

Communicating With Your Legislator

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Too often, citizens underestimate their power as constituents of their elected officials. They feel that it doesn't do any good for them to let their representatives know how they feel about important issues. However, legislators are elected to represent the interests of their constituents. *It is important that citizens communicate with their elected officials so that legislators know what issues are important to their constituents.*

While many people believe their communication with a congressional office is ignored, the exact opposite is true. All congressional offices are organized to handle correspondence from constituents. Just a small amount of interest shown by constituents on a single topic will force the congressional office to pay more attention to that issue than most of the more than 10,000 other bills and resolutions that are filed in a session of Congress. All constituent correspondence is logged and summarized as a way to determine the strength and direction of public opinion on issues in the district or state. Only a small fraction of citizens bother to communicate with their legislators on key issues. If you are one of those people who do send a message, you will get your views heard. If you do not stay in touch with your legislator, you are less likely to be able to shape legislation that represents your views.

All communication is important – letters, calls, faxes, emails – because it shows the elected official that constituents care about the issue. However, a personal letter sent through the mail remains the form of communication that Congressional offices take most seriously when considering an issue, followed by personal visits and telephone calls. Correspondence in the form of fax and e-mail also rank highly, but considerably lower than personal letters and visits.

WRITING A LETTER, EMAIL, OR FAX

Keep the message brief, rarely more than one page. Type if you can, or write neatly. Write it in your own words and include your own thoughts.

Cover only one issue so that your letter will be given the attention it deserves. Save other issues for later communication.

You do not need to be an expert to write to your representative, but more facts included in your correspondence will increase its effectiveness. Show familiarity with the subject and with the current status of legislation – mention the bill number or the names of the sponsors. Briefly give reasons for your position, citing personal experience when appropriate.

Be specific. Tell your representative what action you want him or her to take (cosponsor a

bill, vote for it in committee or on the floor). Ask a direct question about his or her position on the issue – it will encourage a more specific response.

Be helpful instead of threatening. You can best show your concern for the issue by offering to provide further information on the subject.

Remember to thank your representative for votes in support of your issue. Too often elected officials get flooded with mail asking them to do something, but not enough praise for their votes. Expressions of thanks or compliments show that you are monitoring your elected official's actions in office and that you appreciate votes that support your views.

If you receive a response from your representative, please send a copy of the response to a national or state organization that is working actively on the issue. This information helps in planning inside lobbying strategy at the capital. If you believe the answer you get from your representative is not responsive, write again and ask for a clearer statement of position.

When sending an email, be sure to include your mailing address, making it clear that you are a constituent. Most offices ignore correspondence from non-constituents. Since offices generally reply through the U.S. Postal Service, it is unlikely that you will get a response if you do not list your mailing address.

TELEPHONE CALLS

Telephoning your legislator is also a common and effective method of citizen lobbying, especially when speed is essential. While a telephone call is less likely to generate a response letter from a representative, a call coming close to a key vote shows intense constituent interest in the issue, and also highlights that the legislator's actions are being closely monitored.

In most cases, you will not reach your legislator directly with your call, but you will have the chance to register your views. Often, your call will be relayed by a receptionist to the legislative aide who deals directly with the issue. In preparation for your call, have a clear idea of the points you want to make and the specific action you want your representative to take.

CONTACTING CONGRESS

Letters for U.S. Representatives should be addressed:

The Honorable _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative _____,

Letters for U.S. Senators should be addressed:

The Honorable _____
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator _____,

Capitol Switchboard
202-224-3121 or 202-225-3121

Ask for your Senator or Representative's office. Your local phone book will also have a listing for your legislators' local offices.

Fax numbers, email addresses, and telephone numbers can be found at
www.commoncause.org/congress/