

12 How to use Government Strategy and Political Parties for Library Advocacy

In general, political parties and governments now have a positive relationship with libraries, especially after the challenges of COVID-19. Whereas 20 years ago there was always the question of whether libraries were still needed because of Google, most political decision-makers now recognise the changes in libraries. This does not mean, however, that they support libraries and take up their demands. Compared to other political issues, library issues do not seem as attractive or urgent to politicians. To better understand the relationship of political groups to libraries and their demands, one should look at government strategies and political party programmes. Some library associations are active before an election and develop some questions to send to the parties, asking them for their views on the main issues of library development, with the answers of the parties then published for the members of the library associations and the public. Below is an overview of some countries and their current views on libraries.

12.1 Government Strategies and Library Responses

It is not easy to find governments that put libraries on the agenda. In general, governments do not include libraries in their strategy, however, it is worth looking and finding out how the current government views libraries. Very often libraries are not mentioned in current policy publications, which may be because responsibility for libraries in a country is spread across different political levels – from local to national – and in different departments or even ministries, while there is not always a clear government strategy for the period of government. Material can be found in government statements and policies, especially at the beginning and end of a government's term. In addition, the publications of the party or parties supporting the current government are also very helpful in finding parts of a strategy, policies and values.

It is important that librarians and information professionals do not just think what they know about government but try to prove it by reading its published statements and policies. All governments publish plans for education and research, and library advocacy can pick up some elements and explain how libraries support these goals in education and research. Lifelong learning is another particularly important issue for national governments from Japan to Brazil, from South Korea to South Africa. While some countries discuss and support IT skills in this area, others are still fighting illiteracy in their populations. In both cases,

libraries and their services offer government solutions. From New Zealand to France, cultural heritage is an important part of cultural policy. Although the focus is often on architecture and art, library artefacts and collections have a role to play, and preservation and conservation are often needed. Digitisation is a policy issue from Europe to Canada and the Middle East; libraries not only have long experience of digitising material, but also of digitisation standards and workflows, however, many governments are not aware of this and need to be told. It helps that those intergovernmental organisations such as ASEAN, AU and EU support digital libraries. Beyond these more obvious aspects, there are many more policy related activities of libraries that need to be put on the agenda of policy-makers, with the best time to do this immediately after an election and even before the government is formed, if there is time for coalition talks (dbv 2021c). When the new government is developing a coalition paper, the library association should write openly about what should be in it for libraries and their users and talk quietly to the different coalition partners to find supporters for its demands. If, in the end, some of these points are included in the coalition paper that is published, as happened in Germany in 2021 (SPD, FDP and Bündnis90/Die Grünen 2021, 122–123), this is evidence of successful advocacy by the library association at the national level.

12.2 Political Party Policies and Library Responses

In some countries, library associations investigate political parties before elections, sending out a list of questions about libraries and ask for answers before election day. A positive aspect of these election touchstones is that they bring library policy issues to the attention of the different political parties. This is an act of advocacy because the parties must deal with the issue of libraries, even if it is assumed that the top politicians will not formulate the answers. However, many aspects of library policy can simply be included in a question about the role of libraries in society or their role in digital change. The questions are chosen and explained in detail in such a way that a certain information and learning process can take place in the parties by reading the questions, which is targeted advocacy for libraries on selected issues as can be seen in Table 1. In the introduction to the election touchstones 2021, the German Library Association explained the role of libraries in society, in access to information and knowledge, in the promotion of reading, in media literacy and in social participation. This first section can be used as a general starting point for advocacy; it identifies points that each policy-maker can use to build on his or her own library experience, while learning some new aspects. This is followed by an indication of the global importance of librar-

ies by mentioning the number of millions of library users worldwide. The subsequent presentation of the more than 9,000 libraries with 25,000 full-time positions and 11 million users in Germany (dbv 2021d) illustrates the strong role of the library association as a political interest group, making it clear that many voters in elections are affected by the fact that the Library Association represents libraries.

Tab. 1: Selected Election Touchstones for Political Parties and Candidates.

Sample* These twelve questions are sent to parties or candidates in advance of various elections in Germany to find out their views on library issues. The answers are shared with the whole library community before the election.	
1.	What is the party's general attitude to libraries?
2.	What is the party's position on a/the library law?
3.	What is the party's position on a library development plan for the country / the region / the municipality?
4.	What is the party's position on digitisation in libraries?
5.	How does the party support public libraries?
6.	How does the party see the role of academic and research libraries?
7.	How would the party support the national / regional / local library association?
8.	How does the party see the situation of school libraries / libraries and schools / and cultural education?
9.	How does the party see the role of libraries in the integration of migrants / the elderly?
10.	How does the party support cultural heritage / preservation / long-term archiving?
11.	What is the party's position on copyright /open access and licensing /e-books?
12.	How does the party support professional development and fair pay for librarians?
Modify and add additional questions – do not submit more than twelve	

*This sample is based on the election touchstones of various state library associations in Germany for the 2018 state elections, which were sent by letter to the parties. It is possible to make it as an interview, but then needs the agreement of the party/politician.

The election touchstones cover some general questions about the role of libraries in society as seen by the different political parties, as well as some of the most pressing issues facing libraries in the new digital environment. Overall, it is remarkable that all political parties in Germany take the time to work through the election touchstones with some degree of thoroughness, which is certainly also a success of the advocacy work of the German Library Association. In principle, the

election touchstones can be a really good support for advocacy, as they convey to the parties the views, achievements and aspirations of libraries by explaining the individual issues using the example of a library as a third place (see Figure 35). If this is done at every federal and state election, it is possible to maintain regular contact with politicians. Following up after the election and building on the parties' responses is particularly important for further advocacy work. From the answers librarians can develop an assessment of how each party sees the role of the library, what detailed knowledge is available and what the parties are willing to do for positive development. The answers thus provide a basis for further, possibly more targeted, library advocacy to present the right arguments at different levels, which can help to influence decisions and also to reduce recognisable prejudices and misinformation about libraries. As the German Library Association detailed, the answers to the questions will be published on their website and will form the basis for further dialogue with politicians after the elections (dbv 2021d). A review of these responses and additional responses for the state elections will provide a good picture of how all parties view libraries. All this will help to prepare targeted advocating of individual parties in the German Bundestag and in parliaments at regional and local level.

Almost the same, but quite different in style, is the example of a Chinese library director who uses official party policy and adapts it to library activities in the one-party state of China. He publishes an article, starting with the Communist Party General Secretary's instructions on work with the elderly, and shows how the Nanjing Public Library and other Chinese libraries develop their services for the elderly according to these instructions (Chen 2021).

12.3 Summary of Library Advocacy Using Government Strategy and Party Policy

In principle, governments at different levels and most political parties worldwide have a positive image of libraries and recognise their contribution to society. The chances for successful library advocacy seem to be exceptionally good, as one can build on trust in libraries and their role in society. More convincing arguments need to be developed to show how libraries can contribute to solving the challenges of today's societies, while there is also a need to educate government officials at all levels and political parties about the current competencies of libraries and their positive impact on modern society to achieve clearer support for libraries. This includes achieving an even greater impact on society through improved services.



Fig. 35: Library as a Third Place in Cologne Kalk. Entrance Area. Photo by Claudia Lux.