocates, with little to show in significant results. It's therefore essential to set tangible objectives for the caucus. Make sure the objectives are appropriate for a bipartisan body of elected officials and that they will help to cultivate public support of the arts. Caucus agendas need not always revolve around bills or legislation. Issue education can be equally important in cultivating legislative champions for the arts over time.



Oregon Arts and Culture Caucus kickoff event. Photo courtesy of Oregon Arts Commission

## Managing Expectations

Harboring unrealistic expectations in a caucus can lead to potential issues and create a disparity between anticipated outcomes and actual achievements. It could further result in disappointment and loss of credibility and could hinder the caucus's ability to have impact in the future. In contrast, setting attainable goals can build positive momentum for future wins. Caucus leaders should consider multiple factors—current political realities as well as the long-term needs of the arts field—when setting annual agendas.

## Competition for Time

Legislators have numerous priorities during the session and legislative calendars are extremely crowded, making convening regular meetings with the caucus difficult. Considering the competition for legislators' time, the caucus may stop working if it doesn't have a clear objective, especially when other policy priorities are perceived as highly urgent. Be realistic about the time that members can devote to caucus activities and try to avoid “crunch times” when arranging caucus events.

## Rogue Agendas

A lack of consensus within the caucus, limited oversight, external influences, inexperience, or failure to consult stakeholders could lead a caucus to advance unconventional or unpopular legislation that neither the state arts agency nor arts advocates support. Establishing clear objectives can mitigate this, as can regular policy consultations with stakeholders to invite candid comments about the possible positive and negative impacts of proposed legislation.

## Competing Stakeholder Agendas

The arts community has no dearth of ideas and divergent opinions. This can lead to fractured agendas or competing demands being placed on legislators, which can create perceptions of the arts community as being disorganized. To avoid this pitfall, advocacy groups and state arts agencies should consult regularly to make sure they grasp one another's needs, constraints and policy objectives. Stakeholders can work together to avoid surprises and ensure a unified voice on budget requests and alignment of issues.

## Political Sensitivity

Despite being bipartisan, legislative caucuses can be highly political, requiring cautious navigation. Balancing the interests of members with different political affiliations requires prudent leadership to avoid conflicts and find common ground. Even if its internal dynamics are collaborative and harmonious, it is probable that any policy action a caucus seeks to advance will have to move through a partisan legislative process. In such circumstances, having solid arts allies on both sides of the aisle is indispensable, as they can serve as trusted champions for arts legislation within their respective parties. It also can be useful to strategically cultivate support among members of key standing committees through which any arts legislation must pass.

# Results

## Positive Policy

An active arts caucus enables legislators to shape and influence policies that support the arts, ensuring that cultural considerations are incorporated into broader legislative agendas. Backing from caucus members has played a pivotal role in progressing appropriations for the arts, distributing relief funding and advocating for various forms of legislation that prove advantageous to the arts. Additionally, arts caucus members' involvement in crafting beneficial legislation spans the advancement of arts education, promotion of public arts, facilitation of tax incentives for art related activities and more.



## Involved Legislators

Cultural caucus members gain knowledge about the arts and have more interaction with arts constituents. In the process, they may develop a deeper loyalty to the arts. The caucus thus becomes a vehicle for giving legislators ownership of arts issues. This presents a possible opportunity to grow support for the arts and arts policy. It also helps in efforts to cultivate a pipeline of new legislators who can become leading voices for the arts over time.



Members of the Pennsylvania Legislative Arts and Culture Caucus gather in the Capitol Rotunda to celebrate Arts Advocacy Day along with Citizens for the Arts in Pennsylvania. Photo courtesy of PA Legislative Arts & Culture Caucus

## Legislative Expertise

An arts caucus can serve as a home for the review of issues that come up during budget committee or general legislative discussions. Having a group of legislators well informed about arts policy respond to these circumstances can create opportunities for more thorough discussion of issues and well-informed policy-making.

## Relationships

With an active and approachable arts caucus in the state legislature, an arts advocate can enjoy easier access to legislative leaders to discuss arts issues. In turn, legislators become familiar with the arts field and are more likely to seek information and guidance when arts issues arise in the policy process. Positive and consultative working relationships enhance knowledge and trust between elected officials and arts stakeholders and ultimately can support the arts becoming a more integral part of state policy.

## Arts Visibility

The caucus provides a visible and dedicated container within the legislative space for discussions on arts and cultural matters. A caucus can raise public awareness about the arts and underscore

the importance of the arts as a policy issue. Educational programs, outreach efforts and support for cultural celebrations directly engage the public as well as elected officials, and can emphasize the cultural, educational and economic significance of the arts.

## Examples

Cultural caucuses come and go, but at any point in time it is typical for them to be active in more than a dozen states. The state caucuses below provide informative examples of how cultural caucuses can be developed and maintained. Consult state arts agency leaders and advocates in these states for more information on practices they have found to be effective.

### **North Carolina Caucus on Arts and Arts Education**

The North Carolina Caucus on Arts and Arts Education is a bipartisan legislative group that plays a crucial role in advancing the state's cultural policies. Comprising elected officials who recognize the impact of the arts, the caucus serves as a platform for discussions on arts and education in the North Carolina General Assembly. It focuses on policy issues, community needs and trends affecting the arts, contributing to the development of informed and supportive legislation. Through meetings and advocacy efforts, the caucus actively promotes the importance of the arts within the state and works toward sustaining resources for the creative sector, ensuring arts accessibility across communities.

<https://artsnc.org>

### **Oregon Arts and Culture Caucus**

The Oregon Arts and Culture Caucus is a bicameral, bipartisan group that provides legislative leadership for the arts and increases awareness among Oregon policymakers of the impact of the creative sector. It serves as a forum for sharing research and data on arts and culture and highlights policy issues, community needs and trends affecting the arts field. It also sets a legislative agenda by identifying policy priorities, including the need to develop new recurring funding mechanisms to ensure that all communities across the state have access to robust arts support.

<http://tinyurl.com/4rduxbfv>

### **Pennsylvania Legislative Arts and Culture Caucus**

The Pennsylvania Legislative Arts and Culture Caucus is a bicameral, bipartisan caucus within the Pennsylvania General Assembly created to focus on the state's cultural assets. It was established in 2012 by a statewide coalition representing arts, culture, public broadcasting, tourism and zoos. It currently has 27 members, 11 Senate and 16 House. The caucus serves as a locus for legislative information sharing. Its meetings address a wide array of issues, including appropriations for the arts, trends in the cultural sector, the arts and health, community revitalization, and arts education.

<https://www.paartsculturecaucus.com/>

### **Tennessee Arts Caucus**

The Tennessee Arts Caucus promotes the importance of the arts within the Tennessee General Assembly. It facilitates policy discussions about the arts in the state and shares information about the economic and civic impact of the arts. The caucus works to sustain state resources for the creative sector, including the portion of state license plate revenues designated by law for the arts.

<https://www.tn4arts.org/tn-arts-caucus>

## Washington Heritage Caucus

The Washington Heritage Caucus is a forum for sharing ideas, considering policy ramifications, and exploring projects surrounding the arts, heritage, and science activities across the state of Washington. The caucus convenes a bipartisan group of state legislators and other elected officials; staff from state heritage, arts, and cultural agencies and nonprofit organizations; and citizens interested in supporting Washington's cultural heritage and the arts. It is managed jointly by the state arts agency (ArtsWA), and the Washington State Historical Society.

<https://www.arts.wa.gov/2023/01/10/2023-heritage-caucus/>

For additional information on cultural caucuses, contact [Feby Emelio](#) at NASAA.

## National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that serves America's state arts agencies. We are a clearinghouse for information on best practices and research on cultural policy, public funding for the arts and the programs of state arts agencies. For more information, visit [www.nasaa-arts.org](http://www.nasaa-arts.org).

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