

Your Right to Write

by Morris K. Udall, Member, U.S. Congress

Some Suggestions on Writing to Your Representatives in Congress

Surprisingly few people ever write to their United States senators or congressional representatives. Perhaps ninety percent of our citizens live and die without ever taking pen in hand and expressing a single opinion to the people who represent them in Congress. This reluctance to communicate results from the typical and understandable feeling that legislators have no time or inclination to read their mail, that a letter probably won't be answered or answered satisfactorily, that one letter won't make any difference anyway. Based on my own experience, and speaking for myself at least, I can state flatly that these notions are wrong.

I read every letter written to me by a constituent. A staff member may process it initially, but it will be answered, and I will insist on reading it and personally signing the reply. On several occasions, a single, thoughtful, factually persuasive letter did change my mind or cause me to initiate a review of a previous judgment. Nearly every day my faith is renewed by one or more informative and helpful letters giving me a better understanding of the thinking of my constituents.

Mail to modern-day members of Congress is more important than ever before. In the days of Clay, Calhoun, Webster and Lincoln, members of Congress lived among their constituents for perhaps nine months of the year. Through daily contacts with constituencies of less than 50,000 people (I represent a least ten times that many), they could feel rather completely informed about their constituents' beliefs and feelings. Today, with the staggering problems of government and increasingly long sessions of Congress, senators and representatives must not only vote on many more issues than early-day members, but rarely get to spend more than sixty days in their districts. Thus, their mailbags are their bests "hot lines" to the people back home.

Some Fundamentals

- Address is properly: "Hon. _____, House Office Building, Washington, DC 20515," or "Senator _____, Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510." This may seem fundamental, but I once received a letter addressed like this: "Mr. Morris K. Udall, U. S. Senator, Capitol Building, Phoenix, Arizona . . . Dear Congressman Rhodes . . .";
- Identify the bill or issue. About 20,000 bills are introduced in each Congress; it's important to be specific. If you write about a bill, try to give the bill number or describe it by popular title ["BLM Organic Act," "Toxic Substances Bill," etc.];
- The letter should be timely. Sometimes a bill is out of committee, or has passed the House, before a helpful letter arrives. Inform your representative while there is still time for him or her to take effective action;
- Concentrate on your own delegation. The representative of your district and the senators of your state cast your votes in the Congress and want to know your views. However, some writers will undertake to contact all 435 members of the House and 100 senators, who cast votes for other districts and other states. If you happen to be acquainted personally with a member from, say, Nebraska, he or she might answer your letter, but there is a "congressional courtesy" procedure which provides that all letters written by residents of my district to other members will simply be referred to me for reply, and vice versa;
- Be reasonably brief. Every working day the mailman leaves some 150 or more pieces of mail at my office. Tomorrow brings another batch. All of this mail must be answered while I am studying legislation, attending committee meetings and participating in debate on the House floor. I recognize that many issues are complex, but your opinions and arguments stand a better chance of being read if they are stated as concisely as the subject matter will permit. It is not necessary that letters be typed—only that they be legible; the form, phraseology and grammar are completely unimportant.

In the course of my years in Congress, I have received every kind of mail imaginable—the tragic, the touching, the rude, the crank; insulting, persuasive, entertaining and all the rest. I enjoy receiving mail, and I look forward to receiving it every morning; in fact, my staff people call me a "mail grabber" because I interfere with the orderly mail-opening procedures they have established. Whatever form your letter takes, I will welcome it, but to make it most helpful I would suggest the following "do's" and "don'ts."

Do's

- Write your own views—not someone else's. A personal letter is far better than a form letter, or signature on a petition. Many people will sign petition without reading it just to avoid offending the circulator; form letters are readily recognizable—they usually arrive in batches and usually register the sentiments of the person or lobbying group preparing the form. Form letters often receive form replies. Anyway, I usually know what the major lobbying groups are saying, but I don't often know of your experiences and observations, or what the proposed bill will do to you and for you. A sincere, well-thought-out letter from you can help fill this gap;

- Give your reasons for taking a stand. Statements such as "Vote against H.R. 100; I'm bitterly opposed" don't help much, but a letter which says, for example, "I'm a small hardware dealer, and H.R. 100 will put me out of business for the following reasons . . ." tells me a lot more. Maybe I didn't know all the effects of the bill, and your letter will help me understand what it means to an important segment of my constituency;
- Be constructive. If a bill deals with a problem you admit exists, but you believe the bill is the wrong approach, tell me what the right approach is;
- If you have expert knowledge, share it with your congressional representatives. Of all the letters pouring into a legislator's office every morning, perhaps one in a hundred comes from a constituent who is a real expert in that subject. The opinions expressed in the others are important, and will be heeded, but this one is a real gold mine for the conscientious member. After all, in the next nine or ten months, I will have to vote on farm bills, defense bills, transportation bills; space, health, education, housing and veterans' bills, and a host of others. I can't possibly be an expert in all these fields. Many of my constituents are experts in some of them. I welcome their advice and counsel.
- Say "well done" when it's deserved. Members of Congress are human, too, and they appreciate an occasional "well done" from people who believe they have done the right thing. I know I do. But even if you think I went wrong on an issue, I would welcome a letter telling me you disagree. It may help me on another issue later.

Don'ts

- Don't make threats or promises. Members of Congress usually want to do the popular thing, but this is not their only motivation; nearly all the members I know want most of all to do what is best for the country. Occasionally a letter will conclude by saying, "If you vote for this monstrous bill, I'll do everything in my power to defeat you in the next election." A writer has the privilege of making such assertions, of course, but they rarely intimidate a conscientious member, and they may generate an adverse reaction. Members of Congress would rather know why you feel so strongly. The reasons may change their minds; the threat probably won't;
- Don't berate your representatives. You can't hope to persuade them of your position by calling them names. If you disagree with them, give reasons for your disagreement. Try to keep the dialogue open;
- Don't pretend to wield vast political influence. Write your senators or representative as an individual, not as a self-appointed spokesperson for your neighborhood, community or industry. Unsupported claims to political influence will only cast doubt upon the views you express;
- Don't become a constant "pen pal." I don't want to discourage letters, but quality, rather than quantity, is what counts. Write again and again if you feel like it, but don't try to instruct your representative on every issue that comes up. And don't nag if his or her votes do not match your precise thinking every time. Remember, a member of Congress has to consider all of his or her constituents and all points of view. Also, keep in mind that one of the pet peeves on Capital Hill is the "pen pal" who weights the mail down every few days with long tomes on every conceivable subject;
- Don't demand a commitment before the facts are in. If you have written a personal letter and stated your reasons for a particular stand, you have a right to know your representative's present thinking on the question. But writers who "demand to know how you will vote on H.R. 100" should bear certain legislative realities in mind: (1) One major bill there usually are two sides to be considered, and you may have heard only one; (2) The bill may be 100 pages long with twenty provisions in addition to the one you wrote about, and a representative may be forced to vote on the bill as a whole, weighing the good with the bad; (3) It makes little sense to adopt a firm and unyielding position before a single witness has been heard or study made of the bill in question; and (4) A bill rarely becomes law in the same form as introduced; it is possible that the bill you write about you would oppose when it reached the floor. The complexities of the legislative process and the way in which bills change their shapes in committee is revealed by a little story from my own experience. One time several years ago, I introduced a comprehensive bill dealing with a number of matters. I was proud of it, and I had great hopes for solving several perennial problems coming before Congress. However, after major confrontations in committee and numerous amendments, I found myself voting against the "Udall Bill."

Your senators and representatives need your help in casting votes. The "ballot box" is not far away: it's painted red, white and blue and it reads "U.S. Mail."

Morris Udall

US House of Representatives

<http://www.library.arizona.edu/exhibits/udall/congrept/92nd/710915.html>

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