



Tips & Tactics for Contacting Your Members of Congress

Learn about your members of Congress

Learn as much as you can about them. A good place to start is by checking out the websites for your senators and representative. These websites will give you such information as the member's biography, their committee assignments, legislation which they have introduced or cosponsored, press releases or statements on legislation or public policy issues, links to other government and even non-government websites, and more. You can also track down additional information on your members of Congress by checking the websites of national organizations which sometimes have a page devoted to legislation in Congress and even members' voting records on issues of interest. If you don't have access to the internet, go to your local library and ask your librarian for assistance in getting information about your members of Congress.

Meeting with members of Congress

Most members of Congress return frequently to their home states and districts to attend a wide range of local events, from open "town hall" meetings where constituents can speak directly with their senators and representative to parades, county fairs, public speeches, and more. While they certainly are busy, they are very interested in what their constituents think about the issues of the day.

Aside from attending public events where you can meet and talk to your members of Congress, you may want to make an appointment for yourself or a small delegation to visit with your senators and representative on a particular subject or issue. Keep in mind that members' schedules often fill up well in advance of a particular date. Try to schedule your appointment as early as possible.

Sometimes due to their demanding schedules, it is not possible to meet with your senators or representative. In that case, ask to meet with a staff person who works on your issue. Because members of Congress cannot be at every meeting, they rely upon their staff to be their "eyes and ears." Keep in mind that a preliminary meeting with staff can lead to a later meeting with your senator or representative.

For a short but effective discussion:

1. **Introduce yourself – as a constituent and a voter.** Thank the legislator for taking the time to meet with you. Identify your organization if you are working for a nonprofit or coalition. Tell a little about your mission and the people served (but keep it brief).
2. **State your purpose.** Be clear about what legislation you are supporting or opposing. Stay focused on your issue – don't stray onto other subjects. Let your member of Congress know your position and why you are asking them to vote for that position.
3. **Let the legislator and their staff members know that you and your organization have information and expertise.** Let them know you can be a resource to them.
4. **Give them a chance to talk about their perspective on your issue.**
5. **Ask for their vote and try to get a commitment at the meeting.** If they need more time to study the issue or bill, ask them when you can follow up with them to determine their position.
6. **Let them know you plan to stay in touch.**

Keep it brief. Members of Congress and their staffs are very busy. Try to keep your meeting within 30 minutes. Follow-up will enhance your meeting, so write a follow-up letter as soon as possible which restates your issue, your opinion, and what it is that you want your member of Congress to do (i.e., introduce legislation, support or oppose a particular bill, and why).

Making phone calls to Congressional offices

1. State your name, address and indicate that you are a constituent and a voter.
2. Give the name or bill number for the legislation you are supporting or opposing. If a bill has not been introduced on your subject, clearly (and briefly) explain your issue.
3. State whether you oppose or support the legislation and how you want your legislator to vote. Include a statement on how the issue affects you personally.
4. You will usually be speaking with a legislative assistant or staffer. Keep the phone call under five minutes unless the aide or legislator prolongs the conversation.
5. Listen to the legislator's point of view.
6. Take down the name of the aide with whom you spoke so that you will have a contact person in case you need to contact the legislator again.
7. Thank them for their time, both on the telephone and with a note of thanks for the conversation that includes a concise summary of your opinion.
8. Do not call too often and risk becoming a nuisance.
9. Never provide misleading or false information. If a member of Congress or their staff person asks you a question about your issue and you don't know the correct answer, indicate that you don't know and you will be happy to get back to them as soon as possible with the information they have requested.

Writing letters

1. Use the correct address and salutation (i.e., Dear Senator *name*, or Dear Representative *name*)
2. Describe the bill by popular name and by House or Senate bill number, or clearly describe the issue.
3. Be brief and clear. Write about one issue per letter, and state the issue and how you want your elected official to vote in your first sentence. Letters should be no longer than one page, however longer letters may be appreciated if you have some new information on the subject.
4. Be specific. If possible, give an example of how the issue affects your state or district.
5. Be timely. Make sure your legislator will have sufficient time to consider your request.
6. Know your facts. Inaccurate or misleading information will hurt your credibility.
7. Be polite in your requests for support or opposition. Never express anger, make demands, or threaten defeat at the next election. You will want to have future contact with your members of Congress.
8. Use your own words and stationery rather than form letters or postcards. In addition, write legibly or type – your letter could be discarded if it is not easy to read. Ask for a reply from your member of Congress.
9. Be constructive. Explain an alternative or better solution to the problem and offer to be a resource on the issue.
10. Send a note of appreciation when your elected official supports your issue. When they do not support your issue, explain why you think a different decision should have been made. It might make a difference the next time around.