

Contacting Congress



One of the most effective ways to influence the decisions that your elected officials make is to call or send handwritten letters to their Washington, D.C. office.

Calling Members of Congress

Phone calls to Congress are generally low cost with the potential for high impact. As the volume of calls increases, so does your impact. For instance, if you and your friends organized a “call-in” day in support of \$1 billion for international family planning, the more calls you generate, the more likely your member of Congress will pay attention.

When calling a legislator’s office, you will most likely speak with a staff person. This does not mean that the lawmaker does not consider your message important, only that s/he is extremely busy. Staff people are knowledgeable and influential, and part of their job is to speak with you and pass your message on to the legislator. Rest assured, your message will be heard!

Calling a lawmaker’s office is easier than you probably think. Here are some important steps to keep in mind as you make your call.

1. **Do some quick research about your elected official and the issue at hand and adjust your messages accordingly (as you would before a face-to-face meeting).** Does s/he generally support or oppose your issue? If you are calling about a specific piece of legislation, is s/he a cosponsor?
2. **Call the Senate or House Switchboard numbers.** For both numbers, simply request to speak with your member of Congress and the operator will transfer your call to the receptionist in his or her office.

Senate: 202.224.3121

House: 202.225.3121

3. **Ask to speak with the staff person who works on the issue of concern.**
4. **Once speaking with the appropriate staff person, be sure to introduce yourself, say where you are from or that you are a constituent, and mention any organizational affiliations you have.** Provide some brief background information about the issue, what your position is, and why you want the member to take a particular position or vote a specific way. Make sure to voice a clear “ask” (i.e. “Can we count on the Senator to vote in favor of the bill – S.____?”). Thank the staff person for his or her time. In general, you should try to get your point across just a few minutes, as staffers’ time is limited!
5. **Write down the name and email of the staffer as well as notes on the call.** Send a brief thank you email after the call that thanks the staff person for his or her time, repeats your main points and your “ask,” and includes your contact information.
6. **Follow-up with him/her when you said you would.**

Submitting Handwritten Letters

Handwritten letters to elected officials are the staple of many grassroots advocacy efforts. In the U.S., Congressional offices pay particular attention to the handwritten letters they receive. Letters, moreover, offer a personal touch that is often not captured by email. A good idea to amplify the power of a handwritten letter is to get members of your community to participate in a letter-writing campaign and to submit their letters around the same time. As with making phone calls, when the volume of letters increases, so does your impact.

Letters can be faxed to your lawmaker's office in Washington, D.C. Fax numbers for offices are typically located on elected officials' personal websites – these websites can be found by searching for your legislator on the House (www.house.gov) or Senate (www.senate.gov) websites. If faxing is not an option, you can hand deliver them to your elected official's local office. U.S. postal mail should be a last resort since there are delays of several weeks for congressional mail.

Letters step-by-step

Letters should be about one page and should address only one issue. Your letter should include the following points:

- **Include your Senator or Representative's address in the upper left-hand corner of your letter.** These addresses can be found on legislator's websites, which can be located through the House (www.house.gov) or Senate (www.senate.gov) websites. Address should look as follows:

To a Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
(Dirksen, Hart, or Russell) Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

To a Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
(Cannon, Longworth, or Rayburn) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

- **Your greeting: Dear Representative** [Insert your representative's name here] or **Dear Senator** [Insert you senator's name here]:
- **A brief introductory sentence explaining that you are a voter in his/her district and any organizational affiliations or connections to the member you have.**
- **A sentence about why you are writing, within the first paragraph** (i.e. you want your Senator to vote for a certain bill, co-sponsor legislation, or support an issue). If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, be sure to identify it by its name and bill number (H.R.____ or S.____).
- **A statement about your position on the issue, with a few supporting facts to make your case.** You may also wish to include a personal story highlighting your experience and why you care – and why your elected official *should* care.



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- Repeat your “ask” or call to action.
 - Thank your legislator for her/his consideration and say that you look forward to his/her response.
 - Your closing: Respectfully, [your signature]
 - Your name printed and your address in the district.

A Note about Emails

Email has become an increasingly popular – and easy – way to contact members of Congress. Organizations with large memberships or networks have been able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of supporters to send emails or e-petitions to elected officials. Similar to phone calls and handwritten letters, the greater number of emails you generate through a campaign, the more likely your efforts will have a tangible impact.

A word of caution: setting up an email campaign with a “template” or “form” email that supporters can sign with the click of a button has become increasingly widespread and attractive for many reasons. They are easy to configure through various advocacy and email software and they do not require much time or energy from advocates. All supporters need to do is attach their name and contact information to a pre-written message and hit the “send” button.

In general, “form” emails are not as effective or well-received by Congress as personalized emails, handwritten letters or phone calls. The one caveat is that if your campaign is able to amass a sizeable number of emails (thousands or hundreds of thousands), your issue is likely to get on the radar.

If you do choose to organize an email campaign, make sure to emphasize to your supporters that emails should be personalized, right down to the subject line.

