

Calling Congress 101

If you intend to get involved in holding your governmental officials accountable, then you must do more than just vote. You need to read and make yourself aware of issues of the day. You need to write your elected representatives and let them know that you are watching and listening. Finally, call them. Put their numbers in your cell phone, and make it a regular occurrence that when an issue comes up that you really care about - you get on the horn and give your Congressman a call.

There are several things to remember when you call, the most important of which is - any call is a good call. Don't be AFRAID. If you screw up - who cares. Hang up and try again. Like anything else the more you do this, the better you'll get. So let's pick up the phone - and get a dialing.

PREPARATION FOR THE CALL:

1 - Who do you call?

Well, you have three state officials who you vote directly into office. Michigan State Rep, Michigan State Senator, and Governor. Know their phone numbers - enter them into your cell - and bunch them together - maybe by entering Michigan prior to the - rep name. That way you'll find them easier. At the Federal level - it's pretty pointless to call the president's office - for a number of reasons. Again, you've got three elected representatives directly accountable to you the voter; two Senators and your district's member of the House. Get these people in your cell phone as well. So, when it comes to calling - you have six solid choices at the state and national level - keep in touch with them.

2 - Know what you are talking about

Make sure that you know what you are talking about when you call. Take an issue that you are knowledgeable about. You don't have to know everything single thing about it. The person on the other end is not going to grill you for facts...they'll probably be pretty polite. There's a chance you'll be forwarded to an aid who specializes in that issue - that's good for you because they'll probably be more responsive to your needs.

3 - Write yourself an outline

Your call should center on one issue. Write up a list of supports that deal with your issue and that you'd like to cover in the conversation. Just two or three - with notes. Keep the paper in front of you for the conversation. Check them off as you address each on the call.

4 - Something Specific:

While you can call and talk in general terms about your issue, it will help your cause to have specifics that you can point to. If there is a bill in Congress that deals with your issue get the number and bring it up in the conversation. Try to know the position of the representative whom you are calling in order to be more effective. Or if you have any info from other sources make sure to have the source and the quote in front of you when talking.

5 - Find some privacy

Don't make the call while your little sister is screaming at your little brother or your mom is telling you for the fourth time to take out the garbage, or you've just discovered the dog pooped on the living room rug. Sit down by yourself where you have a little privacy, get organized and phone in.

THE CALL

1 - Ask for the Congressman

Always ask for the Congressman. "May I please speak to Senator Levin. - Senator Stabenow - Rep Hoekstra."

2 - They won't be around - so introduce yourself

You'll get a staffer, who works in the office. They usually are college political science grads getting started in the political process by handling a few specific issues. They're usually nice folks, but don't forget it can get a little monotonous answering phone calls all day long. So be polite. Tell them your name - and where you live. That way they will know that you are a constituent. While it may not work then and there to tell them you are a young person, a high school student, or new voter - it wouldn't hurt if someplace in that conversation you could make it clear that you are young and that you care about what is happening in your government. It's your best weapon!

3 - Your Issue

Be direct and put your best foot forward. You might start with:

“I have some concerns” about a bill or a decision the Congressman as made

“I am interested” in a particular issue.

“I’d like to know how the Congressman feels about” - this or that.

Get to the point to start the conversation flowing.

4 - You don’t have to tell them everything

It’s not like you have to educate the listener about the topic. You should be knowledgeable enough about it so that you sound like you know what you’re talking about. But don’t panic - it’s just a phone call. Tell them what you know, ask them what you want.

5 - Just that you called - that’s what’s important

Remember it’s important that they know how you feel. So be clear

THE GOOD BYE

1 - Once the boxes are checked

As you cover your issue, check your boxes. Once they’re checked - you sign off.

2 - Thank you

Make sure that you say “Thank you.”

3 - Name

Get a name of the staffer for future reference. If it’s a real good conversation you might follow it up with a quick thank you email or note to that person. And then you can ask for them by name next time you call.

4 - Your address

Make absolutely sure that they know you would like a follow-up letter from the Congressman - that will insure that they’ve recorded where you stand on the particular call.

STUFF TO THINK ABOUT

1 - Your call counts!

People think it doesn’t matter if you contact your congressman. That’s just not true. One phone call, two phone calls, three and four - a letter from Lansing, one from Muskegon, two from Detroit. All of this adds up. An elected representative cares first and foremost about reelection. There could be a million folks out there thinking the same thing - and if nobody calls or writes your rep never hears it. Believe me if you all contact him enough - he’ll get the message. Loud and clear! Somebody has got to start the ball rolling. Let it be YOU!

2 - BE POLITE

It doesn’t do any good to rant and rave like some drug addicted lunatic. I’m sure they get enough of them. Remember - your goal here is to make a measured, intelligent, valid point. Listen - be polite. But be firm!

3 - Don’t beat around the bush

Make sure to tell them what you think. Get to the point. The call doesn’t need to be long to be effective.

4 - Personal stories can matter

Sometimes you get a good feel for phone conversation - any phone conversation. It provides you a chance to be more personal - to tell of a personal story - if you can weave that into the phone conversation - do it! It always helps to be personal.

5 - Good luck

Your vote matters! Your letters matter! Your opinion matters! You and I are “We the People.” It’s our nation our constitution too. Hold our elected representatives accountable for the decisions that they make in our name!