The Right to Write

Surprisingly few people ever write their elected officials. Perhaps 90 percent of Americans live and die without ever taking pen in hand and expressing a single opinion to the person who represents them in Congress. Yet that representative’s vote may decide what price they will pay for the acts of government, either in dollars, in human lives, or the quality of our environment.

Mail to a modern-day congressman or congresswoman is more important than ever before. In the days of Calhoun, Clay, Webster and Lincoln, congressmen lived among their constituents for perhaps nine months of the year. Through daily contacts in a district of fewer than 50,000 people (House members now represent ten times that many) they could feel rather completely informed on their voters’ beliefs and feelings.

Today, with the staggering problems of government and increasingly long sessions, Members of Congress not only must vote on many more issues than their predecessors, but they rarely get to spend more than 60 days of a year in their home states. Thus the mailbag is the best “hot line” to the people back home.

TOOLS

Letterwriting

Writing your elected officials is easier than you think. In fact, it’s one of the simplest and most effective ways to influence public policy on behalf of the environment. Here are a few tips:

☐ Address It Properly
The Honorable ________
The Honorable ________
U.S. House of Representatives U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20515 Washington, D.C. 20510

☐ Identify the Bill or Issue
About 20,000 bills are introduced into each Congress, so it is important to be specific. If you write about a particular piece of legislation, try to give the bill’s number or describe it by a popular title (“endangered species act,” “Idaho wilderness bill,” etc.).

☐ The Letter Should Be Timely
Inform your elected officials while there is still time for them to take action.

☐ Focus on Your Own Delegation
As a constituent, your views are most valued by the Members of Congress you vote for. Focus your energy on your House member and two senators.
Be Reasonably Brief
Every working day many Members of Congress receive 150 or more pieces of mail. Keep your letter concise and to the point. Try to limit it to one issue. It is not necessary that letters be typed — only that they be legible; the form, phraseology and grammar are completely unimportant.

Ask for a Response
If your elected official is equivocal in his response, write again and request clarification. Don't hesitate to ask questions. Your elected official works for you. Don't sound demanding or threatening, however.

Write Your Own Views
A personal letter is far better than a form letter or signature on a petition. Your representative usually knows what the major lobbying groups are saying, but often does not know of your experiences or observations, or what the bill will do to and for you.

Give Your Reasons for Taking a Stand
Your representative may not know all the effects of the bill and what it may mean to an important segment of his or her constituency.

Show Understanding
Try to show an awareness of how the proposed legislation would affect not just the environment, but also your community and other people's health and jobs.

Be Constructive
If a bill deals with a problem you admit exists, but you believe it takes the wrong approach, offer your elected official an alternative.

Ask For Specific Action
If your questions or concerns are general (i.e., "I hope you are for clean air") you will most likely receive a form letter. Ask for specific action, such as cosponsoring a bill or supporting an amendment.

Share Expert Knowledge With Your Representative
No one can possibly be an expert in all fields; many constituents are experts in some of them. Members of Congress welcome expert advice and counsel.

Use Personal or Business Letterhead Whenever Possible
Be sure to include a complete return address on the letter and envelope.

Say "Well Done" When it is Deserved
Members of Congress are human too, and they appreciate an occasional "well done" from people who believe they have done the right thing. But even if you think your representative went wrong on an issue, a non-threatening letter stating your disagreement would be welcome; it may help on another issue later.

Some Don'ts:
- Don't make threats or promises
- Don't berate your representative
- Don't pretend to wield vast political influence
- Don't try to write on every issue that comes up (don't be a pen pal).

During the two-year life of a Congress, the House clerk will record your representative's votes on more than 250 issues. But in a very real sense these will be your votes too.

Adapted from "The Right to Write" by Congressman Morris K. Udall. These suggestions can be used when writing to any public official at any level of government. If you are unsure of whom to write about a specific problem, contact