



AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION

Four Steps to Influencing Your People in Congress

About half of Americans contact their Senators or Representative. It's easy to be part of the discussion, but these tips can help you maximize your effectiveness.

1. Find out who represents you

Go to <http://capwiz.com/counseling> and enter your zip code in the box under the heading "Elected Officials." Click "Go," and you'll find the names of your two Senators and your Representative. (If your zip code is split between congressional districts, you may be asked for your zip+4, which you can identify by entering your address.)

These are the people who represent you in Congress! *Your* Senators and Representative are almost always who you should contact about federal legislation. Other members of Congress (MoC's) have their hands full just keeping their own constituents happy.

2. Ask for something specific and measurable

The basic rule with working with your legislators is "the squeaky wheel gets the grease" (as long as you're squeaky in a nice, respectful way!). But a squeaky wheel is much more likely to get grease if it says "I need grease" than if it just says "I'm squeaky." If you ask them to do something concrete and specific—like cosponsor a particular bill, or send a letter on your issue to a government agency—you'll be able to tell whether or not they've done it. Asking them to "support" your issue is like asking them to prefer puppy dogs to kittens; it doesn't have nearly as much impact as asking them to cosponsor a resolution establishing National Puppy Dog Week.

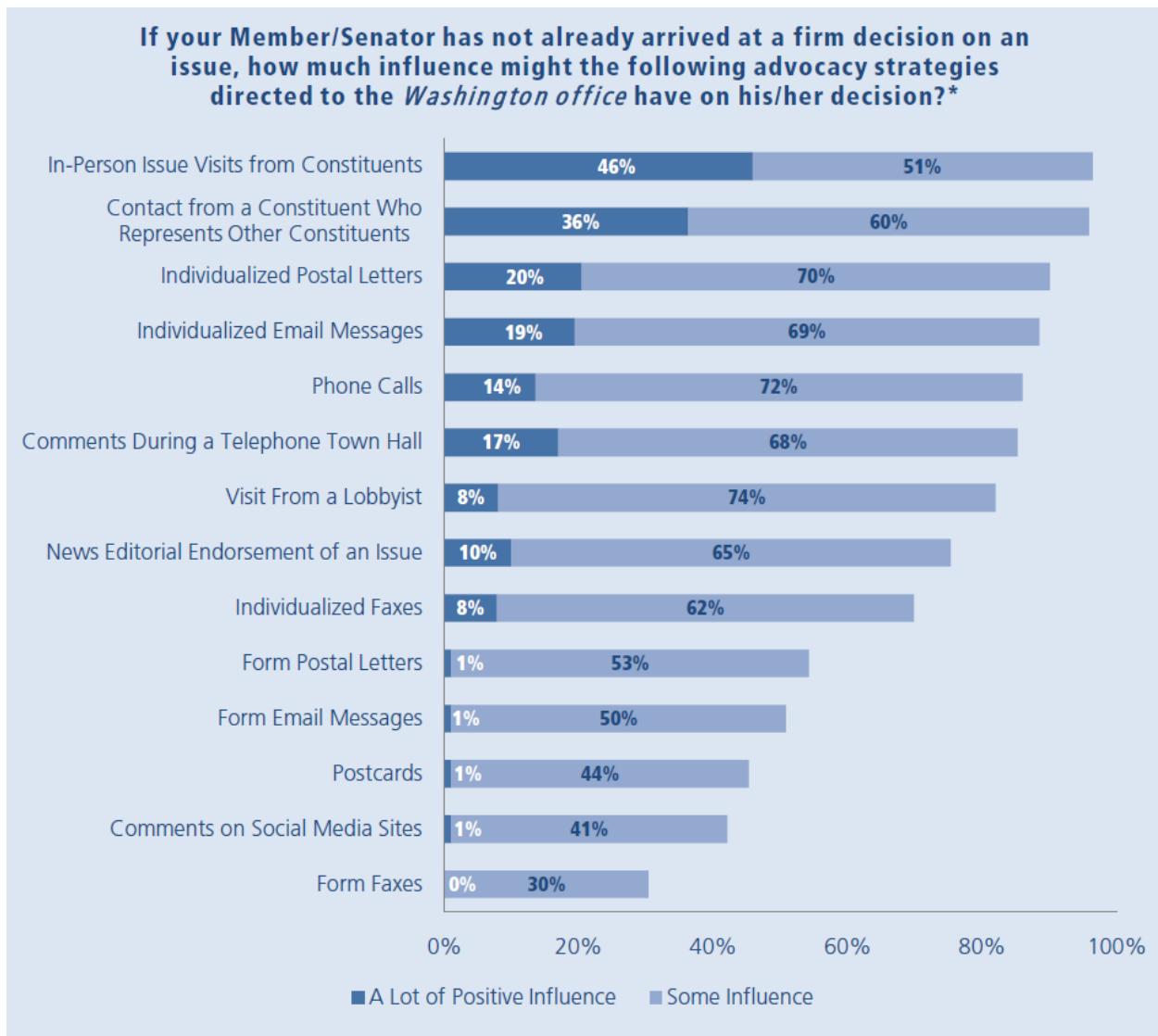
You want your federal representatives to do something, not just write you a short, vaguely supportive letter or email back.

3. WRITE IN YOUR OWN WORDS!

Organizations used to try to flood Capitol Hill with calls and emails, form letters, and pre-printed postcards, in the belief that MoC's would be so overwhelmed that they'd do what was necessary to make the deluge stop. However, something big has happened over in the recent past that has changed things: electronic communication.

These days, the deluge never stops. Congressional offices receive in the neighborhood of 400 million emails a year, when 20 years ago they received none. Unfortunately, MoC's have the same number of staff—and the same number of hours in the day—to respond to all of these contacts as they've had since the 1970's.

Congressional offices get so many constituent contacts (mostly emails, but also calls and letters) that they are forced to engage in information triage: the more effort the constituent put into the contact, the more it's listened to. Contacts that the constituent actually took the time to write themselves are the wheat; contacts where all the constituent did was click a button on a website, or printed their name on a pre-printed petition or postcard, are the chaff. Researchers at the Congressional Management Foundation have studied the effectiveness of various forms of constituent contact, and here's what they found:



Quality counts. A lot! Taking an extra 30 seconds to say in your own words why you care about the issue dramatically improves your message's effectiveness.

4. Contact them again if you don't get a clear, concrete response

If your MoC writes you back and they don't hear from you again, as far as they know you're happy. If you want more—if you asked them to cosponsor a bill and they didn't say whether or not they would, or why—you need to ask. You deserve an answer, so feel free to politely and respectfully keep pestering them until you get one. You may not get the answer you want, ultimately, but at least make them give you one.

There are tons of people clamoring for your MoC's attention. In this race, if you care enough to contact her/him twice, you just jumped ahead of everyone who didn't.

TWO BONUS RULES!:

A. Keep emails and letters brief. As a point of reference, postal letters should be no more than one side of one page. They simply don't have time to read anything longer.

B. Stick to one issue per letter/email/phone call. Otherwise, you'll probably wind up getting a form letter back on whichever issue the office already has a form letter prepared.