

The telephone call

When you are experimenting with different ways of communicating with members of Congress, don't overlook the telephone call. Used correctly, it can be a very effective action tool. Be sure to be well prepared and well informed, and place your call at a strategic time: just before a vote, for instance. If you have written or visited with the representative remind him or her of that previous contact. If the member is not available, speaking with the legislative assistant for that issue is also effective.

Telegrams, mailgrams, form letters

Form letters are the least effective way to communicate with Washington, but when used as a follow-up to previous contacts they can be quite useful in underlining your opinion. As with phone calls, they are most helpful if sent at strategic times. Volume is also important, so persuade as many people as possible to join you in sending a telegram or form letter.

The letter

The letter is still the most widely used form of communication. Delivered by the truckload to congressional offices, the mail is a major focal point for the legislator and his or her staff. More and more letters arrive by fax, especially when time is tight. You can get your members' fax numbers by calling their office phone numbers listed later in this publication. Each letter is read and answered, and the amount of mail on a particular piece of legislation frequently helps determine the representative's approach to an issue. In fact, some members use their "mail count" on a bill as the sole determinant when voting.

Your letter may be answered with a form letter, particularly if you have written on an issue that has generated many other letters. However, whether you receive a form letter, or a handwritten response from your representative, the important thing is that your communication has been received and noted. If you are writing to a committee member, you may wish to write to your member on the same subject. Originals are best by far, but if time is short, a copy will do with a short, personal note attached.

Recommended approaches to letter writing

It's easy to write a good letter when your senators or representative are in agreement with you on a basic issue:

Dear Mr. Smith.

I was pleased to read in the Congressional Record that you gave a speech on the need to protect air quality standards at the same time we seek more efficient energy consumption and conservation. I hope your speech means that you will support passage of the Clean Air Act....

It is always useful to relate local needs to national legislation. If you have first-hand knowledge of what is happening in your community, include comments in your letter:

I strongly urge you to oppose any federal moves to curtail the availability of student loans. As a sophomore at State University, I know many students who would not be able to continue with their education if student loans were no longer available....

It is helpful to indicate your familiarity with the member's past actions on an issue, particularly if you are trying to change his or her mind:

I know that you have had serious doubts about the effectiveness of the United Nations and have voted against U. S. funding. However, in recognition of the need for cooperation among nations in an interdependent world, I hope you will reconsider your stand and support action to strengthen the United Nations....

The fundamental do's

DO address your senator or representative properly.

DO write legibly. Handwritten letters are fine if they are readable.

DO be brief and to the point. Discuss only one issue in each letter. Quality is more important than quantity.

DO identify a bill by number or title if you can. This helps your representative or senator's staff know which bill you are referring to if there are multiple bills on the same issue.

DO identify yourself. Indicate the state, congressional district, city or county in which you are a voter. If you have family, business or political connections related to the issue, explain them. They may serve as identification when your point of view is considered.

DO be courteous and reasonable.

DO feel free to write if you have a question or problem dealing with procedures of government departments. Congressional offices can often help you cut through red tape or give you advice that will save you time and wasted effort.

DO write to say you approve, not just to complain or oppose. Public officials hear mostly from constituents who oppose their actions. A barrage of criticism gives them a one-sided picture of their constituencies. (A note of appreciation will make your senator or representative remember you favorably next time you write.)

DO include pertinent editorials from local papers.

DO write early in the session before a bill has been introduced if you have ideas about an issue you would like to see incorporated in legislation. If your senator or representative is a member of the committee to which it has been referred, write when the committee begins hearings. If he or she is not a member of the committee handling the bill, write him or her just before the bill comes to the floor for debate and vote.