

Sound Science Initiative: Legislative Guide Giving Legislators a Piece of Your Mind

Introduction

It is all too easy to criticize politicians and government. It is much harder to take the next step and to recognize that as citizens, we all share in the responsibility for improving the behavior of politicians and the workings of government. One important way that you can contribute to the democratic process is by communicating your views on particular issues to your elected officials.

As a scientist, your participation is especially significant. Legislators can benefit when you apply your expertise to public policy. In addition, because of your respected position in society, as well as the general perception that scientists are well-educated, knowledgeable, and thoughtful citizens, your views on a range of topics are likely to be received with greater respect than those of other citizens.

Although success in persuading your elected officials to follow a particular course of action is by no means guaranteed, surveys show that legislators *do* pay attention to the opinions of their constituents. Pressure from “back home” does indeed change minds and votes. Furthermore, a lack of communication from constituents on a particular topic can harm an issue greatly. When congressional staffers say, “We haven’t heard anything from the district on that issue - we haven’t gotten any letters on that,” then advocates for that issue know there is trouble.

This guide suggests how to communicate effectively with members of Congress, the president and the administration. In addition, we have attached a primer on the legislative process.

Congressional Ways and Means

The following are all effective means for you to lobby your elected officials: letters, phone calls, personal appointments, letters-to-the-editor, and asking questions at town meetings. Among these methods, letters-to-the-editor and personal contact are by far the most effective, but they also require more time and effort. Individual letters (via mail, fax, or e-mail) and phone calls are also very important and worthwhile. Timeliness is important; if Congress has already finished working on a particular issue for the session, your communication will serve little purpose. All these methods can be used to help you build a personal relationship with elected officials and their staff, which is the best way to ensure that your views are heard and considered.

Letters

Writing a letter to your member of Congress is an effective and easy way to communicate your views, because all congressional offices monitor correspondence from their constituents. Your letter will be open, read, and answered by an aide. Although the legislators themselves usually do not read letters, that does not mean your letter will not have an impact. Because members of Congress must deal with hundreds of complex topics, they rely heavily on their aides to provide them with concise and thorough information. Aides keep a running tally of letters received for or against a given position and report the results regularly to the Congressperson. A well-written, thought-provoking letter can educate an aide, thereby influencing the legislator as well.

Usually the response to your letter will be a standard letter or collection of paragraphs put together on a computer. Since congressional offices receive hundreds or even thousands of letters each week, staff do not have the time to send personalized replies in most cases. The important question is whether their reply answers your questions or responds directly to your request for the legislator to take a certain position. If it does not, write again and request a clear answer.

Postcards are less effective than letters. Mass-produced letters and petitions only make an impact if

they arrive in huge quantities. It is recommended that you send your letter by US mail, if time permits, since some offices do not like to receive constituent mail via fax, since it ties up the fax machine. However, when speed is of the essence, faxing can be a good way to get your message across. Faxes should not be longer than one page.

Some offices may be able to handle e-mail letters. However, you should ask for a reply to your e-mail message and check to make sure you receive a response, since many offices do not yet have a system for handling constituent e-mail.

Tips on writing a letter to your legislator:

- **Address your letter correctly.** The address and salutation should look like this:

| | | |
|-----------------------------|----|---------------------------|
| The Honorable Joe Smith | or | The Honorable Jayne Smith |
| US House of Representatives | | US Senate |
| Washington, DC 20515 | | Washington, DC 20510 |

Dear Representative Smith:

Dear Senator Smith:

- **Write to the legislators for whom you can vote.** Most elected officials will not be interested in your opinions if you are not their constituent. Occasionally it may be useful to write to committee chairs, even if they do not represent your district or state.
- **If your writing is legible, write by hand.** Computer-generated letters are getting slicker all the time. A congressional office knows that a handwritten letter really comes from an individual constituent. If you need to type, put your letter on personal stationery and add a handwritten P.S.
- **Address only one issue per letter.** It will have more impact and receive a quicker response than a letter covering more than one issue.
- **Ask for something specific.** Ask the legislator to take a particular action, such as cosponsoring a bill. Ask the legislator to state his or her position in a letter of response.
- **Keep it short.** To make sure your letter is read rather than skimmed, make your points quickly and concisely.
- **Make it personal.** Tie the issue to your personal expertise or experience, or to the district or state represented by the legislator. Use your own words whenever possible.
- **Do not identify yourself with UCS.** Your letter will be less effective if the staff think you are responding to prompting by an organization.
- **Be courteous.** Rudeness will always alienate your reader.
- **When appropriate, express your appreciation.** Like anybody, legislators appreciate an occasional “well done.” Furthermore, in this manner you signal that you are paying attention to your legislator’s activities.

- **Include your return address on your letter.** Envelopes are easily lost.
- **Follow up.** Follow-up letters have a much larger impact than the initial communication. Thank the legislator for taking a correct stand, or ask questions about any unsatisfactory answers.

Telephone Calls

Telephoning your legislator's office is also a useful way to communicate your opinions, especially on issues on which some sort of action is pending, such as a vote. You will not speak to the legislator directly. As with letters, legislative staff track the number of pro and con calls on various topics. As few as three to ten calls over a short period of time may serve to bring an issue to the attention of the legislator or key staff person. However, if the legislative schedule and your own schedule permit, it is probably better to write a letter.

Tips on calling your legislator:

- **Call congressional offices directly or through the switchboard.** If you do not have the direct number, you can reach US Representatives by calling 202-225-3121, and US Senators by calling 202-224-3121. Ask the operator to connect you to the individual office. If you do not know the names of your members of Congress, contact the Sound Science Initiative Organizer at ssi@ucsusa.org or by calling 617-547-5552.
- **Ask to speak to the aide who handles the issue about which you are calling.** Your call will be much more influential if you speak to the correct aide. You may need to call several times to reach that person. However, if you do not wish to have a conversation, you can leave a message with the receptionist stating your views.
- **Know your facts.** This simply means that you should be able to specifically describe the topic about which you are calling and state your opinion on what your legislator should do.
- **Be brief.** Aides receive a high volume of phone calls every day.
- **Be timely.** Timeliness is especially important when you are phoning. If the vote on your issue is imminent, the aide is much more likely to pay attention to what you say.
- **Call the local office.** Calling the office in your district or state, rather than the Washington office, can sometimes be very effective. District staff often are not informed about the current status of legislation and will call the Washington office for assistance. However, if very quick turn-around is necessary, you should call Capitol Hill directly.

Face-to-Face Meetings

A single visit with your legislator or an aide can be worth many letters, particularly if you are part of a delegation that represents more than one constituency. You can meet with your US Representative or Senator either in their local or Washington offices. Members of Congress come home when Congress is in recess; some members come back to the district or state every weekend. Visiting Capitol Hill offices is especially effective; if you take the trouble to arrange a Washington meeting, it is clear that you are serious about your concerns. In many cases you will meet with an aide rather than the member of Congress. This can be effective, but make sure the aide is the individual who handles the issue of concern

to you.

Tips on meeting with legislators:

Before the meeting:

- **Chose the focus for your visit.** Meetings that cover only one or two topics will be much more effective.
- **Recruit a diverse delegation.** Whenever possible, bring along other constituents who share your concerns about the topic of the meeting. Legislators and staff will be more impressed by a delegation that represents a wider cross-section of your community (by neighborhood, religion, job/profession, etc.), thus demonstrating depth of support.
- **Make an appointment.** Start early and be persistent. Your best chance to get a meeting in the district/state is during a congressional recess. Call the local office to find out when the legislator will be available for meetings; begin trying to set up a recess appointment at least several weeks in advance. For a meeting in Washington, you probably will not need as much lead time. If you cannot get a meeting with your legislator, ask to meet with the aide who handles your issue.
- **Confirm your appointment with a written letter.** Confirm the time and topic for the appointment. If you are going as part of a delegation, list the names of the participants. Confirm again by calling the day before or the day of the visit.
- **Plan your meeting ahead of time.** If several people are visiting with the legislator together, have an organizational meeting prior to the actual meeting. Your appointment will probably only last 10-20 minutes, so it is important to decide what you want to discuss, who will take the lead, and what specific arguments will be presented. Know the current status of relevant legislation, the pros and cons on your issue, and your legislator's voting record and committee assignments.

During the meeting:

- **Make a good first impression.** Allow plenty of time to find the office, so that you will not be late, and dress professionally.
- **Introduce and identify yourself.** Make it clear that you are a constituent, and tell the legislator or aide about any expertise or experience you have that is relevant to the issue you are discussing.
- **When possible, thank the legislator for something she/he has done.** In this way you show that you are both friendly and knowledgeable.
- **Be concise, direct, and relevant.** Briefly describe your issue, explain your position, tell why the issue is relevant to the legislator's district or state. Stick to your agenda.
- **Make a request.** Ask the legislator to do something very specific on your issue, such as

cosponsoring a particular bill or amendment or voting the right way. It is too easy for legislators to agree with you if your request is not specific.

- **Be polite, but persistent.** Do not let the legislator evade the issue or change the subject. Try to get a commitment to a particular course of action. If the legislator or aide is hostile, keep your cool. Follow up your visit with more information or constituent pressure.
- **Do not bluff.** If you do not know the answer to a question, say that you will find the answer and provide it in a follow-up letter. Follow up promptly.
- **Present some literature on your topic.** Bring short fact sheets, articles, or report summaries, and give them to the legislator or aide at the end of the meeting. Many legislators or aides will not read anything that is longer than a page or two long.

After the meeting:

- **Debrief after the meeting.** Make a note of any commitments made by the legislator or by you and your group. If you are part of a delegation, designate a notetaker; if you are alone, it is best to avoid taking notes during the meeting, so that you can give the legislator or aide your full attention. Think about or discuss ways you could do better next time.
- **Write a follow-up letter.** Thank the legislator for the meeting. Reiterate your position and your understanding of any commitments made during the meeting. Be sure to include any information you promised to provide.

Letters to the Editor (LTEs)

Congressional staff say that it is almost impossible to overuse this technique. Letters from readers are among the most widely read features in daily newspapers. When your letter is printed in the paper, your views will have a large audience, and your legislator is well aware of that fact. Congressional staff clip and circulate relevant LTEs from national and local papers.

Tips on writing a letter-to-the-editor:

- **Refer to the legislator you are trying to influence by name.** If the letter includes a legislator's name, in almost all cases staff will give him or her the letter to read personally.
- **Make your letter interesting.** Include interesting facts, relevant personal experience, and any local connections to the issue.
- **Clip out your printed letter and send it to your legislator.** This way you can be *certain* that he/she sees it.
- **For additional tips on this topic, see the Media Orientation Manual also included in the "Tools Packet."**

Town Meetings

Members of Congress will make a variety of public appearances in their home district or state, particularly during congressional recesses. Many of them hold public forums or “town meetings” where they speak to and accept questions from the public. Town meetings provide a good opportunity for you to have direct personal contact with your legislators and their aides. Even better, by asking a question and requiring a response on the spot, you can sometimes get your legislator's position on the record in public.

Tips for successfully speaking out at a town meeting:

- **Call the local office to find out when and where the legislator will be appearing.** Confirm this information as close to the event as possible. Legislator's schedules change frequently.
- **Ask your question clearly and concisely.** Think through your comments in advance, and do not give a speech.
- **Make a specific request, requiring a specific answer.** Ask the legislator to give his/her position on your issue or to state whether or not she/he will take a particular action.
- **If possible, introduce yourself to the staffer accompanying the legislator.** This is the first step in establishing a personal connection.

The President and the Administration

Influencing the president and the appointed officials who make up the administration is a much bigger challenge than influencing members of Congress, but letters and phone calls from citizens can still have an impact. In a 1995 survey conducted by 20/20 Vision, officials agreed that it is effective for citizens to communicate with administration officials.

The President

Although the president has by far the largest constituency of any elected official, which means that the volume of mail or phone calls must be very high to make a difference, the White House is very interested in public opinion. Letters are sorted by topic, tallied, and reported. Since the president receives between 40,000 and 60,000 letters per week, most writers will receive a form letter. However, if your letter describes an unusual personal experience, you may receive a personal answer. Letter readers, 50 percent of whom are volunteers, give President Clinton 10-15 letters to read each week. The White House does not respond to form letters. Phone calls to the White House comment line and electronic mail messages to the president are also tallied, summarized, and reported to the president.

Tips on writing, calling, or e-mailing the president:

- **Use correct addresses and phone numbers.** Address your letter to President William J. Clinton, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20500. Call the White House comment line, 202-456-1111, Monday-Friday from 9 am to 5 pm EST. Send electronic mail to president@whitehouse.gov or to the vice president at vice.president@whitehouse.gov.

Generally, do not use an organizational affiliation. If you are the leader of a local organization

or chapter of a national organization, note your affiliation. Otherwise, it is better not to mention an organization; you do not want the White House to think that your letter is part of an organizational effort.

- **Type or write clearly by hand.** Either one is fine.

The Administration

Lobbying administration officials is especially difficult for several reasons. Most significantly, administration officials are not elected; they answer to the president, not directly to the voters. Second, administration agencies are bureaucratic and complex, and staff change constantly. Finally, federal agencies generally do not have procedures for tracking letters and phone calls from citizens in an efficient or systematic way.

Tips on influencing administration officials:

- **Write, don't call.** Administration offices are not equipped to deal with large volumes of phone calls. A letter is more likely to receive attention and elicit a response. The guidelines for writing to members of Congress generally apply to writing to administration officials as well.
- **Work through your members of Congress.** Write and ask your members of Congress to approach the relevant administration official about an issue, or ask them to forward your letter to the relevant agency. Be as specific as possible about what you want your legislator to do. Keep in mind that administration officials are more likely to respond to senior members of Congress or those on committees with jurisdiction over the relevant agency.
- **Use the media.** Agencies clip major newspapers daily for articles, letters-to-the-editor, and editorials that mention their agency or the issues for which they are responsible. A good letter, appearing in a newspaper such as the *New York Times*, will be read in Washington.

June 1995