

Democracy in Action in the Internet Age

**What It Takes To Contact Congress
And Make a Difference**



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What It Takes To Contact Congress And Make a Difference

Summary

The Internet is revolutionizing the discourse between citizens and their elected representatives. Members of Congress are being bombarded with hundreds of millions of emails a year that make it through their spam filters. Even though Congress keeps refining additional filters that limit Internet access to each Member's constituency, the email tsunami continues to overwhelm Members' ability to process it. The resulting irony is that making it easier for citizens to communicate with their elected leaders is making it harder for them to get through and really be heard. The most dangerous consequence is that citizens are often cut off from contacting the most powerful Members of Congress on issues of concern simply because they reside in another state. A new channel of communication is offered by GripeGenie.com that breaks through the Congressional blockade against citizen communications and addresses the Members' main concerns about processing such messages in a responsive manner.

Introduction

The right to petition government for a redress of grievances is a cornerstone of democracy in the United States, and it – along with the right to vote – is the foundation on which civic participation is built. It has been a strongly held conviction from the founding of our country that an active and engaged citizenry is imperative for a healthy democracy. However, when the Founders included this right in the First Amendment, they never imagined something like the Internet, which has fundamentally transformed citizen participation.

The Internet has provided promising new opportunities for citizens to access and share information, organize around issues, and communicate their views to Members of Congress. Citizens are taking advantage of these opportunities in greater numbers than ever before. The demographics of the Internet increasingly mirror those of the country, though Internet users are still more likely than the general public to vote. These people are flexing their political muscle in entirely new ways which have created both challenges and opportunities for Congress.

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The Internet has already had a profoundly positive effect on the democratic dialogue between citizens and Congress, offering millions of Americans new opportunities to learn about and interact with their elected officials. The accessibility and affordability of online communications offer both sides in this dialogue the chance for a greater understanding of the other. This greater understanding should lead to a more efficient, more effective and more responsive government. It also could result in a better public understanding of Congress, chipping away at the cynicism about government that seems to permeate our society.

People are using the wealth of information online to learn more about issues, candidates, voting records, positions on issues, and candidate endorsements. They are also signing petitions, organizing like-minded citizens, and donating to both candidates and causes online – transforming the role of the Internet to an arena of citizen engagement and political participation.

Legislators have the opportunity to assess public opinion in ways not available just five years ago. Although the Internet offers Members of Congress new avenues to interact with their constituents and invite citizens to participate in the public policy process, the promise of the Internet for democratic dialogue has yet to be fully realized. In fact, congressional offices are still stymied by outdated technologies, frustrated by online grassroots advocacy tactics, and mired in paper-based communications practices.

Making It Easier To Communicate Makes It Harder To Get Through

Ironically, at a time when the Internet has made it easier than ever for Americans to participate in the national political process, it has become harder than ever for ordinary citizens to communicate effectively with Members of Congress. While many people assume that the quality of communication between Congress and the electorate has improved with the onset of email, instant messages and Twitter, the truth is that quantity has been replacing quality at an alarming rate. If something is not done, citizens may grow more disillusioned with government, elected leaders may become more removed from those they represent, and the ultimate victim could be the open and honest dialogue between citizens and Members of Congress.

It is easy to assume that the breakdown in communication is the fault of the politicians, but that's not entirely true. What has happened is that there has been a convergence in a perfect storm of an increased population, static congressional staff resources, increased mail volumes and a proliferation of grassroots advocacy campaigns. The result has been a severe deterioration in meaningful communications between citizens and their elected representatives.

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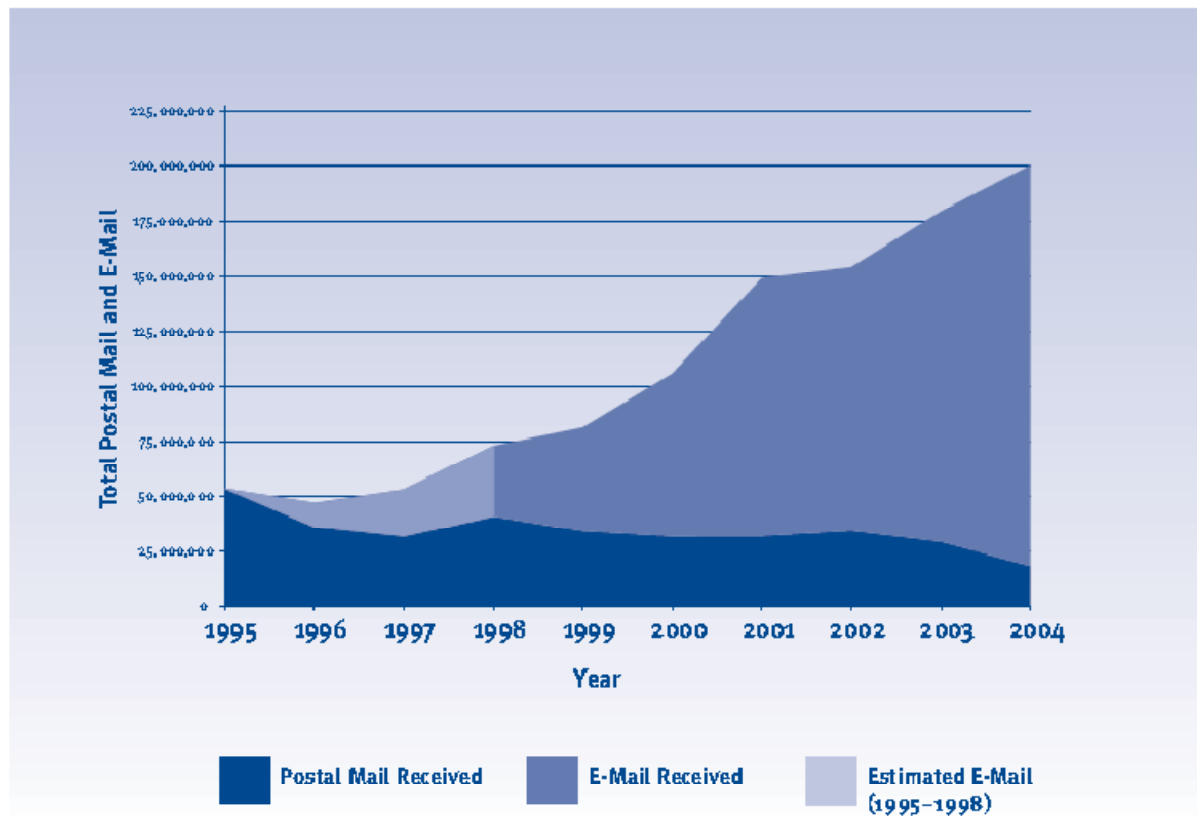
As the population of the United States has increased, so have the number of communications sent to Congress each year. Senators and Representatives now represent more people than ever before. In 1911, the year the number of representatives in the House was set at 435, congressional districts averaged about 75,000 people. Today the average district has grown to 650,000. In fact, since the 1970's, the last time congressional staff sizes changed appreciably, the population of the United States has grown by more than 100 million people, and congressional districts have grown by an average of 180,000 constituents.

In 1911, interactions between Members of Congress and their constituents occurred through in-person meetings, the U.S. mail, and the telephone. Information about public policy was slow to trickle to the general public, and organizing grassroots lobbying and communicating with Congress took longer and required greater effort than it does today.

The Internet has undoubtedly contributed to a significant increase in communications to Congress. Combined postal and email communications to the Congress have gone up nearly 300% since the introduction of the Internet to Capitol Hill in 1995. As the chart below shows, the volume of postal and e-mail communications received by the House and Senate has increased from about 50 million in 1995 to 200 million in 2004.

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Figure 3. Postal and E-mail Communications to Capitol Hill: 1995 – 2004



It is clear from this chart that e-mail is not simply substituting for postal mail; it is compounding the number of constituent communications that pour into a congressional office each month. Now, Americans have access to all kinds of public policy information any time of the day or night, and they can communicate with each other and with Congress instantly. Television, fax machines, computers, mobile devices, e-mail, and the Internet have all had a huge impact on how citizens get information about, and interact with, Congress.

When e-mails began arriving on Capitol Hill around 1995, citizens were contacting their elected representatives using their public e-mail addresses. Within a few years the novelty of this new technology started to wear off, in large part because the volume of electronic citizen communication had increased beyond the capacity of congressional offices to handle it. Citizens were beginning to take advantage of the new medium to organize coordinated electronic advocacy campaigns, which dramatically increased the total volume.

On top of the tsunami of legitimate emails from citizens and grassroots campaigns, congressional offices began receiving, like everyone else, rapidly growing volumes of commercial spam that made e-mail management extremely difficult and time-consuming. For a

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while, some offices opted not to even open e-mail, because it was so difficult to separate the constituent messages from the commercial spam.

While Members of Congress genuinely want to hear from the electorate, the rising volume of citizen communication has overwhelmed their offices. A Member no longer sits in his or her office with a letter opener in hand, or behind a computer waiting to hear the words, “you’ve got mail.” Members receive so much mail that this simply is not practical. Most Senators and Representatives are involved in the process, but usually their staff does the bulk of the work managing and responding to the communications they receive from citizens.

Realizing that e-mail was here to stay, Member offices began in 2000 to use techniques to reduce the commercial spam. At the same time, they made the cataclysmic decision to filter out messages from non-constituents. They created a more structured electronic communication system using zip code matching to ensure messages were from people living in the Member’s state or district.

Constituent verification was not very effective using regular e-mail, so congressional offices began to abandon their public e-mail addresses in favor of contact forms on their Web sites which required certain information, including the sender’s name, address, phone number, email address and zip code. In order for a message to get through, the ID information must match the information in the sophisticated databases now available to congressional offices on the occupants at every address within their district or state. If the ID information provided by the sender doesn’t match what’s in the database, the message may be blocked, sent to the spam folder or simply get deleted.

By requiring electronic contact via the Member’s web site rather than through e-mail, congressional offices have made it more difficult for citizens to contact Members electronically, and they have made certain online advocacy techniques impossible. As a result, this more structured communications system was the beginning of a technological “arms race” between congressional offices and the organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns that continues to this day.

In addition to aggressively employing e-mail filters and rules, congressional offices are developing increasingly sophisticated Web forms that require citizens to choose from a list of specific subject areas. Doing so made it easier to automatically sort and aggregate incoming messages by subject and route them to the appropriate staffer.

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Congressional offices view their actions as ensuring that the electronic environment remains a viable conduit for genuine messages from real constituents. Their view of what it means to be a genuine message from a real constituent, however, often results in blocking legitimate communication from qualified citizens with something worthwhile to say on the issues of the day.

The Misguided Muzzle on Non-Constituent Communications

Limiting communications with Members of Congress to citizens within their state or district seems like a logical enough solution to the problem of email overload. After all, the issue closest to each Member's heart is getting reelected. If they already get too many emails from their constituents, why should they bother listening to anyone else?

As it turns out, there are several good reasons. What if the citizen who lives in another state is a leading expert on a national issue that the Member's subcommittee is charged with resolving? Should that citizen be shut out of the process just because he lives in a different state? Or what if the citizen is an authorized representative of a group, such as AARP with 35 million members? Shouldn't he or she be entitled to contact the Congressional leaders on issues that concern that group? In truth, the geographic blockade is a clumsy, heavy-handed and misguided muzzle on non-constituent communications.

The reality of modern politics is such that elected officials who are likely to seek higher office (probably everyone) will listen to voters outside of their district. The same goes for elected officials who enjoy an appointment of national interest, such as a committee chairman or political party leadership position. Because they are charged with a national office, and hold the office at the pleasure of their colleagues in Congress, they will pay attention to messages from outside of their nominal district if the messages are related to their national office.

Let's say, for example, you have a strong opinion on immigration reform. Proposals for immigration reform are within the jurisdiction of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and more specifically its 9-Member Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees and Border Security, and within the jurisdiction of the House Judiciary Committee, and more specifically, its 16-Member Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law. If none of your three Representatives is on one of these Committees or Subcommittees, you may still send them a free email, but you will have a much better chance of making a difference

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if you send your message to the Members who are doing the research, holding the hearings and drafting the text of the new law on immigration reform.

A Key To Making a Difference: Contact the Right Members

Most of the actual work of drafting legislation is done in committees, and most often in their subcommittees. If you are trying to influence that process, you need to write to the committee, at least to the two leaders of the committee – the committee Chair and the ranking minority Member.

If your two Senators and one Representative are not on the committee, you should send them copies of your message anyway. It's important that they are alerted to your position and can add their support to your message to their colleagues.

More and more frequently, what Congress will do on certain issues is determined by the political leaders of the Republican and Democratic Parties. For this reason, on many issues, your best chance of making a difference is by contacting the Democrat and Republican leaders in the House and the Senate.

The Arms Race Prompted by the Form Letter Explosion

Americans who contact Congress tend to be more politically active in other ways than those who do not. Almost half of all adult Americans had been in touch with a Member of Congress in the last five years. But it is no longer the case that every citizen message to Capitol Hill is personally crafted by individuals sitting at their kitchen table with pen in hand. Most of the citizens who now contact Congress are motivated and assisted in doing so by the organizations they trust, often through organized grassroots advocacy campaigns. These political action groups usually provide significant guidance and assistance with the process of drafting and transmitting the communications.

Many congressional offices have learned that advocacy campaigns of identical form messages are not always sent with the knowledge and approval of the constituents whose names are on them and, therefore, do not warrant responses. As a result, some employ policies and practices to block, filter out, or ignore certain types of grassroots campaigns. This has led to what is essentially an arms race. Congressional offices keep looking for better ways to keep these form letters out and citizens and the advocacy community keep looking for better ways to get them in. Every action results in an escalation. Unfortunately, both sides have expended a great deal of time and resources attempting to thwart the other. What has developed is a complicated system

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that winds up thwarting the dynamics of democracy in action that has always been the bedrock of our political system.

Granted, there is a big difference between a thousand identical constituent messages arriving in a congressional office and three personally drafted letters from citizens that want their Member to know how a bill or issue personally affects their daily lives. High volumes of identical email messages basically represent a nonscientific poll of constituents' support or opposition to a particular issue. On the other hand, handwritten letters or personally drafted e-mails put a face on an issue and persuade a Member of Congress on a very personal level. The most effective grassroots campaigns, obviously, are those that produce a large volume of personalized communications. Almost all Members of Congress would agree that "One hundred form letters have less direct value than a single thoughtful letter."

Organizers of grassroots advocacy campaigns want to engage citizens in coordinated efforts to influence public policy about which they care. Their concepts of how best to do this differ, and there are some tactics that are, at best, ineffective and, at worst, counterproductive, but their efforts play an important role in the democratic process. The sheer volume of communication indicates that many more citizens are being brought into dialogue with their representatives than have been engaged before. Most of these communications, however, are merely form letters developed and promoted by the interest groups and are not unique, personal communications about issues of great personal importance to the constituent. The biggest impact of the increased communications is to clog the inboxes of Members of Congress and not to better communicate the views of citizens.

The Outlook for Democracy in Action

What is disheartening about the "arms race" in contacting Congress is that people appear to feel more disconnected from their Senators and Representatives. They do not think their Members of Congress are interested in what they have to say, nor do they think their Members try to keep them abreast of what they are doing in Congress. They also appear to doubt the trustworthiness of information from their Senators and Representatives, and they do not consider it all that informative. Perhaps partly as a result, people are relying on the organizations they trust to keep them apprised of what is happening in Congress and to help them communicate with Members.

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Mistrust does not only exist on the citizens' side of the dialogue. Congressional staffers are particularly skeptical of identical form advocacy campaigns, which they doubt have been generated with the knowledge and approval of the citizens whose names are on them.

Nonetheless, Congressional staffers report that well-reasoned letters from constituents often helped them assess the impact of pending legislation or proposals on a particular group, or on the district or state as a whole. These staffers say if their Member of Congress had not arrived at a firm decision, individualized letters would have "some" or "a lot" of influence on the Member's decision. Yet, they also believe that the Internet has reduced the quality of constituents' communications to Congress. Many staff expressed frustration that the organizers of grassroots campaigns merely coax citizens to send messages to Congress, rather than making more of an effort to educate either citizens or themselves about how to be effective advocates.

In any other industry, increases in workloads of these magnitudes would warrant commensurate increases in staff and resources. In Congress, however, this has not been the case. Congressional office buildings are already filled to capacity. Significant increases in staff would not only require significant increases in resources, but also significant increases in office space. These changes would be difficult to fund and oversee, even in a less contentious political atmosphere than recent Congresses have experienced. As a result, congressional offices will have to continue coping with the increasing volumes with the staff and resources they have.

How GripeGenie Helps Citizens Contact Congress and Make a Difference

GripeGenie provides invaluable help in contacting Congressional leaders outside your district and state. The "trick" we use to get through the Congressional blockade is to send your message by fax. Yes, fax is the technology that was considered state-of-the-art just a few years ago but is now seen as cumbersome and old-fashioned – except that GripeGenie makes it as quick and easy to use as email. Maybe even a little easier because you don't have to know the street address, web site, email address or even the fax number of any Member of Congress. You simply select the recipients, compose your message and GripeGenie does the rest.

Step 1 – Select Members To Contact

Contact Leaders in Congress on the Issue that Concerns You. Elected officials who are likely to seek higher office (probably everyone) will listen to voters outside of their district. One other exception is writing to elected officials who enjoy an appointment of national

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interest, such as a committee chairman or political party leadership position. Because they are charged with a national office, and hold the office at the pleasure of their colleagues in the legislature, they will pay attention to messages from outside of their nominal district if the messages are related to their national office.

It is also effective to contact all the Members of the committee or all the Democrats or all the Republicans. Your choice of whom to contact is ultimately a personal one. Keep in mind that you should plan to follow up with future contacts to the same Members on the same or related issues. The best way to get your point across is to establish a dialogue with Members of Congress. And remember that it's important to keep your own Senators and Representative alerted to your position so they can add their support to your message to their colleagues.

More and more frequently, what Congress will do on certain issues is determined by the political leaders of the Republican and Democratic Parties. By the time a Committee or Subcommittee is ready to vote on the matter, the issues have been decided, at least for the time being. For this reason, GripeGenie makes it easy for you to select and contact Members of Congress based on their political party or their stature as a leader of their party.

Step 2 – State Your Status

When you contact Members of Congress, you need to tell them who you are. If you are a citizen eligible to vote for them, you should say that you are a constituent. Members of Congress usually pay closer attention to letters from constituents than from citizens who reside elsewhere, unless, of course, there is another reason to give their views more attention. It is always important to alert the Member to any special status you may have as an expert, a party contributor or supporter, a stakeholder in the specific issue, or as an official or unofficial representative of a broader group of stakeholders—say, holistic moms, the medical research community, union workers, etc. But don't claim to be a representative of such a group if you are merely a member.

It is important to state right up front what your relationship is to the subject of your message and to the recipient of your message.

Your status will include one or more of the following:

- A **Citizen** of the United States
- A **Registered Voter**

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- A **Constituent** of the Member or Members being contacted
- A **Contributor or Supporter** of the Member or the Member's political party
- A **Stakeholder** directly affected by the outcome of a specific issue
- A **Representative** of some group of stakeholders affected by the outcome of a specific issue
- **An Expert** with particular and specialized knowledge about the issue
- **A Resident Alien**
- **A Foreigner**

Give your real name, address and other contact information. Most congressional offices have computer programs that provide them with frequent updates to their files on who lives at every address. The software even updates their list of constituents' telephone numbers and registered voters' email addresses and it automatically deletes email addresses of those deceased or no longer living in the district. So don't think you will get away with using a phony name, address, phone number or email address.

When a congressional office receives some correspondence, the first thing most of them look for – even before the topic – is where it comes from. If they can't validate the name, address and other contact information you provide, the system marks your message with a red flag that the name or the information may be phony. Such messages are likely to go right in the trash without being seen by anyone of consequence.

Use consistent e-mail address and contact information. For the same reason, it is important to use consistent e-mail and postal address information. In addition, you should always use your home address, rather than a work address or post office box, which might actually prevent your communication from getting through.

Like postal address information, it is important – to the greatest extent possible – to use a consistent e-mail address. While most people have more than one e-mail address, sticking to just one permits the congressional office to accurately group and track all of your communications in one record.

GripeGenie makes it easy for you to state your status at the beginning of your correspondence. We place all of your identifying information at the top of the first page and provide convenient drop-down menus for you to describe your qualifications.

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Step 3 – State Your Purpose

Cut to the chase right up front. Make it easy for the Congressional staffers to figure out what you are writing about and what you want the Member to do or not do. Do you want them to vote for some specific bill, vote against it, support a specific position or oppose it. The faster and easier you make it for them to see what you want, the better are your chances of getting it. Contact Members of Congress about one issue at a time

Giving your opinion on 20 issues in an “everything but the kitchen sink” letter can mean that a response will be severely delayed or deemed a lower priority because of the time involved researching and addressing each of your concerns. One message, per issue, per citizen, will get your views registered with the congressional office, save your time and the time of congressional staffers, and ensure that you receive a response from the Member more quickly. This is a good rule of thumb unless new or substantially different information needs to be conveyed or there have been significant developments on the issue.

Make a specific request. Asking the Member to support all environmental legislation or to oppose decreases in fuel efficiency standards are broad requests that are very difficult for congressional offices to quantify given the potential number of bills and amendments that address that issue in some way. On the other hand, a message asking the Member of Congress to support, for example, H.R. 6, the Safe Drinking Water Act or oppose S. 21, the Energy Independence Act, will allow the office to know your exact feelings and to group your views with others who share the same position. Including the bill number and/or title will ensure that the Congressman or Senator can correctly identify the bill or amendment in question and know how many citizens share your views.

Cite these legislation identifiers when writing to Members of Congress:

House Bills: "H.R. _____"

House Resolutions: "H.RES. _____"

House Joint Resolutions: "H.J.RES. _____"

Senate Bills: "S. _____"

Senate Resolutions: "S.RES. _____"

Senate Joint Resolutions: "S.J.RES. _____"

GripeGenie provides convenient optional drop-down menus for you to categorize your message by topic, by bill number and title and by the type of action you want taken on the matter.

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Step 4 – Write a Good Letter

Members of Congress get hundreds of letters and thousands of emails every day. You may even belong to one or more grass-roots organizations that implore you to send the same "cookie-cutter" message to every member of Congress. But you should know that these rarely gets much consideration and are usually regarded as a nuisance that merely wastes the time of Congressional staff members.

So what happens when you send a letter? Every office has its own procedures for tabulating correspondence, but most will produce a report at the end of week breaking down how many letters were received by issue area, separating out the form letters from personalized letters sent by individuals.

Personal Letters Beat Form Letters. Don't get suckered in by the quick and easy "Write to Congress!" form letters littering the internet. Form letters are not an expression of values; they are at best a show of numbers. If the NRA convinces five million people to send letters opposing gun control, it shows that the NRA can muster five million people to action, not that five million people necessarily care about gun laws. Congressional offices know this and generally disregard form letters.

Identical form communications have much less impact than those that are clearly crafted by one person. These individual messages put a face and a name to an issue and can be extremely influential. If a bill will hurt the industry you work in or dramatically increase the quality of the education that your two small children will receive, say so in your message.

Keep it Short & Simple. Your letter should address a single topic or issue. One-page letters are best. Senators and Representatives and their staffs probably won't take the time to give a careful reading to long and ponderous letter. The best letters are courteous, to the point, and include specific supporting examples from your own experience.

Your views are much more likely to be taken into account if your message is short and limited to a specific bill or topic, and if it briefly states your position, the reason for your interest, or the impact the legislation will have on you. Communications that are concise and targeted will ultimately be more persuasive.

It may help to think of your message to Members of Congress like a television commercial. You have a limited amount of time to get your point across. A six-page letter that rambles on until page three before citing the specific issue will likely be less effective than a two to four paragraph missive that starts out with the action you would like the Member to take.

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Your best approach is to tell your personal story about the issue that concerns you. That's what they really want to hear. That's what will have the greatest impact, even more than if you recite hard facts and use cold logic to back up your viewpoint.

Be respectful. You might vehemently disagree with one – or all – of the positions of the Members you are writing to. Regardless of how angry you are about their position on the issue, you should afford them the same respect you would want in return. Most offices have policies about communications that contain vulgarities, personal insults, or threats. Using any of these tactics is arguably the *least effective way* to influence Members of Congress. By all means, respectfully disagree, question their logic or their knowledge of the topic, but stick to the facts and convey your position.

Step 5 – Follow Up

The more you can make this a two-way communication, the more impact you are likely to have on the Members of Congress you reach. Follow up their response (or lack thereof) with another brief letter, regardless of the position they have taken.

If the Member agrees with you, send a letter of thanks for his or her stand. If your Member disagrees with your position, reply with a brief letter quoting the section of his letter with which you take issue, restate your position, and supply individual additional evidence to support it. Above all, let the Member know you remain steadfast in your position and that you will persevere in your efforts to prevail.

Conclusion

By traditional measures, American civic engagement has been in decline for more than thirty years. People have voted less, volunteered less, protested less, and exhibited less trust in others and the government, which has caused concern for the well-being of our democracy.

However, there is growing evidence that we are beginning a period of renewal. Old ways of civic participation are being replaced by new, Internet-based ways of engaging in civic participation, learning about public policy, organizing around issues, and communicating with elected officials. The Internet offers great potential for the future of democracy, but to realize the potential will require significant shifts in both thought and practice on Capitol Hill and among citizens all across this great land.

Much of the information presented here is taken from *Call and Response: Citizen Communication with Congress* (2009), Hickey, Emily G., Harvard University Department of Government, Prepared for presentation at the Midwest Political Science Association Conference, Chicago Illinois, April 2-5, 2009 and from *Communicating with Congress: Recommendations for Improving the Democratic Dialogue* (2008) by Tim Hysom, Congressional Management Foundation, Washington, DC.