Guidebook:

How to meet your lawmakers

&

Others ways to build and cultivate a relationship with your legislators

Immigration Voice | Change for fairness and justice
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Introduction

What impacts us at the macro level?

- Government
- Economy
- Industry
- Others

Government guides the economy through Federal bank, trade policy and other ways. Economy and industry are outside our individual control but we can definitely help shape government policy. Just like destiny and fate, maybe, we cannot change our fate but yes we can definitely change our destiny by acting in the manner we want to direct our destiny.

You may have avoided politics in the past due to numerous reasons like:

- Not interested
- No time
- Fear of the adverse repercussion on your temporary work status, impact on FBI name check etc.
- Expensive
- Well, I may be interested but how and where do I start? There is no direction.

No doubt, politicians have good intentions but they might not have right information to make the right decisions. You can easily avoid politics but you cannot avoid the influence of political decisions on your long term and short term life objectives, especially, if you are not yet an American citizen.

Many legal immigrants are wrongly apprehensive of the unknown repercussions that political activism might have on their work status and even their permanent residency application. These are unfounded fears. America does not punish political activism, on the contrary political lobbying is rewarded. Political influence of food industry is well known. Sane governmental nutritional advice is consistently watered down if the message threatens food industry sales. Go and watch the movie Super-size me to see the bad effects of fast food on your body yet there is no dearth of McDonald food places. In fact, kids and youngsters are frequently targeted as new customers. This and countless other examples highlight the fact that political decisions are not always in the best interest of the people impacted by them. This is exactly the predicament faced by high skilled legal immigrants in US. Reams and reams of facts have been published by the National academy of Sciences, Government Accountability Office, USCIS Ombudsman, Economic Advisors to the President and others highlighting the positive contribution of high skilled legal immigrants and some even lament the fact about the broken immigration system yet why is there no political
action on the part of the lawmakers to fix the broken immigration system for the high skilled legal immigrants. Newton’s law of motion states that an external stimuli is required to act on a body under inertia to move it otherwise that object will continue to be in a state of rest. That external force is your participation in educating lawmakers about the issues faced by high skilled immigrants due to the broken immigration system. This is your issue; you should take ownership of this issue and work to mitigate the problems, why would anyone else want to help your cause?

*One man with courage makes a majority.*

- Andrew Jackson

Unless, you are not interested in things for your own benefit! Lawmakers have hundreds of thousands of constituents unless they speak up they won’t know, even if lawmakers are aware of a problem, which problem takes precedence? You are important; don’t let this vital issue of legal employment based immigration be lost in the din of other issues. Stand up, be heard, be respected and get what is rightfully yours.

Political activism is not confined to shouting slogans and waving banners in the street but goes much beyond that. Suffice it to say that these modes of public display may not be the preferred mode of conveying a message by high skilled legal immigrants to the lawmakers. Yet as has been proven by the huge demonstration by undocumented immigrants in summer on 2006 and subsequent passage of Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) bill in the Senate, it does work.

You say, well, hmm, I might be interested but how and where do I start. You see, I am a busy person, I have thousand different project deadlines, I have a family, I have friends but what you say makes sense, without taking more of my time, tell me what to do and I will do. Great, this is the first big step. Maybe, we will refer to this as the “Grand awakening” from now on. The answer is simple and easy. You have Immigration Voice. This is the place where you can share your ideas get answers to your generic immigration related and for the exchange of ideas on reforming the currently broken immigration system for the high skilled legal immigrants.

**Democracy**

Only 54% of eligible Americans cast their ballots during last four decades of presidential elections. Even lesser number, actually 15% of Americans ever actually contacts their lawmakers. It’s like the 80:20 Pareto ratio as a rule of thumb, than what is basically happening is that 20% of the population is effectively deciding the destiny of rest of the people. So, if you have contacted or are about to contact your lawmaker, you are part of a small minority.
Political Activism

This is counter to the traditional simplistic view of majority rules in a Democracy. Yes, majority does count, but majority of what? The answer is majority of people who are politically active.

*The Commons, faithful to their system, remained in a wise and masterly inactivity.*

--Sir James Mackintosh

How to communicate with a Legislator?

Communication method with highest rating of five stars is recommended, see below:

- Personal Visit: ******
- Phone call: ****
- Fax: ******
- E-Mail: ***
- Snail Mail: **

What Type of Communication Works Best?

- Congressional staffers say that interactions before a decision had been reached by the lawmaker might have the most impact on the lawmaker
- They also say that the best way to affect a legislator is by visiting them face-to-face.
- A visit from a constituent is perceived to carry the most weight by staffers

Congressional Schedule

- Congressional session in Washington, D.C., lasts from early January through September. Adjournment is usually delayed till mid-October, and sometimes as late as December.
- Congress also has breaks: at least one week each for Easter, Memorial Day and the Fourth of July.
- Legislators also take the entire month of August off, returning just after Labor Day.
- Congress is formally in session only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, except in extraordinary instances.

This schedule allows legislators to travel to and from their home states on Mondays and Fridays. When scheduling meetings, be aware of where your legislator is likely to be. On weekends, in August, November and December, your legislator will likely be in your local
area. Otherwise, they will be in Washington, D.C. For an exact schedule, contact your legislators’ offices directly and ask.

Writing Good Letters to Congress

The Basic Message

Usually, politicians enjoy talking with people. It’s their job and, if they’ve been elected to Congress, we can assume they are good at it. They should be: they do it often. The average congressional office receives thousands of letters each week, hundreds of phone calls and e-mails, and meets face-to-face with an unending parade of citizens, each of whom is trying to convince them to take some action. So how do you get heard through all of this noise? The good news is that being heard is not hard. Congressional offices spend huge amounts of time and resources keeping track of what their constituents are telling them. Why? That’s how Members of Congress get re-elected. Candidates for Congress will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on polls and experts trying to figure out what their constituents want. Once elected, these same people spend considerable time keeping track of what their constituents tell them — for the simple reason that elected officials want to stay elected. Under these circumstances, the way to be heard is to make noise. Actually, that’s the only way to be heard. Your legislators’ offices are poised and ready to listen, record and respond to your concerns.

At the most basic level, communications with Congress must say two things to be recorded:

1. “I live in your district/state.” In other words, I am a constituent, “I can vote for you now or sometimes in future.” Other than the President, politicians do not represent the entire country. They are only interested in the opinions of people who can vote for them in the next election.

2. “Here is what I want.” Letters to Congress are business letters. They should have a purpose, and it should be clearly and explicitly stated. Legislative offices are busy. Don’t make them hunt for your point. That’s it. Everything else is extra. It would be nice if you included a bit of information on why you think your Member of Congress should take a particular action, but you don’t really have to.

The most important fact contained in your letter, phone call, or meeting is that one constituent, which is you, thinks the legislator should take a particular action. The office will record and remember those pieces of information. Before you start obsessing over what pieces of evidence you will include in your letter to your legislator, keep in mind what is important.
Etiquette

Once you have decided what to say, you need to follow a few, very basic rules for staffers to read and consider your letter. These rules aren’t hard — in fact, most people would just do them without even thinking about it. Still, given that there are only a few ways to get a letter to Congress wrong, you ought to at least keep them in mind:

- **Be Respectful.** It’s generally a good idea to be nice to people who are in a position to help you, and few people can do more to help than a Member of Congress. Also, Members of Congress deserve your respect. Their constituents have selected them to participate in, arguably, the greatest democracy in history. American citizens have empowered them with the right to govern the country. Showing them respect shows our country respect. And, if you don’t, your legislators won’t listen to you.

- **Be Honest.** Congress runs on trust. As an advocate of your position, your message is only going to be given as much weight as you have credibility. So, be honest in all communications with elected Officials. Lies, exaggerations and other untruths will discredit both you and your position, and taint any future communications you may want to have with your congressional office. If you can’t make your point honestly, don’t make it.

Follow these basic rules whenever you are communicating with Congress, or any elected officials. If you don’t, it’s unlikely that your legislators will give your opinion much weight, and you could poison future interactions with them. But follow the rules, and they’ll take you seriously. And your voice will have an impact on your congressional representatives (albeit a small one, in most cases). *But what if you don’t want to be just a small voice? What if you want to have a significant impact? That takes a bit more effort.*

How to Have a Successful Congressional Visit

*A constituent meeting with a Member of Congress or congressional staffer is, without a doubt, one of the most effective ways to influence the legislative process. The fact that you are a constituent, the time that you take to prepare for that meeting, and the concern that you show for your issue all convey a crucial message to your Member of Congress. Your message is that this issue is important, which is mostly likely going to affect a significant group of fellow constituents whose support your congressional leaders may need to get re-elected.*

We strongly encourage our members to meet with their Members of Congress regularly. In addition to giving you an opportunity to discuss an issue of importance, meetings are an opportunity to establish a personal relationship with your legislators. Over time, these
personal relationships will make every communication with them more powerful. Arranging a meeting with a Member of Congress or congressional staffer is not difficult if you know where to start.

Plan Your Visit Carefully

Before contacting their office, develop a plan for your visit. Consider some of these steps:

1. Research your legislators.
2. Know their names, who they are, and their backgrounds
3. Decide what issue you want to talk about
4. Educate yourself on the issue and collect background information
5. Educate yourself on any pertinent legislation, its provisions, its sponsors, and its status in the legislative process
6. Determine what materials you plan to bring with you to the meeting
7. Decide when and where you’d like to try to schedule the visit

We can help you with each of these steps.

Researching Your Member(s) of Congress

If you are not sure who your Members of Congress are, you can look them up at http://www.house.gov/representatives/

To find out your Zip code+4, go to http://zip4.usps.com/zip4/welcome.jsp

To learn more about your legislators, visit their House (www.house.gov) or Senate (www.senate.gov) Web page and look for any biographical information, highlights of issues that they are concerned about, and/or links to legislation they are currently sponsoring. You can also check your local library for congressional directories, or just contact us

Where to Visit — Washington Office vs. District Office

While Congress is in session, legislators spend most of their time in Washington, D.C. Many commute home to their districts on Friday and return to Washington on Monday, so most congressional work (e.g. votes, hearings, etc.) is scheduled for Tuesday through Thursday. When Congress is not in session (October-January and August), legislators spend most of their time in their districts. Check the House and Senate calendars (on their websites) for Congress’ exact schedule. Or, just call their offices and ask.

Washington can be a very hectic place to arrange a visit. Appointments are scheduled to be very brief and are subject to interruption or rescheduling with little or no notice. Meetings
that last longer than 10-15 minutes are rare, and staffers expect visitors to get immediately to the point. On the other hand, Washington meetings are the most common meetings. Congressional office staffs are very good at holding them, and the meetings can be timed to coincide with major legislative actions. Such meetings also demonstrate your seriousness by requiring a greater sacrifice from you. Some Members set aside a certain time period each week for a “town hall” style meeting with groups of constituents in Washington. These events will allow you to meet your legislator, but not to have a conversation with them or express your unique concerns. On the other hand, town halls provide you an opportunity to meet your legislators, have a little food with them, and shake their hands.

Every Member of Congress has one or more offices in their home district or state. With no congressional business or Washington lobbyists to distract them, Members tend to be more relaxed and accessible when in their own locales. Time is still at a premium, but you are less likely to be interrupted. If your message to your legislator is not pressing, consider waiting until they come home, and then schedule a meeting locally. Doing so will save you time and money, and it may allow you to have a more in-depth conversation with your legislator.

Deciding where to hold your meeting will depend on how quickly you want the meeting to occur; the status of the legislation you are trying to influence; your legislator’s availability; and your ability to travel. Keep in mind that there are no bad meetings with Members of Congress. The location is a secondary consideration. When in doubt, just pick a location and go with it. The important thing is to have a meeting.

Making an Appointment

Once you are ready to schedule your visit and know where you would like it to occur, the next step is to make an appointment. To make one, call your legislator’s Washington or District office and ask to speak to their scheduler. Call at least three or four weeks in advance of your target date(s). Some Members of Congress schedule district office visits through their district staff, while others coordinate through the Washington appointments secretary. The only way to know for sure is to call and ask. When you call, let them know who you are (noting that you are a constituent), why you want to meet with the legislator (the subject matter of the visit), and where you would like to meet. Offer some possible dates and times, but be flexible. The scheduler will probably ask you to fax them a letter outlining the request and the purpose of the meeting. Get the fax number, then follow-up by phone in a day or two to check on the status of your request. If the scheduler is not able to confirm a meeting on the dates you are requesting, ask if any alternative dates are available. If your legislator is not available at all, ask for an appointment with the relevant legislative assistant. Legislative assistants are often very knowledgeable about legislation, often more knowledgeable than the legislator, and can be very influential. It’s important to understand their roles and be aware of how they can help you. Treat all staff with the same respect you would extend to your congressional representative.
Be Prompt and Patient

Be sure to arrive for your meeting a few minutes early and check in with the staffer at the front desk. (Don’t assume that the person behind the desk is a receptionist.) Be prepared to wait. It’s not uncommon for legislators, particularly in their Washington offices, to be late. An earlier visit may have run long, or perhaps they may have been detained by an unanticipated committee meeting or vote. Congressional committee members can no longer vote by proxy, meaning they must be present when bills are being voted on. It’s also not uncommon for a meeting to be postponed or interrupted. If the meeting is cancelled at the last moment, check with the scheduler before you leave to try to reschedule your meeting. If interruptions occur, be patient. If the legislator has to leave your meeting, try to continue the meeting with staff. You may consider postponements, interruptions and early departures rude or disrespectful. Please understand that Members of Congress must operate in this manner, because demands on their time are tremendous, and often conflicting. Legislators simply cannot control their own schedules. If you are patient and cooperative, they will appreciate that and try to accommodate you later.

Ask For What You Want

Members of Congress are very pragmatic and after introductions, they will want you to get right to the point. They want to know what you want them to do and why they should do it. These are business meetings, not social calls, so don’t be shy. Being blunt helps and is appreciated. If you want them to vote a certain way on a particular bill, be sure to name the bill. Knowing the key sponsors of the bill will also help. We can help you with this information.

Be Prepared

Plan on completing your visit in five to 10 minutes, and focus your presentation to allow plenty of time for dialogue and questions. Quickly provide a brief non-technical explanation of your topic, avoiding abbreviations, acronyms and jargon. Few Members of Congress have a technical or scientific background.

If you are asking them to vote a certain way on a bill (or a provision of a bill) be familiar with it, but don’t worry if you are not an expert. You are not a professional lobbyist and are not expected to be one. You are a constituent, which makes you more important than a lobbyist.

If appropriate, bring a prop or visual aid. A few well-selected handouts may also be useful, but resist the temptation to bring along stacks of materials. In all probability, they will never be read. Summarize your key points and arguments on one typewritten page to leave with
the legislator and/or staffer at the end of your meeting. Make sure your name and contact information is on the page, or attach your business card.

If you are part of a group, decide who will handle each part of the presentation. Try to have as many people speak as possible. Make sure everyone understands their roles before you arrive. The idea is to show up, state what you want the legislator to do, provide one or two reasons why, and then leave. There will not be time to provide a full briefing or background information on your issue. Yes, this information is necessary to understand all of the issues, but sorry, no time. Legislators don’t need to thoroughly understand an issue before voting on it.

Be Political

The first priority of any Members of Congress is to respond to the concerns of their states or districts. That response is what gets them re-elected. Whenever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the legislator’s constituency. For example, if you are advocating strong federal investments in research, talk about the federally funded research that is going on currently in universities, laboratories and corporations in your district. Emphasize how innovations flowing from federal research are benefiting individuals who will eventually be asked to vote for the Member.

The key is to do whatever you can to convince your legislators not only that what you’re asking for makes sense technically, economically, socially, etc., but also that it’s good for their particular district or state. By being sensitive to your legislators’ political needs, you can make it easier for them to support your request.

Be Personal

Software Engineers and businessmen tend to be more comfortable with data and analysis. For politicians, personal anecdotes, like pictures, are often worth a thousand words. A personal anecdote (supported by credible data) helps to frame the issue and give it a human dimension.

When you make your case, try to put it in a personal context. If you are talking about retirement security, for example, emphasize your own experience in trying to save for the future when you are changing jobs too frequently to vest in a pension plan. Or relay the difficulty you encountered in rolling over retirement benefits to a new account. If you are talking about a technical matter, be sure to explain how it affects not only you, but also other constituents in your district.

Legislators know that if one of their constituents is so concerned about an issue that they arranged a meeting, then likely hundreds of other constituents have a similar concern. To
them, your anecdote about your situation is not an isolated story, but rather an example of a situation many of their constituents may find themselves in.

Be Responsive

During the meeting, the Member of Congress is likely to ask pointed (and often very perceptive) questions. Try to anticipate questions in your preparation. Be as responsive as possible during your meeting. Use your best judgment when offering an opinion, but be very careful not to offer factual information unless you are certain it’s true. You want to make sure you establish a reputation as a credible information source.

If your legislator or a staffer asks you a question for which you have no answer, don’t hesitate to say so. Offer to do some additional research and provide them with the information later.

Members of Congress may ask questions designed to reveal any particular bias you may have on the issue or any organizational interests that are behind your visit. They want to know not only how knowledgeable you are about the issues, but on whose behalf you are speaking. The key is to be polite, and speak for yourself. Don’t become defensive or apologetic, if you are asked probing questions.

To establish credibility, you should also briefly mention any opposing points of view. Members of Congress and their staffs are typically very bright and articulate, but because they are responsible for so many issues, they have to function as “quick-study generalists.” They may not always be that knowledgeable about your issue, especially if it requires a technical or scientific understanding. They may reflect this lack of knowledge in their questions. Be patient and remember: even if they don’t understand an issue, legislators still have to vote on it.

IV’s Role

When you pay a visit to your Member of Congress, you are there as a concerned constituent not as an IV representative. This distinction is important, because you will be more influential speaking as a constituent rather than a representative.

The fact is, however, that you are IV member, and you may be making the visit to communicate issues that concern both you and IV. So, how do you address IV in your meeting?

First and foremost, don’t say you are speaking on behalf of IV. You aren’t there to regurgitate back information IV gives to you. You are explaining your own beliefs, ones that IV may have helped you articulate. The difference is not semantic. IV does not and cannot
force IV members to support our positions. We hope you will, but this is your meeting. Say what you believe.

At the same time, you should feel free to offer IV information, such as position statements, as background material. And when you personalize the issue, you may wish to mention that you are an IV member, and that many other IV members with similar concerns live in their states or districts. Don’t feel you must hide your affiliation with IV. Be honest about your membership, but be clear that your opinions and concerns are your own.

Plan Your Exit

Once you’ve made your points and answered any questions, wrap up the meeting by thanking the legislator and/or their staff for their time. If they haven’t made their position on an issue clear, it’s appropriate to ask for it but be prepared to accept a noncommittal answer. Also, use this time to present your “leave-behind” materials, your one page summary of key points and any other supporting materials.

Most Members of Congress will not cut you off if the meeting is running long and/or the subject matter has been covered. Instead, their staffers will interrupt to end the meeting by reminding them of their next appointment. Your goal should be to avoid being interrupted in this way by ending the meeting in a crisp, timely manner. Wasting or abusing the legislator’s time is a sure way to create a negative impression that may affect their action on your issue and their willingness to work with you in the future.

As you leave the office, make sure to thank you the legislative assistant who supported the meeting, especially if he or she is the staffer responsible for your issue. Offer to provide any follow-up support or information, and ask for their business card. This individual will most likely serve as your primary source of contact for subsequent telephone calls and informal correspondence.

Follow-Up

Follow-up your visit with a thank you letter to the elected official reiterating your main points, and offer your assistance as needed. Enclose any additional information or materials that were requested or promised. Also send thank you notes to each staffer you met with or who helped you with the meeting. You never know whose help you will need in the future.

After your visit, be sure to let IV know how it went; what issues you discussed; how your legislator responded; what follow-up is planned; and how IV can assist. You can also share your experience with fellow IV members, perhaps by reporting your visit at a local state chapter. If any other IV members show interest in making a visit, offer to assist them.
Like interviewing for a job or speaking at a public gathering, meeting with a Member of Congress can be intimidating. But the key is making that initial commitment to give it a try. If you follow these guidelines and prepare yourself, you’ll find that it’s an easy, and potentially rewarding, experience. Members of Congress participate in hundreds (perhaps even thousands) of these appointments each year. As politicians, they are very adept at making people feel comfortable and welcome. Moreover, you are a constituent, which means they will be interested in helping you, if they can. Their first objective at the meeting will be to have you leave happy. They will save their hard questions for the lobbyists that come in after you.

**Campaign Volunteers**

IV members should not volunteer for political campaigns because it is illegal to do so for non-citizens.

**Money’s Role in Politics**

IV members should not donate money for political campaigns because it is illegal to do so for non-citizens.

**Politics and the Press**

So far, we’ve been discussing direct ways to influence legislators. Sending letters, volunteering for Campaigns and face-to-face meetings are all great ways to take your case directly to your elected official. But what if that doesn’t work? Then you have to get creative. All good politicians read their local papers, or at least have a staff member read them. It’s vital that politicians know what the folks back home are thinking. Plus, politicians need to keep up on local events. The last thing a politician wants to do is give a speech in a small town and forget to mention that the local high school football team just won the state championship. Influencing politicians through your local paper is a bit more difficult than speaking with them directly, because you need to consider two different audiences. Reporters are not interested in the same things as politicians. Politicians are generally looking for solutions to problems affecting their constituents. Reporters, on the other hand, are not interested in finding solutions. At the end of the day, they are interested in making money. To make money their stories need to be interesting. Reporters are ostensibly looking for important stories, but they are also looking for interesting stories that will grab people’s attention long enough to get them to read an article. (This, by the way, is why your local TV station puts the weather and sports at the end of their news broadcast. The station knows these topics are two important reasons that people stay tuned.) So if you want to
use your paper to influence legislators and develop public support for your position, you should package your position so that it appeals to the media.

You can express an opinion in a newspaper in three ways:

1. Editorials
2. Op-eds
3. Letters to the editor.

Each serves a different function and has a different format:

The senior staff of the paper writes *editorials*, expressing the opinions of the paper. Since theoretically the paper is neutral, editorials have added credibility with legislators. On the other hand, you can’t write them so controlling your message is a bit more difficult.

*Op-Eds* are opinion pieces that someone other than the newspaper staff writes. They express an individual’s opinion and are often designed to be thought-provoking, sometimes even controversial. *Op-Eds* are great ways to clearly summarize a policy position.

*Letters to the Editor* are short comments on an article or editorial that appeared previously in the paper. They are almost always less than hundred words and do not offer an opportunity for a well-reasoned argument. They can, however, provide a quick response to a negative story.

Since each of the above pieces serve different functions within the paper, each has its own rules on style and placement.

**Editorials**

All but the smallest newspapers have an editorial board. This board of senior staff members (sometimes just the editor) is responsible for writing editorials that state the paper’s public position on issues of interest to the community. These boards produce editorials that can carry great weight, if only because most people in town will read them. Politicians know about editorials. While an editorial won’t get a politician to re-think a long-held belief, it can get them to think favorably about a subject they have no position on yet. In the eyes of legislators, a well-written editorial can be as powerful as dozens of letters from constituents, making editorials a great, indirect way to influence Members of Congress. Editorial boards must come up with positions on one or two issues for each edition. For daily papers, it presents a challenge, especially if the paper has few staff. Editorial board members will often turn to outside groups for help — in coming up with ideas and for choosing which side of an issue to support. If you present the editorial board with both an issue and a perspective, you are doing most of their job for them — something that staffers...
for the paper always appreciate. Presenting an idea for an editorial is usually easy. Simply call the newspaper and ask for the editorial board. The paper will have a process in place for vetting editorial ideas, so all you have to do is speak up. (Remember, most of politics is showing up.) They will ask you to quickly summarize your issue. If interested, the board will set up a meeting to discuss the topic with you in more detail, probably soon after your initial call. All members of the media work on tight deadlines, so they are not inclined to wait. The process for deciding which editorial ideas make it differs for each paper but here are some general things you can do to improve your odds: Be timely. Newspapers must be current. Your issue must be as well. Know your facts. Unlike politicians, reporters tend to ask difficult questions. Be prepared to defend your position. You will need data and facts to back up your assertions. You don’t need to have all the answers, but have as many as you can.

Know your opponent. You will be asked who opposes your idea. Give an honest answer and relay their objections fairly then rebut them. Don’t pretend that nobody opposes you. An issue with no opposition isn’t interesting. Be local. Tie your issue to the community the paper serves. If your topic is interesting to the people who read the paper, the editorial board will be more interested in your topic. Once you have had your meeting, the process is out of your hands. The Editorial Board will probably do some additional research on the topic, and may even contact other groups for their perspective.

You will not be involved in the process of actually writing the editorial, which is the weakness and the strength of this tactic. Ultimately, you can’t control the message. But the Editorial Board is an unbiased observer. If they support your position, you will have gained credibility. If nothing has been printed within a week or so of your meeting, follow up with someone on the Board, and ask if the paper has decided to print something. The reporter may still be doing research; the paper may not have had time to run it yet; or it may have decided not to take a position on your issue. If the paper decides not to take a position, ask if you can submit your own Op-Ed.

Op-Ed

Op-Eds, or “Opposite Editorials” (which is where they are located in most newspapers), look similar to editorials, but they are not written by the newspaper staff. Rather, they express the opinions of the individual whose name is attached to the piece. Newspapers use op-eds to present different, hopefully interesting, viewpoints on current topics. Frankly, the purpose is to spark controversy, albeit in a reasonable and intellectually honest way. Newspapers want op-eds that will engage readers and grab attention. Local papers also like the fact that they don’t have to write op-eds themselves, making them a fairly easy way to fill up page space. An op-ed offers a great way to present your issue to the general public. It allows you to frame your issue any way you want, using the best supporting evidence you can find, provided you do it in fewer than eight hundred words (length requirements vary
between papers.) Most newspapers (USAToday is a notable exception) do not try to provide balance in the op-ed section, meaning most papers don’t publish an op-ed on each side of an issue. Letters to the Editor are used for expressing opposing viewpoints. So, op-eds are a great way to present your side of an issue before the public (and legislators) without giving your opponents an immediate opportunity to respond. You will need to write your op-ed before approaching the newspaper. While an op-ed requires no set format, here are some things to keep in mind while writing it:

- Be sure to comply with your target paper’s requirements. Each paper has its own guidelines on style, length and content. A quick call to the paper’s office, or a visit to its website, will provide guidance.
- The op-ed is for the general public. Avoid using acronyms and technical language. Be sure to explain all scientific and engineering concepts fully.
- It must be entertaining. You are going to have to give people a reason to read it, remembering that the general public is not necessarily concerned about the same things you are.
- Controversy sells. Don’t write an academic thesis, it’s an opinion. Strong opinions are better than weak ones and controversial opinions are best. While still being civil and reasonable, make your points as strongly as you can. You don’t need to consider, or even present, both sides.
- Be timely and local. Make sure your op-ed explains why your issue is currently relevant to the public the paper serves.

Once you have written it, submit the op-ed to your target paper. The paper will review it for factual errors and may correct grammatical mistakes. No paper should ever change any word of your op-ed without getting your approval first. When deciding whether or not to publish your op-ed, the paper will consider several factors, including:

- Relevance and timeliness of the issue
- Writing quality
- Available space
- How interesting readers might find the topic.

Management at most papers will demand exclusivity from you, meaning they will expect you to submit your op-ed to only one paper. Most newspapers like their op-eds to be unique to them. Assume that your paper does as well. Stick to one target paper per op-ed. If your first choice paper declines to publish your piece, submit it to your second choice. Remember, newspapers are businesses. Their job is not to promote your cause, but to make money. If your op-ed won’t sell papers, there is no reason to publish it.
Letters to the Editor

The most common communication with newspapers is the Letter to the Editor (LTEs). LTEs are very brief letters written in direct response to something previously printed in the paper. Letters can be used to correct mistakes in news stories, comment on news coverage, or respond to editorials and op-eds. Because they are so brief, writing letters to the editor is relatively easy, making them, in some ways, far less effective than Editorials and Op-eds at influencing the public and public officials. An LTE’s length precludes a serious discussion of an issue. And because they must be written in response to something else, LTEs allow your opponent to speak first. Still, Letters to the Editor offer an easy, fast way to get your views in print. When writing a Letter to the Editor, keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Keep it short. Limits differ, but most papers restrict LTEs to a few paragraphs at most. Respond to something.
- All LTEs should be written in direct response to something else that previously appeared in the paper. Clearly identify what you are responding to.
- Respond quickly. You have about three days from when an article appears in the paper to respond to it. Five days at the most. Letters submitted after this have little chance of being printed.
- Respond directly. You only have a few sentences. Get to your point, make it, and stop.

Most papers view Letters to the Editor as a community forum, and usually print a variety of LTEs from a wide spectrum of perspectives. If you have something unique to say, the paper will probably consider your LTE.

Other Uses of Newspapers

In addition to influencing legislators and public opinion, IV members can use their local papers for other purposes. Most local papers have columns on local events. IV forum and state chapters can use such columns to advertise their meetings. Similarly, any public event your chapter is holding can be sold to your local paper as a possible story. Doing so costs nothing and could significantly raise the profile of the IV in your local community. Contact your local paper to learn the best way to interact with its staff. Increasing your local state chapter’s visibility has numerous benefits, including increased membership and participation. It also has a political benefit. Politicians like to work with active groups. If your elected officials have read about the good work IV is doing in your community, you will have greater credibility should you ever contact their office. Politicians are wary of working with groups they have never heard of, for fear of associating with someone who could embarrass them. If you have already established the IV’s good reputation, your initial communications will go much more smoothly.
Selecting a Target

Editorials and op-eds require you to select a newspaper to target. Most areas of the country are served by several local, regional, state and national papers. How do you choose? Think about the trade-off: reaching the most possible people or increasing the odds of seeing your views in print. Tens of thousands of people read large national papers, along with most legislators, but competition for page space is intense. On the other hand, perhaps only hundreds, including your elected officials, read your local paper — but you will have less competition for space. The best approach might be to start small. Write an op-ed for your local paper and get it published. The impact will be far less than having the same piece published in The Wall Street Journal, but it’s a start. As you get better at using the system, move up the chain to progressively larger papers.

And remember: an editorial that hundred people read will prove far more effective than one The New York Times rejects.

Guide to Congressional Staff

Chief of Staff: Responsible for overall office management and evaluating political implications of office decisions; reports directly to the Legislator
Legislative Director: Responsible for policy-setting staff and legislation; may also have primary responsibility for one or more issues; reports to the Chief of Staff
Legislative Assistant: Responsible for one or more issue areas; tracks relevant legislation and helps develop office responses; tracks constituent mail for office’s issues; reports to the Legislative Director
Press Secretary/Communications Director: Responsible for interacting with the media and maintaining the legislator’s public image; reports to the Chief of Staff
Scheduler: Maintains legislator’s daily schedule, and assigns meetings the legislator cannot make to other staff; reports to the Chief of Staff
Legislative Correspondent: Manages and responds to incoming constituent mail, e-mail and routine phone calls; reports to the Legislative Assistants and Legislative Director
Caseworker: Responsible for helping constituents with unique problems; usually operates out of local offices; reports to the Chief of Staff
Key Contacts and Information Sources

Congress.Org on Visiting Capitol Hill
  http://legislators.com/congressorg/issues/basics/?style=visit
The U.S. House of Representatives Visitors Information
  http://www.house.gov/house/Visitor.html
U.S. Senate Visitor Information
  http://www.senate.gov/visiting
Library of Congress Legislative Information Center
  http://Thomas.loc.gov
The White House
  http://www.whitehouse.gov
Federal Election Commission — National Registration Form

Political News

Roll Call: http://www.rollcall.com
The Hill: http://www.thehill.com
The Washington Post: http://www.washingtonpost.com

Political Websites

Congressional Management Foundation: http://www.cmfweb.org
Fund Race: http://www.fundrace.org