

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

Let 'er Rep... resentative! (Part 3)

"A government is republican in proportion as every member composing it has his equal voice in the direction of its concerns, not indeed in person, which would be impracticable beyond the limits of a city or small township, but by representatives chosen by himself and responsible to him at short periods." Thomas Jefferson

Recapping: In our *constitutional republic*, we function in most cases as a *representative democracy*, rather than as a "pure" democracy in which each citizen of the body politic votes directly on each decision or law (e.g., New England town meetings, some sovereign tribes).

Although many state constitutions provided the right of the people *"to assemble together, to consult for their common good, to instruct their Representatives,"* the first US Congress in 1789 rejected any notion of binding instruction, favoring legislators deliberating, investigating, and, ultimately, each being guided by *"the clearest conviction of his judgment and conscience."* (Edmund Burke)

But Congress did guarantee freedom of speech, press, assembly, and petition, because the voice of *"constituents is a weighty and respectable opinion, which a representative ought always to rejoice to hear; and which he ought always most seriously to consider."*

"Well," you might say, "I'm just one voice; what difference can I make?" One government official, a veteran of about 20 years on Capitol Hill, said: "If the average member of Congress received as many as half a dozen letters scrawled in pencil on brown wrapping paper, it would be enough to change his vote on most issues." That might be a bit arch, but it suggests that members of Congress *are* influenced by what their constituents are thinking. A survey conducted by *Washingtonian* magazine of 219 top congressional staffers said the most influential factors in the decision-making process of members of Congress were, in order of priority: 1) a member's political philosophy, 2) constituent opinion, 3) office mail, 4) the White House position, 5) party leaders, 6) press back home, 7) Washington lobbies, and 8) the national media. That constituent opinion and office mail rank so high confirms that constituents *can* influence a legislator.

"The Right of all members of society to form their own beliefs and communicate them freely to others must be regarded as an essential principle of a democratically organized society." – Thomas I. Emerson

It should be obvious that in the case of Congresscritters, Senators, and the Resident of the White House, the amount of mail and messages make it nearly impossible for those officials to read or hear each one personally. In fact, for state assemblypersons, state senators, and higher officials, there's usually one or more buffer layers between you and the official, and one or more staffed district offices, as well as one or more offices in either the state capital or DC.

At that level, you will likely receive a machine-signed letter in response (or computer-generated e-mail if you sent an e-mail), thanking you for your interest and your opinion, as the official shares your concern about [fill in issue], and appreciates your comments, and will give it every consideration, etc., and whatever relevant boilerplate the computer keeps handy to make it seem you're getting more personalized attention than you are.

But, behind the scenes, staffers (usually the lowest on the totem pole at each office) go through all the

letters, postcards, faxes, emails, and phone messages, and sort them by issue and count the *fors* and *againsts*, particularly on the "big" issues. These numbers, at least, are sent on to the chief of staff or the official directly. A few "representative" messages may be pulled out to give the official a sense of what is being said. If YOUR message is brief, neat, polite, literate, to the point, AND you represent a significant bloc of voters, there's a greater chance your words may actually reach the official (but don't count on it, OR that one message will change his/her mind... though it may, particularly if the official's position is not yet set in stone). Your first goal is to simply let the official know that at least ONE voter back home has been paying attention to the official's vote, potential vote, or stand on an issue.

"There can be no daily democracy without daily citizenship." – Ralph Nader)

Even if you disagree with the official's stated position, your words may help him/her see the other side. And, if the official voted your way, or took a courageous stand, a note of thanks is always appreciated, and will make it easier and more likely for similar votes or stands in the future.

"Two cheers for democracy; one, because it admits variety, and two, because it permits criticism." – E. M. Forster)

As you can see, NUMBERS are the critical factor, so it doesn't hurt to send at least an email or postcard to the other offices, too. And, get your friends and those with similar opinions to send messages at the same time; as shown, unless they're all identical copies, even a small number may get the office to take serious notice. A few more may get a staffer to prepare a position paper. And full mailboxes of angry (but polite) messages may change minds or stiffen backbones, depending.

"I've come to conclude that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians." – Charles de Gaulle)

Rule # 1 is... NO message is ignored! Even barely readable rants come from *potential voters*, and likely represent the views of many who didn't even send in that much. Hence, it's more than a privilege, but a *responsibility* to inform your officials of your opinions, or else *your* wise and considered thoughts will be outweighed by cranks and malcontents who were willing to exert the effort *you* weren't.

"People often say that, in a democracy, decisions are made by a majority of the people. Of course, that is not true. Decisions are made by a majority of those who make themselves heard and who vote – a very different thing." – Walter H. Judd)

Now, those of us serving at the village, town, and county level rarely have any staff to buffer our messages (what few we get), so they usually come to us directly and raw. I'm not going to say that a crayoned-letter beginning "Deer Jerk," won't get read, but don't expect it to be treated as seriously as one that is polite and literate! Then again, see Rule #1 above.

If you can, arranging an actual meeting with your official, particularly if you represent a larger group or voting bloc, may have greater impact. Just realize, you may have only a few minutes of face time, or none at all if the official has to leave for more critical business like voting (or to meet with a big contributor or more powerful lobbyist; sorry, but money and influence still talks louder, alas, than mere citizenship). Then, you will likely relay your message to a senior staffer; in either case, bring a written summary and support material to leave behind. A follow-up thank-you note is always a good idea.

In the final Part 4, I'll give some tips on how to make your messages more powerful, and more likely to be read and acted on.