THE ADVOCACY GUIDE

Get your voice heard in Congress!

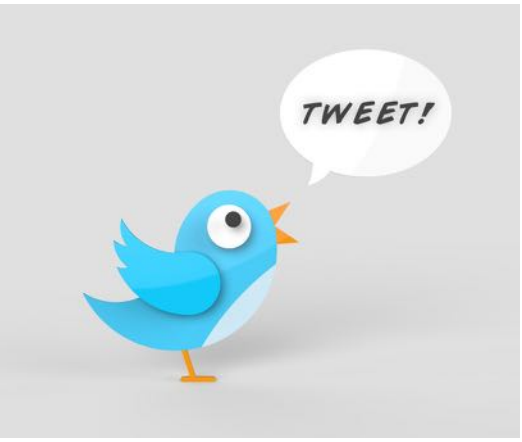


TABLE OF CONTENTS

3
How Congress Works

9
How To “Win Friends And Influence Staffers”

14
Six Steps To Creating An Awesome Advocacy Plan

20
How To Contact Congress

Chapter One

How Congress Works

If you are going to change the system, you must first understand how it works.

How Congress Works

You don't need to know every member of Congress or every step of the legislative process to be able to influence Congress.

But there are a few things you need to know that will help you plan and execute the best advocacy strategy for your issue.

Here are the five things you must know to be an effective advocate and influence your member of Congress:

#1 Politicians Want To Be Re-Elected

A recent analysis of members of Congress found that most of their day is spent on election activities like fundraising, attending district events, conducting press outreach, and meeting with their voters.

Members of Congress focus on raising money because 90% of the time, the candidate who raises the most money wins the election.

The member's office only cares about people inside their district or state because they are the only ones who can vote for (or against) them.

The press often criticizes Congress for taking long "recess" breaks, but the members have to spend a lot of time back home meeting with their constituents because that is the best way to engage with voters.

They spend a lot of time focusing on their voters because they are the ones who will re-elect them.

This is why the majority of Americans disapprove of Congress but 87% of incumbents were re-elected in the 2018 mid-terms.

Good advocates know how much Congress cares about re-election and use it to their advantage.

Every interaction you have with your member of Congress and their staff needs to focus on convincing them that supporting your issue will help them to get re-elected.

#2 Government Was Designed To Be Difficult

The Founding Fathers built a system of checks and balances to make sure that everybody had a voice in the political process.

They wanted to ensure that the minority opinion had a chance to be heard and policies would not be passed based on a mob mentality or the whims and impulses of a few politicians.

Congress consists of 535 elected officials from different states and congressional districts across the United States.

Each member has their own priorities, their own unique constituents, and their own special interests unique to their districts. Congress has often been described as 535 small businesses operating within a larger body.

That is why getting a new law passed is difficult: only about 2-3% of bills written get signed into law. There are many roadblocks each bill has to overcome and stakeholders that need to comment on the new policy.

While we often complain about Congress being inefficient, the system is in place for a reason and helps protect our democracy.

It is vital to keep this in mind when advocating for your issue so you do not give up when faced with the many obstacles you will certainly encounter.

Take a look at this infographic from The Brookings Institute that shows all the steps it takes for a bill to become a law.

Looking at this, it is no surprise bills introduced in Congress are extremely difficult to get signed into law.

But don't give up!

There is a story about a nonprofit who had been advocating for a new policy for over nine years.

They had made great progress convincing members of Congress that their issue was important, but the bill they were working on had not been passed.

Close to giving up, they held a meeting to discuss working on a different policy and shifting their strategy to lobbying for the issue at the state level.

After much debate, they decided to keep fighting for the law, and in year ten, the policy passed.

Their issue now gets over $100 million dollars each year in funding and the new policy has had a tremendous impact on their issue.

If they had given up, their nine years of work would have been for nothing

(Source: The Influence Game).

#3:Congressional Committees Are Very Important

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate are divided up into committees in order to make their work more efficient.

The most important committees are the standing committees which are permanent and handle the day-to-day business of Congress.

The House of Representatives has 20 standing committees and the Senate has 16 standing committees:

Each committee has a chairperson, or chair, who controls what legislation gets "marked up" and voted on by the committee members. These committee chairs are chosen by the political party in power and are influential on the legislative process and the issues that their committees oversee.

Your elected official might be enthusiastic about an issue, but without the support of the committee chair, there is no hope for your issue to move forward.

There are also "Conference Committees" which are temporary congressional committees formed to reconcile differences when the House of Representatives and the Senate pass two different versions of similar laws.

If you want to be an influential advocate, you have to learn about the congressional committee system and which committee oversees your issue.

#4:Congress Passes Appropriations Bills Every Year

Most advocates focus their efforts on sweeping policy changes or large new government programs. While noble, their efforts will most likely be wasted because of how difficult it is to get a new piece of legislation passed.

The best place to start is the appropriations process. Appropriations bills have to get passed every year or the government shuts down.

Because these bills are so important, it forces Congress to compromise.

If you want your issue to break through, find out what appropriations subcommittee oversees your cause and advocate for more funding.

You will have a better chance at success, and the extra funds have the potential to make a big difference for your issue.

#5: Congress Does Make Every Decision

The best advocates know that limiting your focus to the United States Congress is shortsighted.

Political appointees like cabinet officials and agency leaders are also important to target in your advocacy efforts. They enact a lot of changes that do not require a new law or an act of Congress.

Folks in the Senior Executive Service can sometimes be even better targets. These are career government employees who have worked their way up to senior management.

Government employees have a lot of influence over policy, make important decisions, are easier to get hold of, and are more likely to listen to your concerns.

And unlike political appointees, they will continue to work on your issue when the next president comes along.

Also, don’t forget about your state and local governments!

State and county legislators are often easier to reach, and state governments are the proving grounds for ideas that make it to the federal level.

Chapter Two

How To "Win Friends And Influence Staffers"

You can influence another person's behavior by changing the way you treat them.

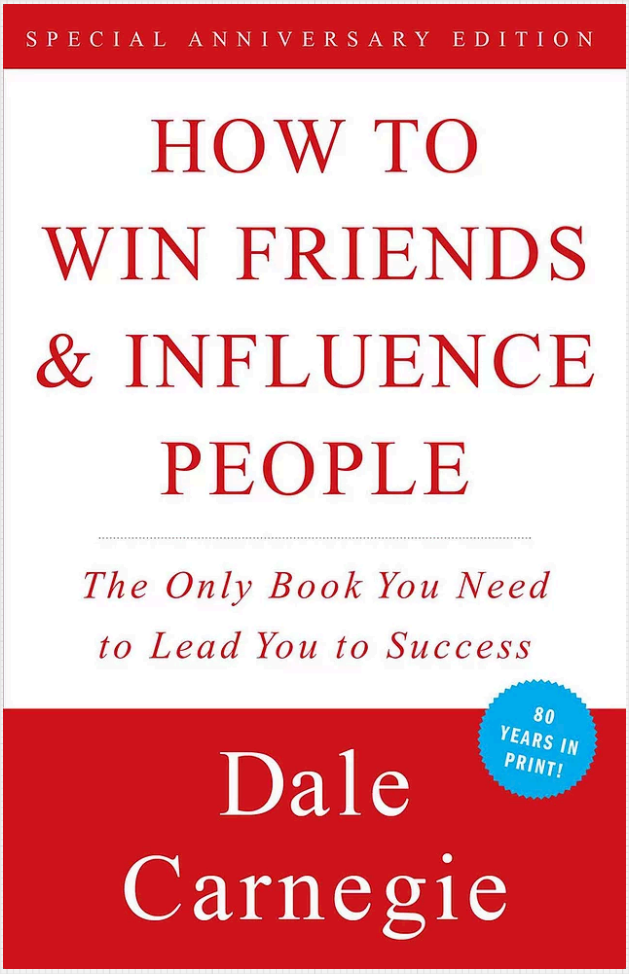
How To "Win Friends And Influence Staffers"

Congressional staffers are extremely influential in the legislative process.

They give advice on how their member of Congress should vote, they make decisions on what should and should not be included in the legislative text, and they make recommendations to their boss about what he or she should focus their attention on accomplishing.

Staffers are also extremely influential because they work with staffers in other offices and can influence their decisions too.

If influencing your member of Congress is the most effective way to get something done on Capitol Hill, then influencing his or her staffer is a close second.



But how do you influence somebody who works for a member of Congress?

In 1936, Dale Carnegie wrote the book **How to Win Friends and Influence People**. His book was the first best-selling self-help book ever published and has sold over 30 million copies worldwide. In 2011, it was named the 19th most influential book ever written and the lessons found in it are still relevant today.

Carnegie's book uses basic principles of psychology and human behavior to teach the reader how to influence people to your way of thinking and increase your ability to get things done.

It's worthwhile to examine some of the book's themes and apply them to your interactions with members of Congress and their staff because what was written in 1936 still applies today.

Tip #1: Don’t Criticize, Attach, or Humiliate

As Dale Carnegie points out in his book, when people are criticized or scolded, they never respond well. They end up resenting their critic and immediately view them as opposition or an enemy.

There is a famous story about the National Peace Corps Association, an organization that advocates for higher funding for the Peace Corps.

One day, a representative from the group went to a fundraiser for a senator who oversees the appropriations committee controlling the Peace Corps budget.

The group had been calling and writing his staff and were upset that they had not convinced his office to support higher funding for the agency.

When the advocate approached the senator to talk about the budget, his anger showed, and he came across as rude and aggressive in front of his supporters.

Even though the senator was somebody who typically would support the Peace Corps, because he was scolded in front of a group of supporters, he immediately resented the individual and his cause.

While the advocate later wrote an apology letter, the damage had already been done. People close to the senator reported that he was so enraged by the incident that he reduced the budget of the Peace Corps by $50 million.

This is why you never criticize, condemn, or complain. It might feel good to get your frustration out, but it will most likely end up doing more harm for your cause than good.

Tip #2: Say Thank You

Carnegie writes in his book, “Honest appreciation brings out the best in people, and is such a more effective tool than criticism.”

Finding ways to thank staffers for their work and efforts is a much, much, MUCH more effective strategy than humiliating or verbally attacking their member of Congress in public.

When you thank members of Congress and their staff for a job well done, they'll feel good about the accomplishment and want to recreate that feeling.

They will then be more inclined to support another issue because of your gratitude.

You can also publicly thank them in an op-ed or social media post. This will enhance their appreciation because it is politically beneficial as well.

Take this advice, you will be 1,000 times more successful in your advocacy efforts than if you try to force people to see your way by criticizing and insulting them.

Tip #3: Be a Partner, Not an Enemy

To get a congressional staffer to work on your behalf, think about what he or she wants most, and then see how your issue can help meet the staffers desire.

According to Carnegie, “When we can combine our desires with their wants, they become eager to work with us, and we can mutually achieve our objectives.”

Congressional staffers are just like the rest of us; they want to do a good job for their bosses. Anything you can do to help them succeed in their job is going to go a long way to building trust and starting a relationship.

Once you have established a relationship with a staffer, keep them updated if there is an event in your district the member of Congress might want to attend, forward them an occasional article in your local paper that is relevant to a policy they work on, or let them know how an upcoming vote is going to impact people in your district.

These types of interactions will make the staffer more eager to work with you.

Tip #4: Mention the Member's Reputation

If you tell the member of Congress, or his or her staff, that they have a good reputation for something, they will want to embody those characteristics and will work hard to live up to them.

For example, if you start off a meeting by saying, "Thanks for meeting with me. You have a great reputation back home for standing up for what is right," they will immediately be motivated to live up to those ideals.

Tip #5: Let The Staffer Talk

People enjoy talking, so you must work hard to be a good listener. After you have made your pitch, let the staffer rationalize and talk about the idea because it will sound much better to them in their own words.

Tip #6: Lead The Staffer To Yes

If you and your member of Congress do not see eye-to-eye on an issue, emphasize and highlight the things you do agree on. One trick is to ask them simple questions where they will always answer yes. Starting off by getting the staffer or member of Congress to answer yes will increase the likelihood of him or her saying yes later on. For example, you can start a conversation by asking them, "Can I tell you about a policy that will lead to more jobs in your district?" or "Would you support a policy that is proven to help out our veterans?"

Tip #7: Talk About The Staffers Interests

If you speak with a staffer or a member of Congress, ask about what they are interested in. When you ask people about their interests, they feel valued. When people feel valued, they, in return, will value you. The best thing to do is find out what their interests are beforehand.

For example, if your member of Congress also represents Hershey, PA, talk about chocolate. If their Alma Mater is good at football, ask them about the upcoming season. Try to find out what interests them and bring it up naturally in the chat.

Chapter Three

Six Steps To Creating An Awesome Advocacy Plan

By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail

Six Steps To Creating An Awesome Advocacy Plan

The most important thing you can do before conducting any advocacy activities is to develop an Advocacy Plan.

An Advocacy Plan will guide your work, give you important goals to meet throughout your advocacy campaign, give you a map to follow in order to be effective, and it will ensure success in your advocacy goals.

To help you with your advocacy planning, we have created the following six steps for you to follow to develop a foolproof advocacy plan:

Step 1: Choose A Policy Issue

The first step is to find the issue that is most important to you.

It may seem like common sense, but this is where most people start off on the wrong foot. It can be hard to focus all of your passion and energy onto one issue, but you will be more successful if you do.

If you are constantly writing your member of Congress and their staff with a different issue every week, you run the risk of getting pegged as somebody who cannot be pleased no matter what happens.

But, if you decide on one issue that you are passionate about, and only focus on that issue, your voice will be stronger.

Additionally, as we discussed before, influencing Congress takes a lot of work. Many people spend their whole career advocating for an issue and never see any substantial progress. You face an uphill battle just trying to get one issue on the radar; you are setting yourself up for failure if you have two or more issues.

Choosing your passion is an incredibly important step in your quest to become an unstoppable advocate. If you pick an issue that is simple and relevant, you'll find much more success.

If you cannot decide on an issue, try looking at the website of your member of Congress.

On most members' websites, they list the issues that they are most passionate about. If your passion aligns with an issue that your member cares about, then it might be a good opportunity to work with your member of Congress on that issue.

It is much easier to get a representative to go from a supporter to a champion than it is to have them change their stance on an issue. (Being labeled a flip-flopper is the kiss of death for a politician.)

If you are lucky enough to be represented by somebody who is the chairperson of a committee or subcommittee, they are in a position of power to do something about your issue. You will have a much easier time dealing with that person's office than somebody who has no committee relationships.

If you live in a congressional district that is 90% Republican, you are going to have a hard time focusing on something like increasing funding to Planned Parenthood.

Similarly, if you live in an urban center with 90% Democrats, picking a traditionally conservative issue like welfare reform might not be your best bet. If you are from a relatively moderate district, avoid supporting or working on issues on the extreme of either end of the political spectrum.

Step 2: Make Your Issue Personal

Once you have picked your issue, it is important that you articulate why the issue is important to you.

Many congressional staffers enjoy learning about policy and will appreciate a well-thought-out argument and the statistics to back it up. However, if you really want to get your issue to resonate through the halls of Congress, you need to have a personal and relatable advocacy story — something that puts a human face on the issue.

Ask yourself why this issue matters to you, and craft your story into a powerful anecdote you can share with staffers.

Writing down your personal story allows you to reflect on why the issue matters to you and how to best tell your story.

Members of Congress and their staff are super busy, so you really only have a short amount of time to get their attention. Write your story down and shorten it as much as you can without losing any of the meaning. Being concise is key!

Step 3: Become A “Subject Matter Expert”

Becoming a "Subject Matter Expert" is an important part of advocacy.

If you know an issue well, whether through a hobby or your profession, you could easily become a resource for your member of Congress.

Let staffers know they can reach out to you if they have any questions. Since Congress is spread so thin, they rely on SMEs for help with forming policies.

The more research about the policy you do now, the more likely you are to get results. Here are some resources to get you started on your search for issues, legislation, voting records, and more:

GovTrack was started as a hobby in 2004 to help Americans participate in government. Today, their vast database allows you to research specific bills, learn about each member of Congress, search voting records, and gain perspective on each piece of proposed legislation.

Congress.gov is Congress’s official resource, with much of the same information. It’s a little harder to navigate than GovTrack but tends to be more thorough.

Opensecrets is The Center for Responsive Politic's website that tracks money in politics and its effect on US elections and policy. They have a searchable database of all organizations currently lobbying Congress; you can use their website to find out who might oppose your issue as well as potential partners.

Congressional Research Service (CRS) is a research arm of the Senate and the House of Representatives. They provide public policy research and legal analysis for congressional staffers and members of both the House and Senate, regardless of their party affiliation.

Step 4: Create a legislative "Ask"

One of the most important things you can do for your issue is to come up with a solid “ask.” Since members and their staff have so much on their plates, it is important to give them a clear task to complete on your behalf.

This could be as simple as co-signing a piece of legislation or including an issue in their annual appropriations letters to their colleagues on the appropriations committee.

Here are some examples of asks that you can use in your advocacy work. You can ask your member of Congress or your Senator to:

- Co-sponsor a bill,
- Include a funding request in their annual letter to the appropriations committees,
- Speak about your issue on the House floor,
- Hold a Senate hearing on your issue,
- Vote yes or no on a specific Bill,
- Vote yes or no in a committee markup,
- Add an amendment during a markup,
- Publicly support an issue,
- Make comments about your issue at a local event,
- Meet with influential constituents to discuss the issue you are advocating for.

Here are some questions you should answer before developing your ask:

How does the issue split down the political aisle?

It is important to know how both sides of the political spectrum feel about your issue and why they might support or oppose changing legislation.

How has your member of Congress voted previously on issues related to yours?

If your elected official voted in favor of your issue, great! If not, then you might have more work to do to convince them to fight on your behalf. Either way, it's good to know whether a similar issue has come in front of your member before, how they voted on it, and why.

Is there legislation already in action for your issue?

If there is already legislation out there, make sure your member knows about it. If you want them to co-sponsor a bill, you will need to bring a lot of information on the specific piece of legislation to make their job as easy as possible for them. If there is no legislation, find out whom the best person to write a bill would be.

What committees and subcommittees deal with your issue?

Members of Congress are more likely to help you with your cause if they sit on the Congressional committee or subcommittee that has jurisdiction over the issue.

Step 5: Practice, Practice, Practice

A simple slip-up, such as using the wrong tone of voice or giving a wrong statistic to a staffer, can do irreparable harm to your cause.

This is especially important when calling your member of Congress, attending an in-person meetings, or speaking at a local event.

Emails and letters to Congress require practice to do well, but at least you have an eraser or delete key if you need it. With in-person meetings and other live events, it is vital to be prepared.

Practice talking to your friends or family about the issue. Some of the best advocacy occurs during casual conversation, so being able to talk about the issue without a script is critical.

You can also have other people read your letters or talking points and give you suggestions on how to make a stronger argument.

Finally — just do it. You will be happy you did when the time comes to give it live and you must think on your feet.

Step 6: Partner With Others

The average congressional district has over 700,000 people, so one person is going to have a hard time changing a member of Congress's mind if they are going at it alone.

That is why finding groups and organizations to partner with will be key to your success.

To find other organizations working on your issue, a simple Google search is your best bet. This will give you a list of civic organizations to reach out to, most of whom will be happy to hear from passionate individuals who care about their work.

Research the organizations beforehand to see what issues they are advocating for and, if it aligns with your cause, how you can participate in their efforts.

It is also helpful to think about nontraditional partners who would care about the issues that you are passionate about. So try to find groups groups who might care about your issue, even if it is for a different reason than you.

Chapter Four

How To Contact Congress

The 12 ways to contact Congress,
ranked worst to first.

#12 Mobile Apps

In the last two years, there has been an influx of new apps and websites designed to help you view issues before Congress and comment or vote on policies on their platform.

Some of these platforms take it a step further and allow their users to send messages their members of Congress and their Senators.

These online platforms are handy if you want to stay on top of the issues and hear other people's opinions, but they are not a good way to contact Congress.

Messages through these websites are impersonal and flood Congress with unauthentic messages from people who can not be verified as constituents. Some folks on Capitol Hill have also stated that people do not trust these platforms because they have underlying partisan motives.

While tech entrepreneurs and Silicon Valley startups are creating innovative ways to make contacting your member of Congress easier, congressional offices are now flooded with impersonal messages from untrusted sources.

This is counterproductive to their mission because all the noise makes it harder for an individual voice to break through.

#11 Petitions

Online petitions are nearly a dime a dozen these days. Still, when one pops up in your newsfeed, it is hard to resist the simple act of adding your name to the cause. At the end of the day, what is the harm?

The problem is, online petitions do not work at impacting legislation.

A study from Pew Research Center found that the petition site, "We The People," which allowed Americans to sign petitions to the president had "limited legislative impact."

The research only found "three instances where petitions led to concrete policy outcomes," even though there were a total of 38.5 million signatures on more than 473,000 distinct issues.

Some fans of online petitions assert that they help build an audience that is engaged in an issue. This might be true if the petition is followed up by more impactful actions by an established organization, but the petition alone does very little to persuade elected officials.

It is, however, worth pointing out that starting a petition seems to be effective when they target large corporations that sell to consumers.

#10 Form Emails

Form emails are similar to petitions, but the difference is they send a pre-written email message to your elected officials. People who fill these out might be misled to thinking that these make a difference, because writing a letter is a good way to reach out to Congress.

However, this could not be further from the truth. ***Sending a message that is prewritten is not an effective way for you to get your voice heard on Capitol Hill.***

First of all, these messages are very impersonal, so most of the time they do not result in a response from the member of Congress's office.

Second, congressional staffers have stated they do not trust these types of messages because there is no way to verify that these messages come from an actual human being and not a computer. Unless you follow up with an authentic message, your form email will be dismissed and not considered.

Lastly, these types of messages can be easily ignored. Sometimes offices respond to them, but there is no harm if the office ignores these messages. If you write a personal letter to your member of Congress, however, you will almost always receive a response and your opinion will almost always be recorded and considered.

#9 You Tube Videos

There have been many attempts to create a video and post it on YouTube about an issue or a policy in order to get the attention of elected officials in Congress.

Sometimes the video comes from an advocacy group that thinks if their video goes "viral" it will catapult their issue front and center and get the attention of lawmakers.

For example, the video to the right was done by the Service Year Alliance.

It featured their members dressed up in dinosaur costumes running around D.C. warning that their program might become extinct because of a low funding request by the Trump Administration.

Another advocacy group convinced a former senator to dance to “Gangnam Style” while a guy in a soda can costume made sure he did the moves right.

Both of these videos received a lot of media attention and were viewed over 500,000 times on YouTube.

The dinosaur video was written up in USA Today and the Gangnam Style coke can was covered by Anderson Cooper.

Media attention might be good for fundraising efforts and recruiting supporters, but they rarely have any impact on actual legislation.

Few people on Capitol Hill pay attention to these videos and they do little to move the needle. With all the resources and costs that go into making them, we do not think they are a good use of time and money.

#8 Social Media

Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are increasingly being used by members of Congress to gauge public opinion on issues and to communicate with their constituents.

Every member of Congress has at least one social media account and posts regularly online. Congressional offices are starting to recognize the importance of social media in discussing their policy positions and explaining their actions to their voters without having to go through the press.

However, there is a lot of noise out there, so it is hard for you to stand out from the crowd. To put it into perspective, on Twitter there are around 6,000 tweets posted per second, which means 350,000 tweets per minute, 500 million tweets per day, and around 200 billion per year.

With all that racket, members of Congress are not expected to respond to every post, and your message can easily be overlooked or ignored without political repercussions.

If you are going to try to use social media to influence your elected official, you need to accomplish two goals: 1) Your representative (or his or her staff) reads your post and 2) they see that your issue has a lot of support from their constituents.

Here's the best way to ensure that members of Congress see the post:

- Tag your representative's personal account.
- If they don't have a personal account, make sure you tag their official account instead.
- Post your message to your member of Congress's favorite social media channel. Don't tag them on Twitter if they devote more time to Facebook.
- If they support the issue, make sure to publicly thank them in the comment section.

Here are some things you can do to show that your issue has support:

- Make your tweet personal. Personal tweets have a much higher chance of getting shared and liked.
- Include a good image. Posts with pictures get a lot more likes and shares.
- Use hashtags, but not too many. Research shows that posts with hashtags get more likes, but too many can actually decrease the number of likes.
- Tag an individual or organization who works on your issue in your post.
- Be funny, clever, or provocative.

Tips To Stand Out In The Crowd

Retweet, like, or share their posts. If any member of Congress posts something online about your issue that is supportive, make sure you retweet, like, or share the post with your network. It's one thing if a staffer sees another post get a lot of attention; it's better if the post they wrote gets a lot of positive responses. Also, consider commenting on it, or better yet, thank the member of Congress for their leadership on the issue. The more comments, likes, or shares the post gets, the more likely it is that staffers will perceive it as popular issue.

Ask for retweets, likes, or shares on your posts. Reach out to your network beforehand and ask them to like/share/retweet your post. If there is an individual or an organization with a lot of followers who cares about your issue, direct message them asking for them to share it. Social media posts can backfire if it looks like nobody cares about the issue. If nobody is liking, sharing, or retweeting your posts, staffers might interpret that to mean that nobody cares about your issue.

Ask a softball question. One strategy that works well is to ask a question on social media that will give your member of Congress an opportunity to talk about their work. If you ask a question like, "Why didn't you support x, y, z policy?" your chances of getting a response are slim. However, if you ask a question that will give your member of Congress a chance to highlight their accomplishments, your chances of a response are much greater. For example, say something like, "Thanks for support on x, y, z. Would you mind telling us what the next steps in the bill are and how we can support it?" Like we discussed in Day Two's email ("How to Win Staffers and Influence Congress"), being viewed as a partner is much more impactful than criticizing or humiliating.

#7 Op-Eds and Letters To The Editor

A good way to garner public support for an issue is to write an op-ed or a letter to the editor of a local newspaper.

Anyone can write one, and they provide a great opportunity to tell a personal story that could resonate with a lot of people and potentially influence your elected official.

Op-eds and letters to the editor can be an effective tool to influence public perception on an issue, especially if it is a local issue.

Members of Congress care a lot about what their constituents think, and local papers are important tools for congressional staffers to get the pulse of their district.

An op-ed or a letter-to-the-editor in the local paper is usually read by people in the congressional district.

The downside to op-eds, blogs, and letters to the editor is that they can seem impersonal. Unless the article is followed up by an increase in phone calls or letters about the issue, it might not make it on the lawmaker's radar.

While op-eds, blogs, and letters to the editor are a good way to share your personal story, if your member of Congress doesn't hear your voice or meet you face-to-face, they might not have the same impact.

If you are able to get an op-ed, blog post, or letter to the editor published, make sure you follow up with your member of Congress. You can call or write the office and let them know why you are passionate about the issue.

You can also print it out and give it to a staffer at a town hall meeting or reach out to try to schedule a one-on-one meeting as a result. Following up ensures that the office sees the piece and is able to put a human face to it.

There are many things you can do to maximize the impact of your op-ed, blog, or letter to the editor:

- Keep it short. Try to limit the piece to 1,000 words or fewer.
- Keep it as clear and concise as possible. State your issue early and be specific about what you want your lawmaker to do.
- Provide statistics. While not as impactful as a personal story, if there are compelling statistics that show the issue affects a lot of people and strengthen your argument.
- Be sure to mention your lawmaker by name. Staffers still collect "press clippings," and most offices have Google Alerts set up for the lawmaker's name. A respectful mention in the post will almost guarantee the story gets read by somebody on staff.
- Propose a solution and a call to action, ending on a note of optimism and respect.

Tips To Stand Out In The Crowd

Follow up! If you are able to get an op-ed or letter to the editor published, make sure you follow up with your member of Congress. You can call or write the office and let them know why you are passionate about the issue. You can also print it out and give it to a staffer at a town hall meeting or reach out to try to schedule a one-on-one meeting as a result. Following up ensures that the office sees the piece and is able to put a human face to it.

Get personal. Published articles are a great place to tell your personal story. Not only will your story resonate with your elected official, but it might resonate with people in your district, which has the potential to sway public opinion. Well-written personal stories get shared more, which could result in your post "going viral." Telling your personal story in a public setting is a great way to show your member how much the issue means to you.

#6 Marches and Protests

The inauguration of Donald Trump was followed by the single largest political protest in American history.

This history-making event was started by a couple different women who posted on Facebook the day after the election because they were frustrated and wanted to protest.

Within 12hours, their Facebook notifications just wouldn't stop, and they realized they had something that could be big.

The women agreed to speak on the phone and decided to merge their events and the Women's March on Washington was born.

While protests or marches can be effective, their impact usually depends on how well organizers mobilize supporters after the event, rather than how many people show up to the protest or march.

Additionally, the people organizing protests or marches are usually great at spreading the word, handling event logistics, and dealing with the media, but more often than not, they do not understand the effective advocacy strategies required to translate their support into actual policy change.

Without a smart and strategic approach, the message usually falls flat on Capitol Hill.

If most of the decisions that impact effectiveness are being made by the event's organizers, we think it is worthwhile to contact them to see if you can join their planning committee. Most of the time, the people organizing these events have a million things on their plate and will gladly welcome all the help they can get.

If you do get a seat at the organizers' table, try to make sure you do the following:

- Be bipartisan. No matter what your political beliefs are, it is important for large events to be seen as bipartisan. If not, it could mobilize the other party against you, sometimes for no other reason than to score political points.
- If you hold the protest or march in Washington, D.C., try to do so while Congress is in session.
- Invite a member of Congress from each party to speak. Members of Congress love to speak in front of large crowds, and this could be something that transforms him or her from a casual supporter of your issue to an ardent advocate.
- If you get a member of Congress to speak, try to highlight, as much as you can, how the issue impacts his or her district or state.
- Try to get local media coverage. Find a good writer on your organizing team and have them write a media advisory, which is sent out a week before so journalists and reporters can attend. Also write a press release, which is sent right after the event to summarize everything so the papers can write a story about it.

Tips To Stand Out In The Crowd

Focus, focus, focus. Make sure your protest or march has a very clear and specific message and purpose. If you try to cover every issue out there, you run the risk of diluting your argument, and, as a result, reducing your impact. Yes, including a bunch of issues will probably increase attendance, but it is not worth the damage you do by diluting focus on your issue.

Attendance matters, but not that much. Yes, a well-attended event increases the likelihood of press coverage and the appearance that the issue has a lot of supporters. However, don't let attendance drive all your decisions.

It's all about the follow-up. Many factors outside of your control will dictate how the event shapes up. If you find yourself attending a protest or march, one of the most impactful things you can do is to follow up with your representatives afterwards. Use the upcoming methods to let them know why you attended the event, why the issue is important to you, and what they can do personally to support the cause you care about.

#5 Phone Calls

Yes, making phone calls is one of the easiest ways to reach out to your elected official. It only takes a couple minutes to complete, and if you call during business hours, you are almost certain to get an actual person to answer your call.

But just because phone calls are easy to make does not make them the most effective way to contact your member of Congress.

While you are able to speak directly to a person and make your case about your issue, the person on the other end is usually an intern or a junior-level staffer.

They typically have very little influence on policy decisions as they spend most of their time engaging with constituents and learning the ropes.

Another reason why phone calls do not rank higher is that Congress gets a lot of them and there is no record except what gets logged into an excel spreadsheet or tracking system.

If you have a really powerful personal story, there is no good way for the staffer to pass the story on to somebody else.

One of the most powerful ways to use phone calls is to strategically plan for a large group of people calling at the same time about the same issue. This shows the member of Congress and their staff that a lot of people in their district care about the issue and they need to take heed to their voters.

Be careful though: phone call campaigns can backfire if not done correctly. For example, if there is a big push to get people to call their member about a certain issue but not many people call, staffers could interpret this to mean that their constituents do not care about the issue.

Whether you are calling as part of a phone campaign or you are just passionate about an issue, here are some strategies to make your phone call stand out:

- Introduce yourself and tell the person on the other end where you live.
- Keep your call focused on your issue and mention the bill number, if there is one.
- Be respectful of the staffer's time: try to keep your call under 60 seconds.
- Be kind and courteous.
- Stay away from the blame game. It is not the intern or junior staffer's fault that your issue has not been addressed.
- Write a general outline beforehand so you can stay on topic and convey the point clearly and concisely.
- Have a strong "ask." Call ahead of important votes or decisions and make sure your ask is specific. You can ask them to vote a certain way, co-sponsor a bill, or make a speech on the House floor.
- Personalize, personalize, personalize, and personalize! Never use prewritten messages. Tell your story and create your own outline.

Tips To Stand Out In The Crowd

Show them you are a supporter. If you support their boss through volunteering or simply voting for them, let them know why you support the member of Congress. People are more open to helping out if they view you as a partner and not an adversary. Be careful how you bring this up, however, as you don't want to be seen as asking for a favor in return for your support. Also, never bring up donations you have made... it is a big faux pas for staffers.

Start to build a relationship. Think of the phone call as the first step in building a relationship. Ask the staffer about their job and if they like working for their member. Ask if they are from the district and try to relate to them somehow. Building a relationship with a staffer is key to getting your voice heard. Do not be discouraged if the person on the other line is an intern. With high turnover, that individual could be a legislative director in no time.

Timing is everything. The most obvious time to conduct a phone campaign is when there is an upcoming vote on the issue. Phone campaigns can also be effective if a member of Congress recently had an in-person meeting on the issue or is close to considering a position on the issue.

#4 Write A Letter

Even though Congress gets an avalanche of personal letters every day, almost all of them are read, responded to, and filed accordingly.

Many members of Congress personally read letters from constituents, and what constituents write to their elected official is sometimes considered when the member of Congress is making a decision on an issue.

But does this mean you should spend time writing a letter to your member of Congress?

We wrote some questions for you to help you decide to write a letter to Congress or not.

Your time is your most valuable resource, so it is important to ask yourself if writing an advocacy letter will be a useful activity or a giant waste of time. There are many factors to consider before deciding if you should write a letter to your member of Congress.

1. Has your legislator already taken a stance on the issue?

If so, it is very unlikely that a member of Congress will change his or her mind on an issue. Constantly changing positions is bad for politicians because they will be labeled a "flip-flopper" by their political opponents.

2. Is the timing right?

Is there an upcoming vote on the issue you want to write about? Has the leadership of either party indicated they want to prioritize your issue during the current legislative session? Is the issue you are writing about newsworthy? If your issue is not relevant or your timing is off, your letter will most likely be ignored.

3. Will your letter elevate the issue?

Maybe your issue is not newsworthy or on politicians radar, but that does not necessarily mean you should not write your letter. If you have a cause that you think needs to be elevated, and your letter could accomplish that, then it might be worth your time to write to your member of Congress. This is especially true if your issue is a win-win or could make your legislator look good by addressing the issue.

4. Do you have an ask for your legislator?

Writing a letter without including an ask is a waste of time. Make sure there is a relevant action your member of Congress, or the staff, can take to advance your issue. Ask the member to co-sign a current piece of legislation, ask if he or she can make a speech about your issue on the House floor, ask him or her to attend an upcoming hearing on the issue or to try to speak with a member of the committee that oversees your issue.

How To Write A Letter To Your Member Of Congress

Letters are a good advocacy tool because they allow you to clearly and concisely present your position on the issue and tell your personal story. Also, writing a letter allows you to carefully plan for what you are going to say.

Here are some tips to help you write an effective letter to your member of Congress:

- Use your own words, do not use a pre-written message.
- Include a return address so the staffer knows you are from the member's district or state. They may also want to mail you a response.
- Introduce yourself and tell the reader a little bit about yourself.
- After the greeting, be clear and concise about what your issue is and what position you want your lawmaker to take.
- Be sure to back up your stance with statistics and facts. Add some data to your personal story to strengthen your argument.
- Try to show how the issue affects other constituents in your congressional district.
- Write your message in a clear and concise manner and show your member of Congress the impact a change will have on you and your community.
- If you are writing as part of a campaign from an advocacy organization, try to personalize it as much as you can.

Include your Personal Story

When drafting your advocacy letter, it is important that you articulate why the issue is important to you.

You might be inclined to write a well-thought-out argument and include many statistics to back it up. However, if you really want to get your letter to resonate with your member of Congress, you need to have a personal and relatable story — something that puts a human face on the issue.

Ask yourself why this issue matters to you, and craft your story into a powerful anecdote you can share with staffers.

How to send your message

Letters are great because they are physical, which tends to be more memorable. A personalized letter also shows the staffers and the member of Congress that you care enough about the issue to sit down and spend time writing it out. Showing that you care is important because it shows you might just care enough about the issue to let it decide your vote (i.e., a single-issue voter).

However, when Congress started receiving letters in 2001 that had anthrax and other harmful substances inside, all external letters are now subject to a very strict screening process before being delivered.

If your issue is time-sensitive, a letter may not be the best option as it could take up to a month to reach your member of Congress's office and miss the voting deadline.

That is why we recommend the fax!

We don't know many people who still use fax machines, but all Congressional offices still have them. Because of this, faxes are the best of both worlds. Faxes are delivered to the member's office instantly, and at the same time, they can show that you sat down to write a letter.

If the issue is time-sensitive, you can write a letter about it and fax it over before you drop it in the mail. Whether you send the letter through the mail or fax it to your member's office, a letter is a great way to contact Congress.

#3 Town Halls and Local Events

Local events where your lawmaker will be present, like a town hall meeting, a fundraiser, or a parade, are fantastic opportunities to meet your member of Congress and let him or her know how you and other constituents feel about an issue.

When lawmakers are not working in D.C., they are most likely back home with full schedules of town halls, parades, meetings, and fundraisers.

Town Halls are a good way to get your elected officials to see you as a person and not a statistic.

A poignant question at a town hall can lead to a constructive—and public—dialogue about your particular issue with a representative. They normally allow attendees to show their approval or disapproval of the members' positions.

Often, if the elected official is truly interested in your cause, a member of the representative's staff will follow up with you after the town hall.

Town halls and other public events are fantastic opportunities to address an issue with your elected officials, raise awareness in the community and build support for your issue among voters.

Here are tips to make sure you are an effective advocate at your local events:

1. Be persistent.

    The frequency and location of town halls vary from member to member and can sometimes be announced or changed with very little notice. Keep monitoring your representative's calendar so that you don't miss venue or date changes. Write down some questions and take them with you. It is good to have a couple of questions ready beforehand so you can be prepared if called on.

2. Be respectful.

Some people attending town hall meetings get confrontational with their elected officials. Unfortunately, this strategy can be counterproductive. Usually these tactics serve only to embolden the opposition and insult the legislator. An insulted legislator normally will not go to bat for you on an issue that you care about unless they think they will lose re-election because of it. (See more in the Advocacy Guide under the section "How to Win Staffers and Influence Congress.")

3. Write a note to your member of Congress.

If you don't get a chance to ask a question at a town hall, then ask one of the staffers to pass a note to the elected official. Make sure to include your email address so somebody from their office can respond to you.

4. Make it personal.

The fact that we keep writing this in all our materials should tell you how important it is to do. A live event is an especially important time to tell your story because the more people who hear your story, the better.

Tips To Stand Out In The Crowd

Network with staff. The best part of a town hall meeting is that the member of Congress will be in attendance with multiple staffers. Try to introduce yourself to the staffers with the goal of building a relationship with them. Exchange business cards or write a polite thank you note for them to pass on to your member of Congress.

Bring your friends. If you belong to an organization like the Rotary Club or volunteer for an issue with a nonprofit, try to recruit your friends to attend the live event. Having one passionate constituent with a personal story is great, but a large group at a town hall can go a long way towards showing the representative that a lot of his or her constituents care about the issue.

Perfect your elevator pitch. When you see your member of Congress at a local event, they are usually surrounded by people trying to get their attention. Make sure you have perfected your pitch so you can recite it quickly if you find yourself speaking with your member of. You usually only have a moment, so make sure your pitch is short and concise and make that 10 to 15 seconds count.

#2 One-on-one Meetings

One-on-one meetings are the bread and butter of great advocacy!
An in-person meeting does two things: it gives you a chance to get 15 to 20 minutes of a staffer's undivided attention and gives you an opportunity to "ASK" for something.

In-person meetings are much more personal and humanizing than every other way to communicate with your lawmaker. There is no better way to personalize your issue than for the lawmaker to see the actual people the policy or law impacts.

Another reason this is so important is that having the undivided attention of someone who can make policy changes, even if it is only for 10 or 15 minutes, is critical in this day and age.

With all the noise coming from social media, fake news stories, partisan outrage, and a press that is constantly looking for the next big scandal, getting the attention of somebody in power is like gold.

The most important step in a one-on-one meeting is actually getting the one-on-one meeting!

Members of Congress and their staff are extremely busy. They have to follow thousands of bills at a time, attend their caucus and committee meetings, and meet with their constituents and other groups in DC. Not to count for all the work they need to do getting ready for the next campaign. They also split their time between their district and Washington, D.C., which makes getting a meeting very difficult.

However, fighting for that meeting is worth it. It shows your elected member of Congress that you are dedicated and persistent for your cause. Building a relationship with constituents is very important for members of Congress because their job is to represent your interests in Congress. This is the first step in making that connection. If you are unable to get a meeting with the member, try getting a meeting with a staffer, and they will pass along your issue.

Here are the things you need to do before, during, and after a one-on-one meeting:

Before:

- Try to recruit other people in your district to come with you to the meeting. This will make it clear that this is a prevalent issue for constituents.
- Know your ONE issue inside and out: whether it's a real bill or one you'd like to propose, know the background and the language well.
- Study up on your lawmaker's voting record, past public statements, and social media posts. These can give you a good idea of where he or she stands on the issue.
- Know the lawmaker's background. Does he or she have personal or professional experience that would connect him with your cause? Be prepared and tailor your approach to their own background.
- Plan and practice your speech, and prepare to ask and answer questions.

During:

- First, thank your lawmaker for making time to meet with you.
- Bring notes if you think you need something to keep you focused on the issue.
- Print out some (short) materials to leave behind with your lawmaker and staffers.
- These might not get read, but if there is a follow-up question, they might use it to look up something.
- Don't do all the talking. Present your issue concisely, then let the member or staffer respond.
- Watch to see if the staff is taking notes. If they aren't, you've lost them. Find a way to connect with what matters to them.

After:

- Send a thank you email to whomever you met with.
- Follow the legislation pertaining to your issue and reach back out when a new bill is introduced, a piece of legislation makes it out of committee, or a full vote is coming up to remind them of your "ask" and where you stand on the issue.
- Keep building the relationship. Staying in touch with the person you met with is just as important, if not more important, than your actual meeting.
- If they take an action in your favor or complete your ask, send a second thank you note to them and to the member of Congress.

Tips To Stand Out In The Crowd

Respect the staffer's time.

I once bragged to a colleague that my meetings were going great because I was able to condense my argument to 15 minutes. He looked at me like I was crazy and said, "That is three times longer than it should be!" He told me to only talk for five minutes. Anything longer, and the staffer loses interest. He, of course, is right. The more concise you can make your argument, the better.

Play the long game.

If you can only get a meeting with a junior-level staffer or an intern, do not get upset. They still have some influence over policy. They will brief the legislative director on the meetings, and if you make a good argument, they will make the same argument to their superiors.

Don't forget about the committees.

Staffers who work for congressional committees are harder to get meetings with but are among the most influential staffers in Congress. They tend to be more policy-focused, so if you are able to get a meeting with them, be prepared to talk more about the policy and less about the personal story.

Follow up is important

Reach out to the office if and when there is an important vote coming up that pertains to your issue. If your lawmaker votes the way you asked or follows through on a request you made, send another thank you note or email. Maintaining a respectful and open relationship with the office will help you now and in the future.

Thank the staffer for their time

Working for Congress is not a glamorous job. Staffers work long hours, get little recognition, and are grossly underpaid. Many are still there despite the fact that they could make much more money working for a private lobbying firm or D.C. think-tank. They stay because they have a sense of service towards their country. A simple "thank you" for this and for their time can go a long way.

#1 Hire A Lobbyist

People who get paid to influence Congress are called lobbyists, and they have a bad reputation. But contrary to public opinion, not all lobbyists are bad.

In reality, there are "good lobbyists" out there who work on issues that benefit the public good, they just don't get talked about much on the news.

We call them "white-hat" lobbyists.

These "good lobbyists" work for nonprofits, labor unions, consumer protection groups, human rights organizations, and responsible companies. They are influential, not because they give money, but because they are good at influencing Congress.

But how are these lobbyists effective if they are not gaining influence through campaign donations? Let's take a look at what makes white-hat lobbyists effective:

1. They Know The Policies

When a congressional staffer needs background about a policy or wants advice on writing a complex bill, they reach out to the people who know the issue best. For a congressional staffer who works on hundreds of policies at once, these "Subject Matter Experts" (SMEs) are extremely valuable resources. These policy experts can wield a lot of influence because Congressional staffers call them when they have a question on an issue or a specific piece of legislation. Lobbying firms have started paying SMEs lots of money to work for them and look out for their interests when they are working with staffers on their specific policy. Most lobbyists also have subscription services like Congressional Quarterly, Quorum or Bloomberg Government, which provide valuable information and insight about what is going on in Congress.

2. They Know The Committees

Lobbyists have an in-depth understanding of the committee structure and have connections to the committee staffers, some of the most influential people in Congress. Committee staffers focus more on legislative initiatives and do not interact with constituents as much as staffers in the members' personal offices. They are typically more influential because they work directly on the committee where laws impacting your issue are being formed.

3. They Know the System

Lobbyists understand what matters to elected officials, their staff, and their unique constituent body. They know the party system, the different committee structures, and the role of the chairs. They know who the influential members are and how to influence them. Successful advocates know which offices their issue will resonate with and can save large amounts of time by focusing on what works and avoiding what doesn't.

4. They Have Spent Years Building Relationships.

An effective lobbyist will maintain the relationships they made early in their careers as well as work to build new ones. This is the main thing that separates them from average citizens... their relationships enable them to gain access to lawmakers and their staff at critical stages of the legislative process. Just being able to have a one-on-one meeting with a staffer or member of Congress at the exact right moment is a game-changer.

How To Hire A Lobbyist

Step 1: Create a lobbying campaign through our crowdfunding platform by answering a couple of questions about your issue.

Step 2: We hire an independent contractor to make sure your issue meets our Founding Principles.

Step 3: If it does, we will create a fundraising page for your lobbying campaign. You will have 100 days to raise $5,000.

Step 4: If your lobbying campaign reaches the fundraising milestone, we hire a lobbyist to lobby for your issue.

Step 5: If your campaign doesn't reach the $5,000 goal within the 100 days, we refund all donations that were made to your campaign.

Step 6: Funded lobbying campaigns will continue to raise money in order to continue the lobbying work.

Step 7: We monitor our lobbyists closely, we assist in their efforts to influence government, we update your campaign's supporters, and we build coalitions of stakeholders working on your issue.

HIRE A LOBBYIST 4 GOOD

Visit our website to find an issue you are passionate about and support one of our citizen advocates in their quest to get their voice heard in government.

Explore Campaigns