

Morris K. Udall -- Selected Articles:

Your Right to Write

By Representative Morris K. Udall, Democrat, of Arizona

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Not long ago a letter reached my office written by an 8-year-old girl in Tucson who had been directed to "write your Congressman" when she complained about an 8 o'clock bedtime to her mother. She wrote. While I don't think my response was entirely satisfactory, at least she did write her Congressman -- something that 90 per cent of all Americans do not do during their lifetimes.

Why this reluctance to communicate? Perhaps it comes from a feeling that Congressmen are too busy to read their mail, that one letter won't make a difference, or that their letter won't be answered properly. Speaking for myself, I can say flatly those notions are wrong.

Like most members of Congress, I have staff help to process my mail, but all of it is answered and comes to my desk for signature. As for impact, there have been many instances where a well-worded and persuasive letter either changed my mind or caused me to review my opinion.

Letters *are* important. Unlike previous eras in the Congress, sessions are longer, issues more complex and vital to the lives of all Americans. We don't have the time to seek out the opinions of individuals as much as we'd like; the mail is the "hot line" between the Washington office and home.

Perhaps setting down some fundamentals of writing your Congressman will get more people to exercise this "right to write."

Address the letter properly: When writing, send the letter to "Hon. _____, House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515." Or, "Senator _____, Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515." While this may seem too fundamental, I once received a letter like this: "Mr. Morris K. Udall, U.S. Senator, Capitol Building, Phoenix, Ariz.: Dear Congressman Rhodes."

Identify the issue: With some 20,000 bills introduced in each Congress, and a dazzling number of issues, it's vital to identify the bill by number or popular title "minimum wage" or "strip-mine bill," etc. -- in your letter.

Concentrate on your delegation: Don't waste your time writing 535 members of Congress. Your Representative and your Senators cast *your* vote. Stick with them.

Be brief: Letters have a much better chance of being answered fully and promptly if they are short and legible. You don't have to type, but write clearly.

Some Do's and Some Don't's

Do write your own opinions. A personal letter is far better than a form letter or a signature on a petition. A telegram is immediate, but impersonal. In most cases, a form letter or wire gets a form response.

Do state why you are taking a stand. A letter that simply says you are for or against a bill is not as helpful as a letter that details reasons for your view.

Do be constructive. If you recognize that a problem does exist but that a particular bill is the wrong approach, help your Congressman by suggesting another solution.

Do share your expertise. If you have specific knowledge on a particular issue, by all means use it to inform your Congressman. These are the letters that really help a person who can't possibly be an expert in every matter that comes to a vote.

Do say "well done" when it's deserved. Though some may dispute it, the men and women who serve in the Congress are people, too. They appreciate complimentary letters once in a while.

Don't threaten. Congressmen usually want to do the popular thing, but this isn't the only reason they vote the way they do. Most want to do what they feel is right for the country, but may not be popular at home. This sometimes brings letters threatening direct political action, or withdrawal of past support. A writer has the right to make such assertions in a letter, but they rarely result in successful intimidation -- and more often result in an adverse reaction to a point of view. It is my experience that reason works better than threat.

Don't be a "pen pal." Quality in letters to Congressmen works better than quantity. The person who sends a long tome every few days on a vast number of issues becomes what is known as a "pen pal" in congressional offices and is consigned to the bottom of the mail-priority list.

Don't demand an immediate commitment. A letter asking where I stand on an issue deserves a response, but a demand for a position may not get it immediately. Some bills are hundreds of pages long, containing 20 different key elements. Bills are often revised substantially in committee and on the floor. It is a rare instance where a member makes up his mind before hearings are held and detailed studies made. Be patient. Tell your views, suggest he pay attention to them, but don't ask for a blind commitment. One time I introduced a bill that was so changed by amendments that I found myself voting against what was called "the Udall bill."

During the two-year life of the 95th Congress, House and Senate members will cast hundreds of votes on matters affecting taxes, defense, science, health, agriculture and more. Each will be representing constituencies ranging from the hundreds of thousands to many millions. You can influence those votes.

Your ballot box isn't far away. It's painted red, white and blue, and has "U.S. Mail" written on it. Use it. It's your *right* to write.

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