



MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

How To Work With Congress



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Center for Civic Education

TURNING TO CONGRESS

What are you concerned about in your life and community?

Every American has unique concerns. Sometimes it is an issue on the national agenda: the cost of health care may be on your mind when you buy prescription drugs; a tax credit may impact your small business; the minimum wage could alter your quality of life. Sometimes it is an issue more particular to your community: a proposed highway route may be poised to change your town's look; the use of an illegal drug like methamphetamine may be rising in a local school; the threat of terrorism may have you worried about security at a nearby chemical plant.

It can be hard to know where to turn. Americans are alert and resourceful, and certainly not every problem needs a government solution. Yet sometimes a problem arises that you or your local community cannot tackle alone.

That is why the success of our communities and our country rests to a significant extent upon our representative democracy. When policy choices and problems arise, Americans can turn to their elected representatives at all levels to make their voices heard. This booklet will explain how *you can turn to Congress* and make sure that your voice is heard.



People Who Made a Difference

THE 9/11 FAMILIES

Shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, groups of the victims' families pressed for an independent investigation. There was resistance, but after meetings with members of Congress and the Bush Administration, candlelight vigils, and media appearances, the families succeeded: Congress and the President created the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the "9/11 Commission"). After the 9/11 Commission issued its report, many of the families became advocates for the Commission's recommendations, and played an important role supporting passage of legislation that reorganized America's national security agencies in December 2004.



UNDERSTANDING CONGRESS

Congress as a Representative Institution

Congress is a complicated institution.

From a citizen's perspective, Congress can seem distant and intimidating, with the Capitol's stately dome, ornate chambers, and sprawling complex of buildings. It is hard to follow debates over policy and legislation, as members of Congress use formal terminology, follow complex rules and long-standing procedures, and work in hundreds of committees and subcommittees. It is easy to feel distant from the action in Washington, with all the back and forth between politicians and pundits, powerful interests, and well-placed experts.

Yet don't let that deter you. Congress is *your* representative institution. You elect members of Congress to represent *your* views. You pay tax dollars to fund *your* government. The Founding Fathers were clear that the ultimate authority in American government lies with the American people. That truth gives meaning to the words we live by: "We the people" and "consent of the governed." For our system to work, you need to make your views known to members of Congress, and members of Congress must listen to your views. That is what representative government is all about.

The Challenge of Representation

Representative government is hard in a big and diverse country like the United States.

When our government was established, members of Congress represented smaller districts and fewer voters, dealt with fewer issues, and spent more time at home. The country now sprawls across the continent, and congressional districts are far bigger and much more diverse. In previous centuries, a member of Congress might

represent a district made up almost entirely of farmers. Today, a member is likely to represent a great variety of people from widely differing backgrounds; that means members have to work harder to understand and reach constituents. Citizens must do their part by making their voices heard.

The challenge of representation is sorting through different views, and reaching a consensus on how to act. What's your stake? How Congress acts has a huge impact on your life.

HOW CONGRESS IMPACTS YOUR DAILY LIFE

Making your views known is important because Congress considers issues that touch nearly every part of our lives. Consider just a brief list:

EDUCATION Congress helps set standards for public schools, and provides grants and loans for higher education.

HEALTH Congress invests in research for new drugs and helps ensure that medicines are regularly tested for safety.

JOBS Congress sets the national minimum wage, oversees regulation of workplace safety, prohibits job discrimination, and helps protect pensions.

NATIONAL SECURITY Congress funds and oversees our armed forces, national law enforcement, and homeland security efforts.

RECREATION Congressional action supports our national parks and monuments.

RETIREMENT Congress set up and maintains Social Security and Medicare for older Americans.

TRANSPORTATION Congress appropriates funding for highways and roads, and oversees air safety.

TAXES Congress decides how to raise the funds needed to pay for these and many other federal programs.

People Who Made a Difference

HOWARD JARVIS

Howard Jarvis was a sixty-six year old businessman who thought his taxes were too high. So he started the California Tax Reduction Movement and led a “tax revolt” in California in the 1970s. After years of pressuring public officials, making public appearances, and signing up like-minded Californians, Jarvis helped write and secure the passage in 1978 of Proposition 13, which made huge cuts in property taxes. Jarvis’ success made him a national folk hero to people displeased with the tax system. Similar “tax revolts” spread to other states, and in 1981 the American Tax Reduction Movement delivered more than one million petitions to Congress supporting President Ronald Reagan’s federal income tax cuts.



WHO CONTACTS CONGRESS?

What is a “lobbyist”?

Despite the impact that Congress has on our lives, only a small fraction of Americans have ever contacted their Senator or Representative. There is one group of people that is not at all shy about contacting members of Congress: lobbyists.

Lobbyists are professionals who are hired to persuade government officials to adopt or resist certain policies. They typically have money and resources behind them that are not available to the average citizen. In recent years, there has been a huge growth in lobbying. It is now a multi-billion dollar industry, and the number of registered lobbyists in Washington has doubled to more than 35,000 in only five years. Many Americans are wondering: Who does Congress work for, the special interests or me?

WHY “LOBBYIST”?

The word “lobbyist” first appeared in the middle-19th century to describe people who waited in the lobbies of the U.S. Congress to speak with members. The term was popularized during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant, who liked to smoke cigars at the Willard Hotel; often, people who sought favors from President Grant were waiting for him in the Willard’s lobby.

Constituent Access

Don’t be discouraged. Often, the influence of ordinary constituents on members of Congress is underestimated, while the influence of Washington lobbyists is overestimated. In fact, you have several advantages.

TEN WAYS TO CONTACT YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS

SEND A LETTER All correspondence to a member is reviewed, and you will almost certainly receive a response.

SEND AN E-MAIL E-mail is now the most popular—and most common—way to get in touch with a member of Congress.

CALL ON THE PHONE It is difficult to get a member on the phone, but you can certainly pass on a message—most members set aside some time to call back constituents.

MEET IN WASHINGTON Members make time on their schedules for constituents, but be sure to give advance notice, as members' days are full.

MEET IN THEIR DISTRICT OFFICE It is easier, and often more productive, to schedule a meeting back home, away from the distractions of the Capitol.

PARTICIPATE IN LOCAL MEETINGS Members regularly hold public meetings; look for the schedule on your member's website, and don't hesitate to speak up!

PARTICIPATE IN VIRTUAL FORUMS Many members now hold "virtual forums"—it is easy and convenient to participate in these online discussions.

MAKE A SPEAKING INVITATION You can invite a member to speak to a local group that you belong to. This is a good way to start a dialogue, and there is strength in numbers.

RESPOND TO A SURVEY Many members will send out surveys—by mail or online—to solicit the views of their constituents on issues before Congress.

GET TO KNOW STAFF Members have staff in Washington and the district who are excellent points of contact. They have expertise that might help resolve your specific problem.

Keep in mind that effort pays off. The more of these that you can do, the better.

Constituents have something that Washington lobbyists don't have: a vote back in the district. All members of Congress know they depend upon the folks back home for their job. For this reason, they must always take into account the opinions of their constituents.

Constituents have the added credibility of a local perspective. Members of Congress are always confronted by facts and figures, but you can provide them with a view of how a piece of legislation might impact you, your family, and your community.

Constituents have a home-turf advantage. You come from the same region as your Representative or Senator. You share experiences, culture, and even acquaintances. You can meet and interact with them away from the distractions of Washington. And you can appeal to local media or community groups. All that is needed is for you to take that first step: getting in touch.



People Who Made a Difference

GREGORY WATSON

In 1982, Gregory Watson was working on a paper for government class at the University of Texas when he noted something interesting. In 1789, the U.S. had left unratified a constitutional amendment providing that any change in salary for members of Congress could only apply to the next Congress, not the current one. Watson started a letter-writing campaign to complete ratification of the amendment that included public officials in targeted states, and Maine soon became the first additional state to ratify the amendment. Ten years later, on May 18, 1992, the 27th Amendment of the United States Constitution was ratified following the approval of Alabama. Watson got a “C” on his government paper, but he launched a movement that amended the Constitution.



HOW TO BE HEARD

So now that you are ready to contact your member of Congress, how can you best assure that your voice is heard? Whatever your reason for getting in touch—whether you are concerned about a national policy like health care or a local issue like a new road—you will make more headway if you follow a few basic guidelines:

Making Your Case Effectively: Some Do's and Don'ts

BE FACTUAL: Do some research to be knowledgeable in the facts of the issue. Don't wing it, overstate your case, or try to mislead your member of Congress. Make your case with facts and figures instead of spin, and know the arguments on the other side well, so that you can highlight the strengths of your own argument.

BE CLEAR AND CONCISE: In your limited space and time, be sure to clearly state the most important part of your position. Stick to one or two issues rather than nine or ten, so a lawmaker can focus on your priorities. Make your case briefly, because there are many demands on a member's time.

BE PERSONAL: Lawmakers are bombarded with requests; make yours personal. Write your own letter rather than signing on to a form letter. Explain how an issue will impact you and your family. Know and appeal to your member's specific background to make a personal connection—for example, if you are interested in a farming issue, it would be important to know if your member comes from a family of farmers.

BE INCLUSIVE: Bring other constituents with you or mention who else supports what you have to say. If you belong to a church group, labor union, or community board, it is important for the member to know that others share your views. It can be particularly influential for a member to know that people from different backgrounds or ideological viewpoints agree with you.

BE CONSTRUCTIVE: Try to find a way, not just to raise a problem, but to help your legislator find a way to solve it. And while you should be passionate about your beliefs when you present your case, don't demonize the other side or treat it like an enemy.

BE INFORMED ABOUT CONGRESS: The more you are informed about Congress and how it works, the better. If you know what steps a bill must take before becoming law and know the legislative calendar, you can make sure that your contact is timely and appropriate. If you know about your member's past legislative record, you can relate it to your current request.

BE A LISTENER: Listen to your lawmaker. By listening, you can learn more about your member's position, gain insight into his or her thinking, and discover more about an issue or about how Congress is functioning. You may learn that an issue is not as clear-cut as you believed, or you may learn how to better influence your member in the future.

BE COURTEOUS: Even if you disagree, do not get upset with your member by raising your voice, making personal attacks, or issuing threats. Stick up for your views, but always disagree without being disagreeable—that way, you are more likely to earn your member's respect, and more likely to have your dissent registered.

BE AWARE OF RULES: Laws and congressional rules restrict what members can receive from somebody who is seeking to influence them. Don't bring in expensive gifts or promise campaign contributions for your member. Know the rules and follow them.

BE OPEN TO COMPROMISE: Not everyone gets everything they want in the legislative process. Recognize that others may have different viewpoints and needs, and that making some progress toward your goal is better than none at all.

BE PATIENT: Don't expect your member to always give you an immediate commitment one way or the other. Some issues are difficult and demand time for deliberation and consultation, and sometimes issues evolve. Accept your member's answer, and tell him or her that you look forward to discussing this further in the future.

BE PERSISTENT: Follow up after your initial contact. Keep in mind that legislators hear from a very wide range of people on any given issue. Even if you lose on one issue, don't shy from making contact on the next. Be prepared to make frequent contact but don't overdo it; bombarding your member's office with calls, letters, or requests can at times backfire. Cultivate your relationships with a member's staff, try to establish a long-term connection with the member, and make sure your views on issues of concern are understood.

ENJOY YOURSELF: Finally, relax. Don't worry about making the perfect presentation or writing the perfect letter. Say what you want to say, and enjoy your exchanges with your representative. Participation in representative democracy is the surest antidote to cynicism about politics; many people find participation interesting, exciting, and empowering.

Joining with Others

One of the most common ways to influence Congress is to join your voice with other like-minded people. Congress does respond to numbers. *Interest groups* present an opportunity for you to pool your resources and add your voice to a chorus of voters who share your concerns. *Political parties* offer many ways for you to participate in the process at the local, state, and national level. *Websites* and other cybergroups and forums now offer creative ways to act on behalf of your viewpoint or interest.

If none of these venues fit your concern, why not start your own group? If you are concerned about the highway that may run through town, you could ask like-minded citizens to join an "Alliance to Stop the

Interstate.” If you are concerned about the use of methamphetamines in your child’s school, you could get in touch with others and start “Parents Concerned About Meth” and seek out similarly concerned school boards and parent groups around the region, state, and country. If you are concerned about security at chemical plants, you could have others join you in writing letters to public officials.

American history is filled with examples of citizens who saw a problem and formed a group to do something about it. In a big and diverse country like ours—with countless problems and challenges—there is always room for a new group of concerned citizens. You can be assured that if you succeed in joining your voice with others, your representatives in Washington will take note.

INTEREST GROUPS

Four-fifths of all Americans belong to at least one interest group. Here is a brief list of some prominent groups working on behalf of their members. There are thousands of others.

AARP: A nonpartisan organization for people age 50 and over that advocates on behalf of policies that benefit people as they age.

AFL-CIO: A federation of American labor unions that advocates on behalf of job safety, security, pay, and benefits for American workers.

AMERICANS FOR TAX REFORM: A grassroots organization of citizens who favor lower and simpler tax rates for Americans.

NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION: An association of citizens who support the right to keep and bear arms.

SIERRA CLUB: A grassroots organization that represents the views of citizens who are concerned about the preservation of the environment.

U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE: A federation of businesses and associations that advocates on behalf of businesses.

People Who Made a Difference

CANDY LIGHTNER

After Candy Lightner's twelve-year-old daughter Cari was killed by a drunk driver, she turned her grief into activism. In 1980, she founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and helped turn it into a hugely influential grass-roots organization. Through outreach, advocacy, and appearances before Congress and legislators in all 50 states, MADD has educated the public and supported stricter laws against drunk driving at the federal, state, and local level.



POLITICAL PARTIES

The two biggest political parties, the *Democratic Party* and the *Republican Party*, have both national and state organizations. There are many smaller or regional parties like the *Green Party* or *Libertarian Party*. Joining and participating in a political party offers many opportunities to engage with elected representatives: voting in a primary election; attending party conventions; volunteering on a political campaign; receiving updates about your party's positions and events in Washington; or running for office yourself!



CYBER-POLITICS

The Internet is revolutionizing politics and policy, offering countless new venues to participate in representative democracy. *Political campaign* websites allow you to learn more about a candidate's position and activities. *Research and Policy* websites allow you to learn more about a specific issue. *Blogs* provide an opportunity for citizens to locate, read, and share their views on issues. *Networking* sites like Meetup.org allow citizens to locate and organize meetings. *Fundraising* websites allow interested donors to locate like-minded causes and candidates. Or, should you want to start your own group, a website is an important tool for signing people up and getting your message out.

People Who Made a Difference

DONALD L. RASMUSSEN

Donald L. Rasmussen was a young doctor who answered an ad to work at the Miners Memorial Hospital in a small town in West Virginia. A specialist in lung disease, he became deeply concerned about the “black lung” disease he saw among miners making it difficult for them to breathe. He became a leading expert on the disease, studying tens of thousands of cases, and then a leading advocate for reducing miners’ exposure to coal dust. His efforts, combined with those of many others, helped bring about passage by Congress of The Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, which for the first time mandated the eradication of an occupational disease.



LOOKING AHEAD

Democracy is a work in progress.

The Founding Fathers viewed representative democracy as a *process* for getting things done, not a final *product*. There are always new elections, new representatives, and new laws under consideration. If you think the problems in your community, state, or the nation are beyond your control, remember our government was established so you could participate in solving those problems.

Whenever there has been progress in America, it is because a citizen or group of citizens identified a need, a problem, or an idea, and decided to do something about it. As Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only way that it ever has.” Those who do engage in our representative democracy come to know their communities better, lessen the distance between themselves and the centers of government, and help build a better nation.

There are two guarantees in our system: Those who sit on the sidelines will not play a role, and those who engage in representative democracy will have a voice. If you believe you can make a difference, you can find a way to do it. Will you?

People Who Made a Difference

ROSA PARKS

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks—a seamstress from Montgomery, Alabama—was arrested and fined when she refused to give up her seat to a white passenger. Her act of defiance sparked a 382-day citywide African-American boycott of the bus system, led by the young Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. The emboldened civil rights movement and national attention led to the Supreme Court's overturning of the Montgomery Ordinance, and eventually prompted far-reaching legislative action by Congress, most notably the historic 1965 Voting Rights Act. Mrs. Parks became an icon to many Americans, and worked for many years on the staff of U.S. Representative John Conyers.



RESOURCES

Identifying your Members of Congress

Find your Senators: www.senate.gov

Find your House Representative: www.house.gov

Local phone books have congressional office information too.

Making Contact by Phone

Senate Switchboard: 202-224-3121

House Switchboard: 202-225-3121

Making Contact by Mail

The Honorable
(full name of your Senator)

U.S. Senate

Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable

(full name of your Representative)

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

Making Contact by E-mail

For the Senate: www.senate.gov/contacting/index.cfm

For the House: www.house.gov/writerep/

Television

Watch C-SPAN or C-SPAN 2 to see the Congress in action.

Websites

- The House: www.house.gov
- The Senate: www.senate.gov
- Tracking legislation:
www.thomas.loc.gov
- Center for Civic Education:
www.civiced.org
- Center on Congress at Indiana
University: www.centeroncongress.org
- CIRCLE Program, University of
Maryland: www.civicyouth.org
- Dirksen Congressional Center:
www.congresslink.org

Newspapers and Periodicals

Read your local newspaper and national publications!

Publications that follow Congress: *Congressional Record*, *Roll Call*, *The Hill*, *Congressional Quarterly*, and *National Journal* available at your local library

Books

Roger H. Davidson and Walter J. Oleszek, *Congress and Its Members*, CQ Press, 10th edition, 2005

Stephen E. Frantzich, *Citizen Democracy: Political Activists in a Cynical Age*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2nd edition, 2005

Lee H. Hamilton, *How Congress Works and Why You Should Care*, Indiana University Press, 2004

Alan Rosenthal, Burdett A. Loomis, John R. Hibbing, and Karl T. Kurtz, *Republic on Trial: The Case for Representative Democracy*, CQ Press, 2002

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