



## How to Guide on Bird-Dogging

### What is bird-dogging?

"To bird-dog" means "to follow, watch carefully, or investigate." When used in a political context, the term refers to activists who seek out candidates or elected officials, pin them down with specific questions or information, and retrieve their views. It is also known as "direct candidate engagement."

Bird-dogging is attending elected official's (aka your target) events and public appearances and directly asking them about their stance on an issue or to support your cause. It really is all about getting our elected officials to stop hiding on the issues and force them to either take a stance or make it clear they're deflecting questions from constituents. Repeated questions and asks on a particular issue also puts it to the forefront of their mind and shows that constituents/community members care about it.

### Step-by-step

#### *1. Recruit a team/tap into team of ACLU advocates*

Bird-dogging is more effective if you have a team of people who attend the public event, say a public forum/town hall. Approaching elected officials can be nerve-racking, so it is good to go in teams of two or more people for support. Plus if you ask a question, others on your team can ask follow up questions. It is also ideal for record keeping, as one person asks the question while another writes down or records the response. A team allows for more flexibility and it's more likely someone will be able to attend the event, especially last minute.

#### *2. Research your target's schedule and other community events*

The best bird-dogging opportunities are events where elected officials will be relatively accessible so that you can approach them directly. Also, events covered by media are good opportunities to so that your confrontation of the politician may be noticed by them and covered in the news. They may post their schedule on their website, Facebook page, Twitter, Instagram or send out newsletters to their constituents. It's ideal if there is at least one person from the group in that elected official's district (they'd be receiving constituent newsletters).

#### *3. Maximize the visibility of you or your group*

You can make signs, t-shirts, flyers, pins and/or other visibility tools. You and your team will want to be as visible as possible at your bird-dogging event. Your target or their staff may try to ignore you, in which case you may need to be so visible that you simply can't be ignored. Depending on the issue or campaign, it may be useful to have a flyer, petition or something similar to "deliver" to your target to make your point.

#### *4. Attend the event*

Once you are at the event, do what you can (within reason) to get your target to answer your question about where they stand on the issues. You can get several people to them directly or get reporters to inquire, etc. It is extremely helpful to make sure someone from the group is taking notes or video record any interactions so that their comments are recorded.

#### *5. Report back to the group*

After the event, debrief with your team on how the bird-dogging went, what information was gathered, and what could be improved for the next event. Make sure fill out the bird-dogging report below and return it via online-email to [scorte@aclu-nm.org](mailto:scorte@aclu-nm.org) along with any photos and videos of the event.

#### *6. Keep going*

Keep showing up at public events and posing questions on the issues. Having a bird-dogging group allows differently people to approach elected officials and show that people in the community care about the issue. Organizers at the ACLU of NM can provide support and guidance with bird-dogging as well as building out a strategy.

#### **Tips:**

*Arrive Early* - This is especially important if the elected official is very popular, leading in the polls, or if it is late in the election season. In situations where there is a question and answer period, it will be important for you to be close enough to the stage so that you are in their line of sight.

*Have Your Question Ready* - Get input from family and friends about the best way to frame a question. Practice asking it to yourself. Make certain your question is brief, fact based, and direct. ACLU of NM organizers are available to support as well!

*Ask Your Question Early* - At events where there is a question and answer period most people in the audience will not raise their hand immediately. If you indicate early interest, you are more likely to be called on.

*Stick Your Hand Out* - As you know, elected officials often walk through the crowd shaking hands and pausing for brief conversations. Be ready for these one-on-one opportunities. Position yourself in their path. It's okay to stop them and talk to them.

*Disperse throughout the venue* - Dispersing at the event will improve the odds that more than one of your group will get to ask a question. Also, come prepared with more than one question, as someone may ask your question before you get the chance.

*Know the Target's Positions* - Ask a question that shows you know something about the politician's position, and that you want to know more. Check out their voting record ahead of time. Don't waste your opportunity by asking a "softball" question, but choose a topic that you want them to move on and formulate a question on that topic. The bird-dogging will be most effective if the questions are based on very recent information about their positions.

Adapted from ACLU's Rights for All Campaign & MoveOn

*Be Calm and Reasonable* - Maintaining a respectable tone will bring a more positive response from the elected official, their staff, and the media, if they are present. Getting angry or sarcastic will generally result in being ignored. One can even preface your question with a comment on something the politician has done well, before proceeding to your question.

*Take Notes and Record Video* - The only way to track their responses is to have a record of what they said. It is also helpful to have notes when you are trying to frame a follow-up question.

*Be Prepared to Speak with the Media* - Generally speaking in some public venues, journalists like to speak to folks who have asked the elected official a question. Remember to stay on message when talking to reporters by talking about the issue that is important to you. For example, if the reporter asks, "What do you think of the governor?" respond "I'd like her to say more about how she proposes to address the harmful collaboration between local police and ICE." Don't be afraid to approach reporters even if they have not approached you. Try positioning yourself next to a reporter and striking up a conversation, again remembering to stay on message.

*Be Creative & Improvise When Necessary* - Being a bird-dog is not just about asking questions. Street theatre, or even a simple picket sign, can raise public and politician awareness on key issues. These tactics are especially helpful at events where you are prevented from entering or if you are well known to the politician or their staff.

### **Tips for filming using a cell phone camera**

- ✓ Shoot horizontally, not vertically.
- ✓ Don't zoom in. Get closer. The lens isn't zooming optically so you're just enlarging the picture which means the whole image might pixelate.
- ✓ Try to be no more than 5 feet from the person you are recording so that the mic can pick up the audio.
- ✓ Make sure you're not covering any of the phone's mics with your fingers. Most phones have a rear, front and bottom mic.
- ✓ Use the exposure focus lock to ensure the camera is exposing for and focusing on the subject. Otherwise, the phone tends to keep adjusting and refocusing, which can make the video look jittery.

**For questions or additional information, please email Stephanie Corte, Immigrant Rights Campaign Strategist, at [scorte@aclu-nm.org](mailto:scorte@aclu-nm.org) or Field Organizer [mmaestas@aclu-nm.org](mailto:mmaestas@aclu-nm.org)**

**To volunteer with the ACLU of NM, please fill out our volunteer form at <https://action.aclu.org/volunteer/nm-get-involved> or contact our Organizer at [mmaestas@aclu-nm.org](mailto:mmaestas@aclu-nm.org)**

**Check out the ACLU's 2020 presidential bird dogging campaign at: <https://www.rightsforall.us/tips/>.**

## What issues should I ask politicians about?

The ACLU of NM covers a wide range of issue areas related to civil rights and civil liberties. For the upcoming NM State Legislative Session and 2020 election season, we're going to be focusing on three key policy areas that we need politicians to feel are important. Below are some examples.

**Criminal Justice Reform:** Do you support ending mandatory minimums? Do you support voting rights for all including those living with felony convictions? Do you believe people on probation and parole should be incarcerated for technical violations, such as missing an appointment or failing a drug test?

**Reproductive Rights:** How are you going to ensure that reproductive healthcare is protected and accessible in NM?

**Immigrants' Rights:** How would you ensure there is protection from deportation for undocumented immigrants currently in New Mexico?