

A Brief History Of Politics In Professional And Trade Associations



Associations play a significant role in setting standards and advocating for their members' interests, whether working to protect their professions, advance their missions or adapt to changing expectations, all while trying to unite different perspectives.



Politics as it relates to professional and trade associations is nothing new; politics have been part of the association landscape for as long as these organizations have existed. Whether they are professional associations, serving individuals in a specific profession, or trade associations, representing businesses in a particular industry, associations have always been effective channels for influence and change in regulation and public policy.

What follows is a brief explanation of some of the important times for U.S. associations and the impact of associations on politics, along with a peek into the political future of associations.

Early chapter politics (1800s–Early 1900s)

In the United States, professional and trade associations began to formalize in the 19th century. They became more common as industry expanded, and professions looked for ways to highlight their legitimacy. Early associations like the American Medical Association (AMA), founded in 1847, the American Bar Association (ABA), founded in 1878, and the New York chapter of the American Institute



of Architects (AIA), established in 1916, were formed to standardize practices, establish codes of ethics and advocate to increase public trust in these industries.

These early groups helped shape policy by influencing licensing laws, educational requirements and regulatory oversight and lobbying the U.S. government to advance their industries.

Rising political advocacy (Mid-1900s)

After World War II, the U.S. expanded massively, both economically and professionally. With more people entering specialized fields and higher education becoming more accessible, professional and trade associations grew in size, scope and influence.

With this growth came new resources and new expectations. The 1946 Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act and the 1976 Lobbying Disclosure Act marked the shift toward the need for professional advocacy, as associations began to hire lobbyists with more frequency.

Many associations began establishing formal government relations offices during this time, to monitor legislation, communicate with policymakers and advocate for industry-specific interests. This included associations like the California Medical Association (CMA) — a chapter of the AMA — which established a formal government relations office in Sacramento, California to engage directly with state legislators on healthcare-related issues.

Modern politics in associations (1990s–present)

The political environment surrounding associations continues to grow more complex and charged. Increasing polarization in national politics has filtered into the advocacy work of professional and trade associations.

Campaign finance reforms, including the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (also known as the McCain-Feingold Act) and Supreme Court decisions like *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* (2010) reshaped how associations can engage in lobbying. And with the push toward using digital media, associations now operate in an environment where what they say, or don't say, can trigger fast backlash from members and the public.



At the same time, associations are navigating changes in leadership priorities often due to generational shifts, as older chapter leaders retire and are replaced by recent graduates and those newer in their careers. These younger members often push for transparency and social responsibility, while longer-standing members often advocate for more traditional or more neutral stances.

An eye on the future

As members become more vocal about what they want their associations to represent, the political role of professional and trade associations continues to evolve. Associations are faced with aligning with their members' interests while managing increasingly scrutinized public perceptions. The public, and members, can interpret what an association does or doesn't say in multiple ways; even associations that try to stay neutral can face criticism for perceived inaction or silence.

At the same time, members are becoming more politically engaged, and they expect to have a voice in terms of what the organization stands for. Grassroots advocacy is gaining momentum, as members use digital platforms like online chapter forums and social media to organize campaigns, challenge decisions and push for action on issues that reflect their values.

To remain effective and relevant, associations will need to navigate this evolving terrain with strategic agility. That means investing in digital tools for member engagement, while strengthening opportunities for feedback and developing governance structures that can handle increasing complexities.

Politics is ingrained in the fabric of associations. It shapes their identity and amplifies their influence. Today's political landscape presents new challenges and new opportunities. Both local chapters and their parent organizations should study what members, industry and communities have done before and understand and determine how to best act on current needs, with an eye toward what the future holds, based on what they understand about the past.

Associations will continue to play a critical role during periods of significant change. This is what you do best.

