

## **Getting a busy signal when you call Congress? Here's how to get through.**

<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2017/0213/Getting-a-busy-signal-when-you-call-Congress-Here-s-how-to-get-through>

### **What is most effective?**

In-person visits are the best way to influence lawmakers who have not yet made up their mind on an issue, according to 94 percent of Capitol Hill respondents in the foundation's report, which compiled data from hundreds of staffers over more than a decade. Advocacy groups agree. You can call or email for an appointment in Washington or a district office to see the member or more likely, someone on the member's staff. Work to build a relationship over time. It's helpful also to prep a staffer in advance, including sending them evidence relevant to your position. But not everyone can make it to Washington or to a member's district office.

### **What about town halls?**

This fixture in American politics is another opportunity for face-time with a Congress member. But when town halls turn into verbal brawls – as they sometimes did at tea party town-hall protests during the Obama administration and as they have with progressives flooding GOP town halls – they can be counterproductive. Yes, representatives see that people are upset. That registers. But angry mobs can also stiffen a lawmaker's resolve, or prompt them to use telephone town halls instead of in-person ones. Congress has a recess next week, and Republicans have been advised to hire security, limit crowd size, and make sure they have a way to safely leave the building. "Nobody likes getting yelled at," says Noah Wall, national director of campaigns for FreedomWorks, the conservative advocacy group. "The way to change members of Congress's minds is to be persuasive in your argument." He notes that anger never repealed the Affordable Care Act, or "Obamacare." But when channeled to the polling booth, it produced a Republican sweep that now has the potential to repeal.

### **Should I call or write?**

Opinions differ on the benefits of calling vs. emails and other electronic communications. In its report, the Congressional Management Foundation found that individualized emails are more influential on an undecided lawmaker than are either phone calls or form emails. Personally written emails and even snail-mail letters give members of Congress a chance to hear a constituent's story, and show how legislation might directly affect them, says Brad Fitch, the president of the foundation. He says that phone calls are tabulated and produce either a "for" or "against" count – still useful, but less so. In heavy volume times such as these, voicemail stacks up and staffers – who

because of budget cuts are about what they were in 1980 – have to take notes and tabulate, and sometimes simply can't keep up. Emails are easier to count. But Bella Pori, co-founder of the new progressive advocacy group "Call Them In," thinks phoning is far more effective. The group sends timely emails with issue snippets and a script for callers to contact their lawmaker. All a recipient has to do is press the link to the phone number, and they're connected. It's perfect for young people, who hate talking on the phone and don't know much about politics, says Ms. Pori, herself a millennial. Meanwhile, a call takes up two-and-a-half minutes of an intern's day, while emails are much easier to ignore. Also, in many offices, staff rotate phone duty, so sometimes a caller actually reaches someone who works on legislation. "We've seen that calling works," says Pori. She points to Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R) of Alaska, who, along with Susan Collins (R) of Maine, were the only two Republicans to vote against Betsy DeVos for education secretary. Senator Murkowski "voted against DeVos because of calls."

### **Which issue(s) should I target?**

The kind of issue to target, and the message that accompanies it are incredibly important. Asking senators to vote against President Trump's nominees is going to be far less effective than targeting specific legislation, says Mr. Fitch. That's because Republicans control the Senate, and it only takes a majority to approve appointees – whom Republicans are generally inclined to support. Legislation that has to meet a 60-vote threshold, on the other hand, will require bipartisan support. "There will be a different dynamic at work when we're talking about building a \$20 billion wall with Mexico, than when we're talking about a cabinet official," he says. Indeed, experts suggest that Democrats need to selectively pick their issues. "It has at times been a little bit hysterical. And worse, indiscriminate," says Ross Baker, a political science professor at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ, speaking of Democrats' strategy so far. "You wear out your emotional welcome if your hair catches fire too many times."

### **What should I ask for?**

But when the time is right, it's important for individuals to be clear about what they specifically want a lawmaker to do. This is the "ask" by which members of Congress can later be held accountable. Adding the "why" – how something affects you or your area or issue – also helps influence members. One more thing can assist citizens in influencing their members, and that is to get on the email list of groups that care about certain issues. These groups are following details long before these issues reach a floor vote. There are associations for every conceivable interest Americans might have, from education to deforestation, from elder care to day care. "Everybody has a lobbyist in Washington. You just may not have met them. Find out who is actually articulating your viewpoint, and make sure you are kept informed about how legislators are acting on issues important to you," says Fitch.