

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

Let 'er Rep... resentative! (Part 4)

"There go my people... I must find out where they are going so I can lead them." Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin, 1807-74, French politician, on seeing an angry crowd marching down the street below his window during the 1848 Revolution.

Recapping: Our *representative democracy* guarantees 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.*" (Edmund Burke)

You won't always get an official to agree with you, but NO message is ignored. 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; a well-crafted message, properly delivered, *may* even help see your request granted or goal realized. And say "Thanks"!

These guidelines should cover most of your elected representatives (or even appointed officials) from village to federal level, though the higher up you go, expect greater need to attend to detail and formality, particularly if you don't want to get treated marginally. With written correspondence (the most popular choice of communication with a congressional office, thus the one I will focus on, though emails should follow similar considerations), that begins with the correct name (*nobody* likes to receive a letter with their name misspelled!), formal title (*nobody* likes to be slighted or treated dismissively), and address. (Oh, the letter may get there eventually, but wasn't your message urgent?)

To a Senator: The Honorable (full name), United States Senate, Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (Surname):

To a Representative: The Honorable (full name), House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. (Surname):

If you have the room number, which you can find at the official's website, www.congress.org, www.house.gov, or www.senate.gov, put it after the name, on line #2 (you can also get the district office address there; send a copy to both):

(Rm.#) (Name of) House Office Building (or Senate Office Building)

Besides showing courtesy and respect to the official, this suggests someone who was willing to do some basic research, which suggests a more thoughtful and serious person. (Make sure your own name, address, and other relevant contact and affiliation info is legible and on all parts of the correspondence.) Ask for a written reply and keep copies of all you write and receive, in case you need to resend, or to reference them later by date or topic.

Your own two senators and one congressperson have an obligation to consider your views, so identify yourself as a constituent. But you may have occasion to write to one who, as chair of a committee – it's proper to address one as Dear Mr. Chairman (or Madam Chairwoman) – or sponsor of a bill, needs to hear your opinion. But be warned... letters from outside their district may simply be forwarded to *your* rep, or busy staffers may just toss them, unless you give them a good reason not to. Which leads to...

State your purpose up front, in a "re" line, and in the first paragraph. Even if a staffer can't read the

whole thing right away, this will help direct the letter to the proper "pile." If addressing a specific bill, identify it as H.R.(#) or S.(#), as appropriate. Focus on just *one* issue per letter, or it may be hard to direct it to the right person, and you dilute your argument and make it harder to respond to. Be specific in your concern, and clearly state what you want *done*.

Ask the reps where they stand on the issues, or how they intend to vote and why, but give them fair time to think about it before expecting a commitment. You may get a boilerplate or wishy-washy answer, but it's your right to know, so that *you* may respond appropriately with further communication or actions.

Speaking of boilerplate, sending a mass-produced form letter begs to receive a form reply. Yes, it will register as one *for* or *against* vote, but little more. The depth of your interest and concern is measured, in part, by the time and effort *you* put into your message and how unique or powerful *your* story is; a brief but personal letter in your own words will carry more weight than a longer, but formulaic, mass-produced missive. (The same applies to signatures on petitions, or online polls where one click sends off a battery of pre-written messages; do it also, but the robotic email reply is just as impersonal and pro forma as the original, and as minimally impressive or influential.) Specific questions requiring specific answers may get more personal attention than a computer database of cookie-cutter replies can provide.

Be brief. That's always a hard one for me, but look at it from the busy staffer's point of view. The first three paragraphs are the most important. If you feel it's necessary to provide support evidence, make that a separate document or package of material, but keep the basic cover letter to one clear, complete, legible page (typing or computer printing is best, but a short hand-written note is clearly more personal, as long as it's readable!)

Make your case. Don't threaten, or demand, or get emotional, but emphasize facts, examples, logic, and evidence. Speak from personal experience, or that of the group you represent, as to why a particular bill or action will hurt or benefit you, using concrete language that hits the point home clearly.

Never assume, unless you know otherwise, that the rep is up-to-speed on every issue or bill. Write as early as possible, while there's still time to study and learn, before other influences take hold. Keep things simple and jargon-free, but include critical data if it's not common knowledge. Offer constructive solutions or alternatives to bad proposals, or suggest experts or organizations they can contact for more details or testimony. If *you* are an expert, prove it, and offer your expertise, and why your opinion is to be given more weight than that of hundreds of non-experts.

Pick your battles. Don't get known as a crank or whiner who gets equally hot and bothered over every little matter. Discretion and strategy dictate you speak only when you have something meaningful to contribute; reps don't need tiresome "pen pals"!

Contacting a legislator is just like talking to a friend whom you would like to influence. Even if you disagree with the bill, or the rep's stated position, be polite and positive, as if the person were in front of you. *Nobody* enjoys being called a fool, knave, traitor, pig, etc., or treated so. And, if you come across as *never* going to vote for the rep in the future, it's easier to ignore you and write you off as a lost cause no matter how he or she acts. So, start a dialog and keep it open; you want the rep to display an open mind, so make sure you come across as a reasonable and flexible person. And, did I mention, say "Thanks!"?