



CALLTHEHALLS

CONTACTING YOUR REPRESENTATIVES

THESMARTWAY

BY EMILY ELLSWORTH



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INTRODUCTION

On November 11, 2016, [I began a series of tweets](#) with “I worked for Congress for 6 years, and here’s what I learned about how they listen to constituents.” I then tweeted out a few tips on how regular people could take action after an election when many felt powerless and angry. Within days, the tweets had been viewed over 25 million times with 14 thousand retweets. By the following Monday, the phone lines in Washington, D.C., were flooded with calls from people talking to congressional staffers about their frustrations with political appointees and requests to investigate the incoming administration’s financial entanglements.

The response was overwhelmingly positive and hundreds of people reached out to me to let me know that my specific advice on how to effect change in Congress led to them making phone calls to their representatives for the first time in their lives.

However, not everyone has Twitter and tweets aren’t easy to aggregate into a simple, readable and shareable document. This short e-book serves as a guide to what I experienced as a congressional staffer and how we listened to

our constituents. It is free to download and distribute, but if you find the information worthwhile, I’d appreciate a contribution.

At the end of this e-book, you’ll find a sheet checklists and worksheets that you can use to write down your research. I hope they will be useful to you as you start to learn more about how Congress works and how it represents you.

It can be discouraging to see your representatives not taking action on things that matter to you. It’s also important to set your expectations properly. You won’t change your representative’s mind right away. In most cases, you’ll see more failures than successes.

However, despite the uphill battle, a more engaged constituency always leads to more compromise and conversation. When we only allow those in the extremes to dictate the conversations, we grow further apart.

These tips and tricks will not work for every situation and with every office. However, once you start to engage with your representative, you’ll learn more about how to best reach your own representative.

RESEARCH

If you're starting from square one in citizen activism, getting in touch with your members of Congress can seem overwhelming. However, with a little preparation, you can feel more confident reaching out with a phone call, email, letter, or meeting. Here are a few things you should know before you start making phone calls.

KNOW WHO REPRESENTS YOU FEDERALLY AND IN YOUR STATE

During presidential election years, most voters focus on the candidate on the top of the ticket and pay less attention to their congressional representatives in the House of Representatives and the Senate. These elected officials more directly represent you and are the offices where you have the most power in the federal government. You should be familiar with their names, their policies, and how best to communicate with them.

UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR REPRESENTATIVE CAN AND CAN'T DO

Members of Congress are legislators, so their primary roles are writing and voting on laws that then go to the Senate for a vote or the president for a signature. They don't have the power to litigate or prosecute. When you contact your representative, you make better use of your time if you discuss issues that they can directly influence.

Also, know the difference between a state legislator and a federal representative. Issues such as local funding for schools, road construction, or a dead deer in your yard are handled on a state and city level. Sidenote: Yes, the dead deer in the yard thing was an actual call I took once. I actually was able to get someone from the city to take care of it.

THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

"Also referred to as a congressman or congresswoman, each representative is elected to a two-year term serving the people of a specific congressional district. Among other duties, representatives introduce bills and resolutions, offer amendments and serve on committees. The number of representatives with full voting rights is 435, a number set by Public Law 62-5 on August 8, 1911, and in effect since 1913. The number of representatives per state is proportionate to population" ([The House of Representatives](#)).

Since the House of Representatives divvies out representation based on population, generally your representative is at the front lines of representing you to Washington. You can find out who your representative is by visiting the House of Representatives' [website](#). Once you know who your representative is, do the following:

- Bookmark their website for easy access later.
- Save the phone numbers for both their D.C. office and state office closest to you in your phone.
- Sign up for their email list if they have a form on their website.
- Follow their social media accounts.

You may also want to note any committees they serve on, since that should give you some insight on the issues that are most important to them. If your representative holds a chairmanship or position on a powerful committee, it's even more important to direct your concerns to them about relevant legislative topics. Here are the current standing committees in the House of Representatives:

- Agriculture
- Appropriations
- Armed Services
- Budget
- Commerce
- Education and the Workforce
- Ethics
- Financial Services
- Foreign Affairs
- Homeland Security
- House Administration
- Judiciary
- Natural Resources
- Oversight and Government Reform
- Rules
- Science, Space, and Technology
- Small Business
- Transportation and Infrastructure
- Veterans' Affairs
- Ways and Means

The House of Representatives and the Senate have similar roles with a few differences. For instance, the House is known for having the “power of the purse” ([source](#)). This means that all spending bills originate in the House of Representatives. So, when you need to talk about budgets or appropriations for programs

like Medicare, Social Security, defense, healthcare, research, or any other federal spending program, you'll likely start with your congressperson.

Congressional budgets and staffs are relatively small. The two members I worked for had about 15 staff members in their state and D.C. offices combined, and that number seems fairly consistent with current staff reports ([source](#)).

Sidenote: The powers of impeachment also lie with the House of Representatives. The House Judiciary Committee is the one that brings articles of impeachment, but the Senate is the chamber that holds the trial.

THE SENATE

“The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each State” [U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 3, Clause 1].

The Senate is the smaller of the two legislative bodies, and both senators represent the entire state. This means that for larger states such as California, Texas, and New York, each senator is representing millions of people. However, along with their larger voting populations come larger budgets and staff to compensate.

Finding your senators is easily done on the Senate’s [website](#). Once you’ve determined who your senators are, do the following:

- Bookmark their websites for easy access later.
- Save the phone numbers for both their D.C. office and state office closest to you in your phone.
- Sign up for their email lists if they have a form on their websites.
- Follow their social media accounts.

Once you’ve got their contact information handy, take a look at their websites and find the committees they serve on and what specific issues seem to be of most interest to them. This will make it easier for you to tailor your message to them and maximize the impact of your contact.

Here are the standing committees of the U.S. Senate:

Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
Appropriations
Armed Services
Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
Budget
Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Energy and Natural Resources
Environment and Public Works
Finance
Foreign Relations
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Judiciary
Rules and Administration
Small Business and Entrepreneurship
Veterans’ Affairs

The Senate has a few special roles that the House of Representatives does not. The most notable of these is confirming presidential appointees and giving advice and counsel on treaties.

PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTEES

“The president nominates all federal judges in the judicial branch and specified officers in cabinet-level departments, independent agencies, the military services, the Foreign Service and uniformed civilian services, as well as U.S. attorneys and U.S. marshals” ([source](#)).

Presidential appointments and the Senate hearings for said appointees are important and strictly under the purview of your senators. If you have a strong opinion about a presidential appointee—including appointments for the Supreme Court—it’s important that you contact your senators about them rather than your House of Representatives member.

TREATIES

“The Senate does not ratify treaties—the Senate approves or rejects a resolution of ratification. If the resolution passes, then ratification takes place when the instruments of ratification are formally exchanged between the United States and the foreign power(s)” ([source](#)).

When a treaty comes before the Senate, your elected officials play a role in discussing the treaty as well as passing resolutions to ratify it. Make sure you are in contact with your senators when major treaties are being discussed in order to voice your support or opposition.

When compared to House staffs, Senate staffs are much larger—the average senator’s office has 40 staffers in their D.C. and state offices combined. These staffers handle constituent correspondence, casework, and legislative duties.

FINDING YOUR NICHE

Once you’ve done your research on your representatives and know which issues to bring up with which chamber, you can focus on a few key issues.

It’s tempting to call your representative about every move made by the president and his administration, but this is generally a formula for burnout and can be derailed by misinformation. If you, like most people, don’t have time to do significant research into committees, rules, amendments, and other nitty-gritty details of legislative work, there are a wide variety of advocacy groups who will do that work for you.

One of the other advantages of getting involved with local groups is that your message and your voice are amplified by working in numbers. As a group of citizen advocates or as part of a lobbying group or other professional organization, you’ll be able to set up appointments with staff, create specific calls to action, and pool your resources.

This works on both a federal and a local level. Once you start networking and connecting with other people in your community, you’ll learn more about your state legislators, city council members, mayors, and other influential lawmakers.

Who knows, you might even find yourself with enough of a network and support system that you’ll run for office.

Here’s how to start your research and define your niche:

- Write down the issues that are most important to you.
- Determine your bandwidth and amount of time you can dedicate to volunteer work.
- Search Google, Facebook, and LinkedIn for groups in your area. You can be as broad or as specific as you’d like.
- Visit their websites and attend volunteer orientations.

HOW TO CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVE

For the past decade, the Congressional Management Foundation has researched and published studies on the most effective ways to contact your representative. Their work is important because they have surveyed hundreds of congressional staffers and can give a broader view of Capitol Hill and how it listens to constituents.

In my experience, I found that most people never contacted their representatives. In fact, very few people are civically engaged enough to know who their representatives are or recognize their elected officials' names when they are on the ballots every two years. This means that anytime you are communicating with your elected officials, you are likely doing more than your neighbor.

As a constituent, it's easy to feel like your voice doesn't matter. You may write about your feelings on Facebook or in a conversation with a friend, but your representatives aren't privy to those conversations. And if six years in Congress taught me anything, it's that offices need to hear more from those in the middle rather than the fringe opinions that burn up the phone lines and flood the email inbox.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Most representatives have Facebook and Twitter accounts, or even Youtube channels. These accounts are managed by staff and even the representatives themselves.

I worked for two members of Congress who each handled their social media interactions differently. One of my bosses tweeted himself, and the other usually had our press person handle tweeting. However, I believe that they both saw social media as a way to communicate their messages quickly and easily rather than as a way to engage in a discussion with constituents.

Social media is obviously a quick and easy solution for you to communicate with your member of Congress, but at the same time, it has significant disadvantages. According to the [Congressional Management Foundation](#), only 36% of staffers felt like social media profiles had enough information to identify a commenter as a constituent. It's an onerous task to determine location in a social media profile, and most staffers aren't going to take the time to do it.

Social media is very useful for spreading a message quickly and effectively. My viral tweets were certainly evidence of that. In fact, in the week after the tweets went viral, several specific calls to action, scripts, and spreadsheets with phone numbers also spread quickly on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. So, don't discount social media as a powerful platform for advocacy and social change. But, also recognize that Congress is slow to adopt new technology.

EMAILS

Email is the other quick and inexpensive electronic communication. Every representative has a form on their website to take constituent messages. They have forms rather than email addresses is for security reasons. They can't risk viruses and spam coming into their inboxes and compromising the security of their offices. Individual staffers use email addresses as do the representatives themselves, but it's best to stick to the forms at first.

Emails received from a representative's website go into a constituent correspondence system (for those who know sales and marketing terms, it's essentially a CRM). Each representative gets to choose which system they use. The most common systems are IQ (built by Lockheed Martin) and iConstituent.

Your email is entered into the system with your name, mailing address, email address, and message. The system will recognize form emails immediately and group them all together. This makes it easy to see all at once exactly how many emails were received on a subject and compose a form letter in response. Staff can also search by keywords and add those emails into the correct batches.

It's up to staff how specific they want to get on those batches and which emails they end up assigning, and it's a task that takes a surprising amount of refining. Our staff always tried to walk the line between making sure individual messages were read and given a proper response, and not devoting excessive amounts of staff time to writing and grouping letters. We didn't always hit the mark on this, but a few things stuck out when we were sorting letters.

THE MORE PERSONAL, THE BETTER

As mentioned above, form emails that come from websites where you just put in your name and ZIP code are batched easily. Lots of emails on one particular issue show that there is interest in a policy or piece of legislation, but the impersonal nature of form emails can dilute their impact ([source](#)).

However, a large number of emails on one specific issue that constituents personally wrote can have a tremendous impact. Heartfelt and personal stories from constituents about how a specific piece of legislation affects them can serve a couple important functions.

First, these emails aren't easily batched. Since they don't contain the same language, a staffer has to read them individually. A hundred emails with the exact same message wouldn't be passed along to the representative, but one persuasive email with a personal story is likely to make its way around the staff as well as to the representative.

Second, [the power of an individual story](#) is the thing that changes the minds of lawmakers. Rachna Choudhry, co-founder of POPVOX writes, "Savvy advocacy organizations encourage their supporters to share their stories in their own words, rather than rely on form letters."

ASK FOR SPECIFIC ACTION

The best letters are the ones that are specific and heartfelt. Congressional staffers want to give you a direct response to your concern, and it's much easier to do that when you make a clear request.

So, include a bill number or some other important action item, as well as what you'd like your representative to do for you. The more information you have about the legislation, the better, but a bill number or amendment name is good to start. Then, identify the action. These actions can include cosponsoring legislation, voting for legislation in a committee or on the floor of the House, or releasing a statement on presidential appointments.

BE BRIEF AND RESPECTFUL

Emails that contain walls of text with copied and pasted information from articles are frustrating and hard for staff to read. From time to time, we'd get requests from constituents to send attachments with news articles or other reports. That information is generally not necessary.

The most effective emails outline the legislation or issue you are concerned about, your personal story, and a call to action. This shouldn't take you more than a couple paragraphs. Additionally, a respectful tone feels more like an invitation for discussion rather than a screaming match. Your legislators and their staff are just like you: they would rather have a passionate and respectful disagreement than be screamed at in all-caps.

PERSONAL LETTERS

If you want someone to read your message, one of the best ways is to write a personal letter. However, since 9/11, congressional offices have new ways of handling mail. Mail sent to D.C. offices goes through scanners and can take weeks to arrive. Mail sent to state offices goes through normal postal systems and only takes a few days.

When your letter arrives, a staffer or intern will read it, scan it, and put it into the constituent correspondence system. Then it will be batched with emails and a form letter will be sent in response.

The effectiveness of a letter is similar to an email. It's important to keep your letter brief, targeted, and from the heart. Staffers often look for letters they can pass along to their bosses, so the more personal, the better. Be sure to include your information on the actual letter so you can receive a response in return.

PHONE CALLS

The [Congressional Management Foundation](#) mentions phone calls in their report:

“While the vast majority of grassroots organizations seek to engage Members of Congress in a genuine dialogue about issues, there is a minority that consider it a point of pride to effectively shut down a Member’s office. Usually, this is done by sending such high volumes of e-mail, telephone calls, faxes or letters that a Member’s entire staff has to be temporarily re-assigned to manage the communications. This practice does attract the attention of Members and staff, but perhaps not in a constructive way.”

In my original tweets, I mentioned the impact of a few of these phone calls in our office. There were a few times during the six years that I worked there when we received a flood of phone calls about one specific issue and it tied up a good portion of our time. However, when they were respectful phone calls, it wasn’t a negative experience for me or my interns.

I believe phone calls have a significant impact because of their immediate call to action. It requires an office to formulate a response right away and in our district office, we began tallying calls immediately when we received a large number on a specific topic. I also liked hearing the voices of constituents because they felt more personal than an email or letter.

However, I also agree with the CMF’s assessment that large amounts of calls can be disruptive in a bad way and they should be used responsibly, so you don’t damage your message:

- 1 **Only call the representatives who represent you.** It may be tempting to go down a list of senators and representatives and voice your opinion. However, this is not an effective use of time for you, and it’s frustrating for offices that are trying to communicate with their constituents. I also believe it’s unfair for constituents of those offices. If the phone lines are tied up because out-of-state callers are flooding the office, their constituents can’t get through. So, call your representatives and urge your friends in other districts to call their representatives. Don’t aim to shut down the office every day.
- 2 **Identify yourself as a constituent.** One of the most important aspects of a phone call is to make sure the staffer knows you live in their district. You can provide your ZIP code or city to the staffer if they ask.
- 3 **Call the D.C. office as well as the state offices.** Pick one office to call and voice your opinion. Many callers choose the D.C. office because that’s where most of the legislation happens. However, state office staffers are members of your community. They usually live within the district and are tasked with specific constituent assignments.
- 4 **Call once about an issue.** It’s not necessary to call daily or weekly about an issue. Again, the point is to have a large number of phone calls about an issue, but once you’ve told your story, it’s important to allow time for others to do the same. However, if you have new information

about an issue or a separate issue, make a separate call. Like emails, phone calls are better when they are targeted.

5 Tell your story on the phone to the staffer. Be specific about how a piece of legislation, presidential appointment, or other policy will affect you. If you have specific expertise in an issue, make sure the staffer knows that. It's okay to be emotional or passionate about your concerns.

6 Ask for specific action. As with an email, make sure you know your call to action in advance. The most obvious thing is to ask for a vote or position on a specific piece of legislation with the appropriate bill number. If you're calling about something related to the presidency, make sure you know what you want your representative to do. In many cases, they don't have the power to control the executive branch. But, you can ask for statements or positions on a topic. If the staffer isn't sure about a position, you can ask to speak with someone else or just ask that your opinion be recorded.

7 Be brief and respectful. Being a congressional staffer is like being the customer service representative for the federal government. It can bring out the worst in people. You may disagree on every issue with your representative, but it's not helpful to yell or be profane on the phone. When I trained interns on taking phone calls, I made it clear to them that they weren't expected to take abuse from constituents on the phone. So, keep your phone calls to a couple minutes or less, and be kind to the person on the other end of the line. It's okay to ask questions or press a staffer on an issue, but keep the language clean and your volume down. It's not only the right thing to do, it's the best way to get them to listen to you.

USEFUL SCRIPTS AND TEMPLATES

If you've never contacted your representative before, you might want some help framing a message. In this day and age, talking on the phone can feel unnatural. Trust me, the first time you call is always the most nerve-racking. In most cases, once you've had a good conversation with a staffer, you'll feel more confident going "off-script."

Again, your own personal story is what matters here. So, if you're able, customize your script to match your own experiences, fears, and desires. This means more to the other person on the other end of the line.

Kara Waite's Google document ([We're His Problem Now](#)) is a list of calling scripts and phone numbers has been incredibly helpful to people who need to know where to start.

However, if you want to make your own personal script, here is how I would formulate it:

- 1 Identify your name and city.
- 2 State your specific call to action and pose your question to the staffer.
- 3 Wait for a response from the staffer.
- 4 Tell your personal story about why this particular call to action matters to you.
- 5 Ask for your opinion to be recorded and end the call.

In my opinion, this is the most powerful formula that will affect the person on the other end of the phone.

TOWN HALL MEETINGS

As a staffer, I noticed that there were constituents who wanted a direct connection to my boss. Since we represented 700,000 constituents or more, it simply wasn't possible to have a face-to-face conversation with every voter. My bosses relied heavily on their staff to interact with constituents and pass along important messages. However, we also planned town hall meetings to offer constituents the opportunity to ask questions directly to their representatives.

Not every representative has public town hall meetings. If your representative is one of these, you can call the office or email and ask to know about upcoming meetings, but it's also possible you'll need to just stick to emails, letters, and phone calls.

Representatives advertise town hall meetings in a few different ways:

- 1 **Email.** Constituents who have signed up for regular email updates will get notifications about town hall meetings. It's easy and cheap to send out these notifications. So, sign up at your representative's website.

2 Mail. Elected officials can buy mailing lists and send out postcards to constituents in the neighborhoods where they will be holding town hall meetings. There isn't a good way to get on the mailing list, and these postcards can get expensive.

3 Social media. Some representatives announce their public meetings on their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

4 Call the office. You can always call the state office and ask if they have any meetings planned.

Town hall meetings are sometimes held during the day, but they generally take place in the evening. If you can attend these, you should. In 2009, the first few town halls my office held had nearly 1,500 people. This was during the debate about healthcare reform and we had to book very large venues. However, in subsequent years, we had anywhere between 25-150 people attend our meetings. I also heard from other staffers that it wasn't uncommon to have no one show up at their public meetings.

Town hall meetings are particularly important for millennials and younger voters to attend. In my experience, town hall meetings were frequented by older voters. This meant we didn't get to meet or hear from young voters. It was a demographic I felt particularly passionate about and I wished we had more involvement. I understand that in many cases, work schedules don't accommodate attending meetings and it can be hard to find childcare for young families. But, if you can find a way to make it work, do so.

It's a good idea to bring several people in a group with some ideas about specific questions

you'd like to ask. This gives you a higher chance of having your question selected and asked.

One thing that representatives and their staff are mindful about during town hall meetings is that if you give someone a mic, they'll use it as an opportunity to command the room. So, sometimes representatives and their staff ask that you write your question on a piece of paper so it can be asked succinctly and they can fit in more questions.

None of the representatives I worked for used pre-selected questions. We didn't filter out only the ones we wanted to answer, and we didn't plant questions in the audience. It's possible that this happens in these meetings, but I was never part of a team that did that.

In some cases, we had a mic that we gave to people to ask questions. If this is the case in your town hall meetings, remember that the more brief and pointed your questions, the better. Taking a lot of time to ask a rhetorical question or prove a point may seem like a good way to put pressure on your representative, but it's frustrating for others in the audience and it's not effective if you want to have a conversation about a topic. It's okay to question the logic of a policy and to be critical, but make sure there is a specific question.

Staff are usually in attendance at town hall meetings, so you can take a few moments before or after to talk to them.

Sidenote: If you are a business owner or run an advocacy group, it's worth reaching out to congressional staff about setting up a town hall meeting at your place of business or about a

specific topic. If you can help facilitate a venue and provide a good audience, it's something that most staff would be amenable to. We often had informal talks with employees at local businesses and the representative answered questions. In fact, my bosses liked these meetings much more than formal presentations from executives.

IN-PERSON MEETINGS

If you have a group of people who are all concerned about a specific issue, consider setting up a meeting with a staffer to talk about your concerns as a group. In most cases, it's not feasible to go to Washington, D.C., to speak to the representative, so start with a meeting with a staffer. These meetings can be set up with a field representative or legislative staffer in advance.

It's easy to set up these meetings—just make a phone call to the state office closest to you. You can ask to speak with the person in charge of the legislative issue you'd like to discuss. Let them know that you are part of a group of concerned constituents and that you'd like a 15- to 30-minute meeting with a staffer.

If your group has a specific expertise, let the staffers know. I had meetings with groups of physicians, lawyers, teachers, engineers, farmers, small-business owners, and many others. If legislation affects you and your community, your representative needs to hear your perspective.

At these meetings, you'll need to be prepared with what you'd like to bring up as well as your specific call to action. And, keeping with the theme of the most effective ways to get your

message across, be prepared to share your personal stories.

If you'd like to leave some sort of information or a fact sheet behind, feel free to do so. However, don't leave anything too long. One to two pages is a good balance between enough information to digest but not so much that it's overwhelming.

If you get to know the state office staffers, you'll be able to develop relationships and know better how to communicate with them. Don't be afraid to ask about the issues the representative cares about the most or how best to communicate with them. It's information most staffers are willing to give and it will help you shape your message and its delivery.

During your meeting, be brief and polite. Don't take up more time than you'd planned and make sure that if you're coming from a place of opposition, you signal your respect and desire for sincere dialogue.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

I disagree with my representative and they will never change their position to agree with me. Should I still call?

Yes. We are all in danger of existing in an echo chamber. During my time working in Congress, we often heard from people in the extremes. More moderate or respectful people didn't often take the time to call. In every instance, I would have preferred listening to and having a discussion with a respectful constituent who disagreed with our position over being yelled at by someone who agreed with us. (Yes, that happened a lot). Constituents who let us know why they disagreed had important things to say and we didn't hear from them enough. So, it's crucial to let your representative know that you're paying attention and that you disagree.

I agree with my representative and like what they are doing. Should I still call?

Yes. Offering encouragement and suggestions to your representative is important. It's not fun to only take calls when people are upset about your position. It's good to hear from constituents who agree with you and want to thank you for your vote or position on an issue.

Should I call the Speaker of the House or the Majority Leader in the Senate?

That's up to you. They do have contact forms on their websites and phone numbers for their leadership offices. If you are going to reach out, use those numbers and forms rather than the phone numbers or forms for their

state offices and D.C. office meant for their constituents. I never worked in a leadership or committee office, so I'm not sure how they tally or record public opinions. Just make sure you have a targeted question and that you are calling the proper office.

Did these tactics ever work in your offices?

The most notable change in position from a lot of phone calls and emails was SOPA in 2012. This was an internet privacy bill that was championed by some in the tech community, but opposed by sites like Reddit, Google, and Wikipedia. They launched a blackout campaign and encouraged their users to contact Congress.

This resulted in the bill being stalled in the House Judiciary Committee until the representatives could make improvements to the bill.

That's one specific example. However, I've heard others from committee and congressional staffers. Many pieces of legislation introduced stem from a particular problem or pattern that emerges from constituent communication.

Can I use these tips with my state legislator or city council member?

I never worked on a state or city level, so I can't speak from experience. However, I've found that nearly all levels of government work the same. State legislators often don't have any staff, so you can arrange in-person meetings with them easily. City councils meet often and it's easy to attend public meetings and get on the agenda. Also, having a group of like-minded individuals always strengthens your position and makes a greater impact than trying to go it alone.

I'm disabled and can't make phone calls. Will my voice still be heard?

Yes, please still send an email or a letter or whatever you can do. The delivery is secondary to your individual message. Make sure your message is heartfelt and personal. It will be read and responded to just the same as a phone call, and you shouldn't ever feel discouraged from using those methods to communicate.

Do Twitter or Facebook really accomplish nothing? Some representatives respond.

I still think it's worth sending a tweet or leaving a Facebook comment, but don't stop there. Remember, Congress has a lot of catching up to do. So, take your political opinions to Facebook, but also use your phone to actually make a call if you can.

If I'm a regular citizen, can I talk to a legislative aide?

Yes. If you'd like to talk more in-depth about a policy issue, just ask. This won't be the case for most callers, but if you have an expertise or particular way that a legislative issue will impact you, make contact with the people in charge. In most cases, they'll appreciate your opinion and want to know more about your story. There isn't much more to it than just asking to speak to them and giving them short but fact-filled emails or phone calls.

Should I call every day? I don't have time for that.

Only call or email once per issue. It saves you from burning out and it gives the office time to talk to other people. Don't feel like you have to constantly jam the phones.

Are voicemails as important as phone calls? Should I leave a message or call back?

If you get a voicemail recording, leave a message. If you want to follow up with a phone call later, that's fine too. When we had lots of voicemail messages, we had a staffer or intern go through them, make a note of the position and location of the caller, and tally the call along with the other calls we received.

What if their voicemail boxes are full and I can't get through?

If you are calling your representative's office and can't get through because it's busy and their voicemail box is full, it's best to send an email. Take some time to craft a personal message and try as much as possible to not rely on scripts. If there isn't an email form available and it has been a few days of busy signals and full voicemails, send a personal letter with a stamp.

Where do faxes fit into the mix?

Offices generally don't have dedicated fax machines. Our offices had multifunction copy machines that we used to send faxes—yes, I sent lots of faxes in the 21st century. However, we didn't print out our faxes. Instead, we had sent to an email inbox that we checked and put with our other letters. We rarely got faxes that had any kind of personal message attached to them. Usually people who sent faxes had the fax numbers for every member of Congress and sent the same message to every one of them. In these cases, we deleted them. I'd recommend sticking to phone calls, emails, and personal letters.



CONCLUSION

If you get one lesson from this guide, it should be this: know who your representative is, what they do, and how to contact them.

One of the best things about social media is also the worst things: bad and good information spreads quickly. Before you make your phone calls, do some research to determine if you're calling the right person about the right issue. In most cases, if you call the wrong office they will still talk to you, but your message will go unheard. To make a difference it takes a lot of people communicating to their representatives about how the laws they are writing affect you. So, use those stories to your advantage and make the calls and write the letters when it can make the most impact.

Please take the time to be more engaged with your representative. It's uncomfortable to call someone when you disagree with them, but I think you'll find that most staffers are willing to talk and to listen. Use the phone, email, and letters to get responses on a wide variety of topics and encourage your friends to do so as well.

CALLTHEHALLS

CHECKLIST

RESEARCH

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Find your representative here: <http://house.gov/representatives/find/>

My representative is: _____

- ☐ Bookmark their website for easy access later.
- ☐ Save the phone numbers for both their D.C. office and state office closest to you in your phone.
- ☐ Sign up for their email lists if they have a form on their websites.
- ☐ Follow their social media accounts.

SENATE

Find your senator here: <http://www.senate.gov/senators/contact/>

My senators are: _____ ; _____

- ☐ Bookmark their websites for easy access later.
- ☐ Save the phone numbers for both their D.C. offices and state offices closest to you in your phone.
- ☐ Sign up for their email lists if they have a form on their websites.
- ☐ Follow their social media accounts.

FINDING YOUR NICHE

These are the issues most important to me: _____

ASK YOURSELF

How much time per week do I have to devote to volunteer and advocacy work?

Which advocacy groups are in my area?

These are the advocacy groups and nonprofits I want to work with:

MAKING YOUR PERSONAL SCRIPT

My name is _____, and I am from _____, _____ (city, state).

List the reason you are calling and then condense it to one or two sentences:

How does this legislation or issue affect you personally?

What is the call to action for your representative? Do you want a statement, cosponsorship of a bill, a vote, or something else?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Emily Ellsworth. I worked for Congress from 2009 to 2012 under two representatives from Utah—Congressman Jason Chaffetz (UT-03) and Congressman Chris Stewart (UT-02).

I worked in the state offices in Provo and Salt Lake City. When I worked for Congressman Chaffetz, I was his district office manager. My primary roles were training interns, answering phones, writing letters, and meeting with community leaders and constituents in the district.

In 2012, Congressman Stewart hired me as his constituent services manager. I did many of the same jobs, but my main focus was casework. Casework in a congressional office means that when constituents had specific problems with a federal agency such as immigration, Veterans' Affairs, Social Security, or any other federal department, I acted as a liaison between the constituent and the federal government.

I worked on hundreds of cases during my time as a staffer. It is one of the most emotionally difficult jobs in a congressional office, but it provided a unique opportunity for me to learn about some of the most significant problems our constituents were facing.

I worked for a Republican office, but I recognized that many of the people visiting my office and calling me did not and would not vote for my boss. However, I always tried to listen and have a conversation with everyone who came to me with questions and concerns. After six years of taking calls, holding meetings, and writing letters, I learned a few things about the most effective way to get the ear of an elected official.

Regardless of your party affiliation, the tips and information contained in this guide are useful for beginning to engage in a conversation with your representative. I hope you'll use them and start to become more involved with government on a local level.

Since leaving Congress, I've worked in marketing and public relations. I'm currently a freelance writer, editor, and social media marketer. I am still involved in local politics and hope to continue doing so for as long as I'm living in Utah.

You can learn more about my work on my website: www.emilyellsworth.com.