

COMMUNICATING WITH CONGRESS

Emails, Letters, and Phone Calls

Congress is the legislative branch of the Federal (National) Government. In-person (lobby) visits are the most effective way to convey your thoughts and concerns to Congress and other elected officials. In addition to face-to-face meetings, you can share concerns and build relationships with your elected officials through emails, letters, and phone calls. Congressional offices receive thousands of communications each month. Here are suggestions to increase the chance that your message is heard:

1. **Make it personal.** Congressional staff say messages with personal content are more effective. Start your message with information about yourself: where you live, what groups you are involved with, what work you do, and *why the issue you're writing about matters to you*. One personalized note can carry more weight than many stock emails or form postcards.
2. **Be polite.** Ask, don't tell, your Congressperson to do something. Staff may dismiss angry constituents. Be polite! Thank your Congressperson for a previous vote or co-sponsorship that you appreciated. This can make your message more persuasive by showing that you're paying attention to the process, and that you notice and appreciate the actions they take.
3. **Make a specific request.** Be concise. Mention a bill number or bill title, if possible. "I would like Rep. Jane Doe to cosponsor H.R. 12, the Alternative Energy Act" is more effective than saying, "I would like Rep. Jane Doe to protect the environment." Try to keep your email or letter to one or two paragraphs; staff are too busy to read messages that are several pages long.
4. **Include your postal address and/or district.** Contact only your own Representative and Senators. It is tempting to write to or call other Congress people who are key decision makers. However, most offices discard messages from non-constituents. Include your postal address, especially in emails, to show that you are a constituent and live in their district.
5. **Determine which office you want to contact.** Congressional members have offices both in Washington DC as well as local in-district offices. Communicating with district offices often makes it easier to attract attention than writing to or calling WA DC offices.
6. **Find the most effective method of communication for you.** Contact your elected officials' offices to ask how best to communicate with them. The most effective method of communication differs from office to office. Be aware that postage to Congressional offices is first sent for processing due to safety concerns, which can delay delivery by as much as three to five weeks. Some offices prefer speaking to constituents on the phone, others are impressed by

those taking the time to mail a letter or postcard. Emails may not stand out as much, but they are a quick way to send your thoughts to your officials, and can be a more regular method of contact.

7. **Make your message timely.** If you know a vote is approaching, try to contact your representative and senators at least one or two weeks in advance. On some issues, there might not be an impending vote, but Congress still needs to hear from their constituents to gauge where the electorate stands. It's always good to reach out, build your relationship, and share what issues matter most to you.
8. **Encourage others in your congressional district or state to contact Congress about the same issue.** Organizing a letter-writing campaign with a group of folks on a specific topic multiplies the impact of your efforts. Including a community leader such as a clergy member, elected official, or businessperson as a voice in the campaign will increase the chances of a message generating attention. Writing a letter on a company or organization's letterhead can also increase attention. The more constituents they hear from, the better!
9. **"Adopt" an issue.** One way you can try to maximize your influence is to write your legislators about only one or two issues, no more than once every few weeks. Focusing your communications on one or two issues can make you an "expert" in the eyes of the office. Thank your legislators if they do what you ask.
10. **Capitalize on the local angle.** Include information about how specific legislation may affect your community, district, or state. For example, if you are writing your member of Congress about rising energy prices, send an article about oil companies' profits along with a quote from a resident who is unable to afford rising gas and energy costs.

Emails, letters, postcards, and phone calls are important ways to express your views and build relationships with your members of Congress. Another approach is to write letters to the editor of your local newspaper. If your letter gets published and you include your elected official's name, your letter may get noticed by them or their staff. *Check out the "Utilize the Media" section in our toolkit for more help.*

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