



How to Influence Your Legislator

Introduction

Citizens should be aware of what their elected officials are doing. They should not only participate in the process of selection of those officials, but also in giving them guidance and direction during their terms of office.

Let Your Legislator Know What You Think

Legislators are interested in what their constituents are thinking. There are many ways of contacting your legislator—in person, by mail, through petitions.

Face-to-Face Meetings

As a rule, personal contacts are the most effective. It is worth the effort to make the arrangements.

In Sacramento → Legislators are very receptive to visitors in their offices in the State Capitol. Make an appointment. Meeting with the legislator's staff person on the issue can be as valuable as meeting directly with the legislator. Legislators rely heavily on their staff.

In district office → Legislators are often available on Fridays and over weekends during the session. Appointments can be made through their local offices.

Suggestions for Personal Visits

Set up an interview together with several friends. Or invite your legislator to a home meeting for discussion and exchange of ideas.

Guidelines for Your Interview

Keep your group small, not more than five or six people. If your group is too large, your legislator will make a speech. This is not meant to discourage invitations to make a speech—do this also!

The group should be informed about the legislator's record on specific issues. Ask him/her for elaborations on the points on which you have little information. Ask for clarification on his/her position on others.

Someone in the group should be appointed spokesperson to introduce members of the group and start the conversation.

Questions should be specific. General questions, such as, "What is your stand on social welfare?" permit vague and evasive answers.

Attempt to discover areas of agreement as well as disagreement, and to explore new ideas. If you succeed, both you and your legislator will gain from the interview.

Be brief!

Timing is important

The most effective time to communicate with your legislator about a bill in which you are interested is before it comes up for committee hearing. You can check the hearing schedule and bill status on the Internet (www.leginfo.ca.gov, www.legislature.ca.gov).

You can get a single copy any bill free from the Bill Room, State Capitol, Sacramento, CA 95814. You can download a copy from www.leginfo.ca.gov.

If you plan to attend a committee hearing, check by phone with the author's office to find out whether the bill is still being heard that day.

Writing Letters

If personal visits are not possible, you can express your opinion by letter. When writing, keep the following in mind:

- Write only about one subject in a letter. Be brief!
- Make your letter courteous and legible.
- Include your contact information. Make sure your name is legible someplace in the letter.
- If writing about a specific bill, have its number or popular name.
- If writing via Email, put the bill number and/or name in the subject line.
- Begin with a recommendation for a vote or speech. Support a courageous stand and encourage continued leadership.
- Give reasons for your stand in your own words. If possible, draw on your personal experience.
- Raise questions. A well-formulated question can express a viewpoint and encourage response.

Forms of Address

The Honorable John Doe
California State Senate
P.O. Box 942848
Sacramento, CA 94248-0001

Dear Senator Doe:

The Honorable Jane Doe
California State Assembly
P.O. Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249-0001

Dear Assembly Member Doe:

Phone Calls

Phone calls, especially if you have had previous contact with your legislator or member of his/her staff, may get through to the actual person. They can be valuable.

To call a state legislator in Sacramento, check his/her Web site for a number. Calls to district offices are also effective.