



CONGRESSMAN'S REPORT

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The Right to Write

Some Suggestions on Writing Your Congressman

Surprisingly few people ever write their congressman. Perhaps 90 per cent of our citizens live and die without ever taking pen in hand and expressing a single opinion to the man who represents them in Congress -- a man whose vote may decide what price they will pay for the acts of government, either in dollars or in human lives.

This reluctance to communicate results from the typical and understandable feelings that congressmen 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 ten years' experience, and speaking for myself, I can state flatly that most of these notions are wrong:

-- Let me say that I read every letter written 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 I can testify that 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 today's congressman is more important than ever before. In the days of Clay, Calhoun, Webster and Lincoln congressmen lived among their people for perhaps nine months of the year. Through daily contacts in a constituency of less than 50,000 people (I represent 10 times that many) they could feel rather completely informed on their constituents' beliefs and feelings. Today, with the staggering problems of government and increasingly long sessions, I must not only vote on many more issues than early-day congressmen but I rarely get to spend more than 60 days a year in Arizona. Thus my mailbag is my best "hot line" to the people back home.

SOME FUNDAMENTALS

Here are some suggestions that apply to all congressional mail:

**** Address it properly:** "Hon. _____, House Office Building, Washington, D. C. 20515." Or "Senator _____, Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 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 ("truth in lending," "minimum wage," 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 congressman while there is still time 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 Nebraska, he might answer your letter, but there is a "congressional courtesy" procedure which provides that all letters written by residents of my district to other congressmen 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 -- and 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 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 these "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 a 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. I regret to report that 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 and for you. And I often am not fully aware of new conditions and developments in Arizona. A sincere, well-thought-out letter from you can help fill this gap.

* **Give your reasons for taking a stand.** Statements like "Vote against H.R. 100; I'm bitterly opposed" don't help me much. But a letter which says "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 congressman.** Of all the letters pouring into a congressman'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.

3.

* **Say "well done" when it's deserved.** Congressmen 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 disagreed; it may help me on another issue later.

DON'TS

My list of "don'ts" would include these:

* **Don't make threats or promises.** Congressmen 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, they may generate an adverse reaction. He would rather know why you feel so strongly. The reasons may change his mind; the threat probably won't.

* **Don't berate your congressman.** You can't hope to persuade him of your position by calling him names. If you disagree with him, give reasons for your disagreement. Try to keep the dialogue open.

* **Don't pretend to wield vast political influence.** Write your congressman as an individual -- not as a self-appointed spokesman 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."** In a newsletter appealing for *more* constituent mail 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 congressman on every issue that comes up. And don't nag him if his votes do not match your precise thinking every time. Remember, he has to consider all his constituents and all points of view. Also, keep in mind that one of the pet peeves on Capitol 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 my 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:

- * *On major bills there usually are two sides to be considered, and you may have heard only one.*
- * *The bill may be 100 pages long with 20 provisions in addition to the one you wrote about, and I may be forced to vote on the bill as a whole, weighing the good with the bad.*
- * *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.*
- * *A bill rarely becomes law in the same form as introduced. It is possible that the bill you write me about you would oppose when it reached the floor.*

The complexities of the legislative process and the way in which bills change their shape in committee is revealed by a little story from my own experience. One time a couple of 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."

CONCLUSION

It is now September 1971, approaching the half-way point of the 92nd Congress. Before 1972 is history the House clerk will record my votes on more than 250 issues. But in a very real sense these will not be "my" votes alone; they will be yours too. There are more than 500,000 Americans in the 2nd Congressional District of Arizona but when the clerk calls the roll he calls only my name. Thus these 250 votes I cast will speak for you in the decisions our country must make in the next two years.

I need your help in casting these votes. The "ballot box" is not far away. It's painted blue and it reads "U.S. Mail."



Some of you will recognize this newsletter. Since I first sent it out in January 1967 I have had calls from around the country and have supplied thousands of reprints. A sizeable number of civic, business, veteran and labor organizations have asked for permission to reprint it in their own publications. All of this demonstrates, I think, a need for this kind of fundamental guidance and people are hungry to receive it. So in view of the fact that a quarter of America's families move each year -- many from state to state -- and the continuing growth of interest and participation in the governing process, I thought perhaps this re-issue might be timely. Thanks. --Mo

Additions to My Mailing List

Through the past 10 years my newsletter mailing list has grown from a few hundred to over 25,000. For the most part these additions have been made in response to requests from constituents who have heard about the newsletter from their friends. I would be pleased to add the names and addresses of any others who may be interested in receiving my reports. If you are not now on my mailing list or have a friend you would like to add, please write me or fill out and mail the coupon below:

(Please Print)

Name

Address

City State Zip Code