

# Tips for Townhall Actions

Susan Schorn (susanschorn.com)

## Assertive communication, rudeness, and civic protest

In an everyday relationship, it's often a warning sign when a person ignores your "No," talks over you, or otherwise violates your boundaries—such behavior indicates the person does not respect you.

In public discourse, when we encounter people **not** arguing in good faith, we may set a boundary (blocking on social media), or disrupt and redirect the conversation by other means (like mockery or sarcasm). Our choice depends on what we want from the interaction, and what we want observers, if there are any, to notice/think about it.

But elected officials have much more power than most individual citizens do, and some may use this power to silence and bully voters they disagree with. They may also allow or even encourage their supporters to silence others. Sometimes we may have to escalate conflict to be heard or noticed.

When elected officials repeatedly refuse to hear what their constituents are trying to tell them, they are acting disrespectfully and abusing the power granted them by the electorate. An elected representative who refuses to listen is seeking to control a structure that is supposed to benefit all. We can think of that as theft, oppression, or violence. Whatever we call it, we have the right to resist it.

## Tactical nonviolence

"**Nonviolence**" isn't all one thing. Philosophical nonviolence means trying to love your enemies. Tactical nonviolence means you can **feel** any way you want about them, but you **behave** nonviolently. This doesn't mean you are automatically polite, or that you don't disrupt or inconvenience others. "Good manners" are one of the most powerful ways we normalize and enshrine the inequities in our society.

A common goal of non-violent protest is to **expose structural violence**, including the latent violence of racism, misogyny, homophobia, economic violence, state/police violence, etc. Counter-protesters are a predictable reaction when we challenge structural violence. They are pieces of the normally invisible structure sharpening into focus.

**Audience** is critical to successful nonviolent action. You are exposing violent, disrespectful behavior. People who have been unaware of that behavior, or willing to ignore it, need to see what is happening. Record everything, alert the press, take pictures, write down details.

**Planning is also key. Have an explicit agreement among your group** that everyone is committed to nonviolent behavior during the action. This is not to say that nonviolent protest is the only way, or the best way, or a morally superior way of effecting change. The more immediate point is that if some of you believe you are acting nonviolently and others believe otherwise, those using nonviolent tactics will be at risk. Don't do that to your allies.

## Townhall Strategies (see [indivisibleguide.com/](http://indivisibleguide.com/) as well)

1. Go in with a **question**. Share questions among your group, and decide who will ask each one. If the official refuses to answer the question from one person, another might ask it.

2. Ask your question, even if they try to stop you. One option is to keep **repeating** it, like a broken record. You can rephrase it in small ways for variety. (Here's an example of Elizabeth Warren using this technique on Ben Carson: <https://youtu.be/ihsF-bltgTU>)

3. Don't assume you have to stop talking just because someone tells or asks you to. If you **keep talking**, there is a chance that someone, somewhere will hear you—in a recording, through others who witness your efforts, etc. (here is an example of Senate Democrats using this technique in the middle-of-the-night vote on repeal of ACA: <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow/watch/senate-democrats-put-up-a-fight-on-obamacare-vote-853911619748> )

4. If the official responds with generalities or tries to change the subject, **interrupt** to point this out: "You're not answering my question." **Restate** the question.

5. **Remind** them: "It's your job to answer our questions."

6. If staff or audience members try to shut you down, **allies** can say things like:

- Answer her/him!
- Answer the question!
- Do your job and listen!

Small clusters of your people spaced throughout the venue will make this more effective.

7. If they try to move on and steamroll you, you can shout and **drown out** the next thing if you choose.

8. Have a plan for **leaving**, and make sure everyone in the group agrees to it in advance. Many political events these days take place on private property, and either the official or their "hosts" are likely to tell you to leave or be arrested. If they ask you to leave, how will you respond? How much security is there? How many are in your group, how many people in attendance are unhappy that you're there? Remember that you can keep speaking as you leave.

9. NO ONE LEAVES ALONE. Others should go as shields and witnesses. **Film your exit.**

A few follow-up questions that can help keep officials from straying from the point:

- Why?
- Why not?
- Just give me one example (when they say it's too broad a question).
- You are talking about your intentions. I am asking about your actions.
- I understand you are still deciding, but will you commit to . . . ?
- Why should I vote for you if you . . . ?