

Working with Elected Officials: How to Make the System Work for *We, the People*

Democracy rests on the simple idea that elected representatives serve the interests of those who elected them. Unfortunately, this revolutionary idea doesn't always work in practice. That doesn't mean we should give up on the political process. Rather, it should spur us work even harder to ensure that elected officials—the servants of the people—are following our views.

Democracy, it is important to remember, is not a one-day act we commit once every two or four years. Democracy is a *process* that requires continuous citizen participation if it is to work properly.

This guide offers some pointers on how we can make democracy work for us, the people. Included in this guide are instruction on how to prepare for and meet with elected officials, the best to contact a legislator on issues of concern, and a tips on how you, as a citizen-activist, can become more politically influential.

I. Meeting with legislators.

Without question, meeting with and developing long-term, productive relationships with legislators is the most effective form of grassroots lobbying. This is true for representatives at the local, state, and national level. Everyone who will be meeting with the elected representative (or their aides) should be an active participant in the meeting.

1. Setting Up a Successful Meeting:

Pre-appointment planning

- Gather information about your representative, including their committee assignments and their voting record.
- List your reasons for the meeting in a clear and concise manner.
- Decide who will attend the meeting. Generally the more people, the more likely it is that you will meet the legislator rather than just staff. A small representative group or a coalition of leaders may be the best bet.
- Determine how much time you will need. Fifteen to 20 minutes is generally the longest. appointment with a legislator you can expect, so be concise and present only two to three points for discussion.

Call your representative's office to schedule a meeting

Organize your resources for the meeting

- Select the specific topics to be covered (contact Global Exchange for the latest updates on your issue).
- Create a typed agenda for the meeting.
- Prepare materials, including specific requests, that you can leave with the legislator.
- Assign roles for the meeting, making sure to involve every partner.

Practice for the meeting

Confirm the appointment

- One week before the meeting.
- The morning of the meeting.

2. Suggested Format for the Meeting:

Introductions

- Connect with the person with whom you are meeting. (*Example:* If it is an aide, ask what brought them to work with the representative.)
- Describe who you are and what you do in the community.
- Explain why the issue is important to you. Show that the issue is personal and communicate your concerns on a personal level.
- Give the representative (or their aides) a typed agenda and a list of your requests.
- Show that you are local—legislators pay particular attention to constituents. You need to show that your support can help this person get reelected.

Acknowledge your legislator for any previous positive actions

Presentation of Issues

- Stick to your agenda and assigned roles.
- Involve all of the participants.
- Perhaps show a video or use another creative element.
- Be honest and don't claim to know more than you do about an issue.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Give the legislator a chance to express an opinion. If he or she is supportive, don't be afraid to ask for help in advancing your issue and in contacting other like-minded legislators.
- Keep the communication positive. Never burn bridges. Even though the legislator or the staff person is rude or uncooperative never lose your cool, argue or threaten.

Make specific requests and ask for an immediate answer

- If the representative (or their aides) are unwilling to make a commitment, set a date for a follow up meeting.

- Carefully record any questions, objections, or concerns.

After the meeting, determine your next step and plan for follow-up

- Send any materials and information you offered. Follow up on deadlines and if they are not met, set up others. Be persistent.

The next day, send a thank you letter

Follow up with the legislator and their aides!

II. Letters and other written communication

It is important that we tell elected officials where we stand on issues. Our input on human rights, global trade, corporate accountability, peace and reconciliation, and other issues shapes the way our representatives create and implement policy.

When you are pushing an issue or supporting or trying to defeat a bill, writing to your legislators is a very effective way of getting your message across. However, some methods of communication are more effective than others.

1 Personal letters or faxes.

The absolute best thing to do is to write a personal letter. Personal letters show legislators that the author is knowledgeable, interested and committed to the matter at hand. Sending a personal letter also alerts the legislator to the fact that the author is politically active. Legislators keep close track of how their mail is running on particular issues, so your letter will have an influence whether the elected official will read it or not. Many legislators argue that one clear, logical individual letter is worth more than a petition with a thousand signatures!

Suggestions for writing personal letters:

- *Be Timely* - Write when an issue is current. Procrastination reflects apathy, and an outdated letter is a sure way to guarantee that your voice will not be heard and that the legislators will assume you don't really care.
- *Be Brief* - Limit yourself to one page and to one topic. The goal is to be read and understood.
- *Be Specific* - Reference specific bill numbers. Include basic information like what the legislation would do and how it would affect you and other people in the legislator's district or state. Remind legislators how their actions affect your issue and your vote.

- *Be Legible* - Clearly sign your name and include your address in the letter itself (envelopes with return address are routinely discarded). Type your letter rather than hand write it.
- *Be Supportive* - Write thank you letters when a legislator supports your cause. Too often they get only "anti" or complaint letters. A thank-you will make you stand out and it will help establish a more personal relationship with the legislator.
- *Don't Be a Pest* - Don't become a constant "pen-pal." Legislative offices track who writes and how often. Avoid being seen as a constantly writing crank or malcontent; it will dilute your message.

2 Email correspondence

Email has become a very useful tool for quickly and effectively communicating with elected officials. Keep in mind, however, that email is easily deleted and often comes in overwhelming numbers. A personal letter will always be more effective.

Suggestions for email communication:

- *Treat it as an electronic personal letter* - Follow the same rules for form and content as you would for writing a personal letter. Avoid the symbols, shorthand or "electronic-speak" that often accompanies personal emails. Write in complete sentences.
- *Title your submission* - Take advantage of the email subject line to give the legislator an idea of what the letter is going to be about. Include the bill number, if possible. This will make it easier for legislator to categorize the email and respond more effectively.
- *Include a home address* - Always provide your postal address somewhere in the body of your email. This will increase your chances of getting a response to your note. Most legislators and legislative staff are not prone to establishing an electronic conversation.

3 Form Letters

"Canned" or form letters are okay, but not nearly as effective as a personal letter or email. Certainly, they are easy to produce and send in. However, they lack personal touch and conviction. Legislators are more likely to discount form letters because they may show a lack of effort, and lack of effort can be translated into lack of interest.

Nonetheless, if you are embarking on a form letter campaign, keep these two iron-clad rules in mind:

- *Include your address* - A great number of form letters have no obvious space for you to LEGIBLY write in your address. Without an address, the legislator has just a piece of paper. He or she won't know whether you are a constituent or not.
- *Give extra effort* - Take an extra 30 seconds to write a 1- or 2-line personal note at the bottom of the form letter. Briefly restate your concerns. Ask for a written response. Any effort to make a form letter personal will help it be noticed.

4 A very few words about petitions.

They usually don't work. Few people read petition papers and many of the people who sign them have no idea what they are signing. Legislators know this and overwhelmingly discount their importance.

Petitions also tend to be poorly prepared and legislators have difficulty or no time to look through thousands of signatures to determine if any constituents signed on.

Petitions, however, are better than nothing at all, and logistically they are much easier than letters if you are out tabling at, say, a concert or farmers market.

Bottom Line: Write personal letters or pay your legislators a visit.

III Phoning your legislators:

Phone calls are a relatively effective way of communicating your concerns to your legislators. Phoning is especially important when a bill is moving quickly through the legislative process and time is short. The opportunity cost is that issues need to be relatively simple to be communicated well.

- *Be simple* - Call about one issue at a time. If possible, refer to the bill number and what the bill will do.
- *Be brief* - Introduce yourself, state how you feel about a particular bill or issue and ask for the legislator's support. If the legislator is undecided, ask to be updated on his or her stance after a period of time or ask for a meeting where you can argue your position.
- *Be logical* - Call your own representatives before you call any others. Your local legislators are always your first priority. They owe their political fortunes to you and your neighbors.
- *Be connected* - Always leave your name and address, particularly if you are a constituent. To keep track of how the constituency feels on certain issues legislative offices often log phone calls. Legislative offices usually respond to phone inquiries

by a mail after a brief period of time. If you phone to express an opinion but refuse to leave an address, you are wasting your breath.

- *Be smart* - Always say thank you. Never be abusive or threatening.