



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION OF CONGREGATIONS

Washington Office for Advocacy

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“It is not yours alone to complete the work (of justice), but neither are you free to desist from it.” - Jewish teaching

TIPS ON EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

The commitment required to be an effective advocate can be as short as a 1 minute phone call or as long as organizing a coalition visit to an elected official. Below are some tips on each of the most likely methods, organized from most effective to least effective.

By far, the most effective way to get your elected representative’s attention is a visit to their office. After a visit, writing letters and making telephone calls are the next most effective means of advocacy. Postcards, petitions, and emails (provided they include your name and address) have some impact, but considerably less. Online petitions can be good for raising awareness, but may be inaccurate and are usually not effective advocacy. Petitions forwarded by email are often outdated and/or wrong and should be avoided. Lastly, joining groups on Facebook may be fun but is unlikely to have any real impact.

Please remember to identify yourself as a Unitarian Universalist when communicating with Members of Congress and their staff. They are hearing from conservative religious activists all the time. They need to hear from the Religious Left a whole lot more!

Visiting Members of Congress

A face-to-face visit with an elected official, or their staff, is the most influential form of advocacy. This direct lobbying can be time-consuming, but it can also be fun, interesting, and rewarding. Elected officials, particularly on the federal level, have very demanding schedules. Don't be disappointed if you have to meet with a staff person—chances are good that they know more about the issue than the member anyway! Group visits are particularly effective, especially when different organizations or constituencies (such as religion, labor, and business) are represented. If you're determined to meet with your Member in person, a group visit increases your chances. For more information on how to prepare and conduct a visit, consult the “Tips on Visiting Members of Congress” section below.

Letters

Writing letters in your own words is an efficient and effective way to influence Members of Congress. Since congressional offices receive only a handful of letters on most issues, each carries real power. Identifying yourself as a person of faith makes your letter even more compelling! Please keep in mind that due to irradiation, it could take weeks, even months, for your letter to reach Congressional offices. Therefore, it’s best to fax your letter rather than using conventional mail. For more information on how to write the most effective letter, consult the “Tips on Writing Members of Congress” section below.

Telephone Calls

Although not as effective as letters, telephone calls are very important—especially when the respective legislation is being debated or voted upon. A constituent will rarely get through to a member of Congress on the telephone, but talking to or leaving a message for the relevant staff person definitely has an impact. For more information on how to prepare and conduct a call, consult the “Tips on Calling Members of Congress” section below.

Petitions

It is precisely because petitions are easy to gather and circulate that they are not particularly influential. Taking the extra time and effort to write a letter is considerably better. The exception is if the petition (containing a lot of signatures) will be delivered **in person** to the elected official.

Postcards

Like petitions, due to their ease, postcards are not nearly as effective as letters in influencing legislators. However, like petitions, a large number of postcards hand-delivered to a member during a meeting can be very compelling.

Emails

Although few if any emails actually reach the Members themselves, most are seen or addressed by the staff in some way. Keep in mind that a faxed or mailed letter is much more effective than an email. If you are going to email—which is certainly better than nothing—be sure to include your home mailing address in your message, as it will be given much more weight.

Internet Petitions

Online petitions – whether via websites, emails, or social media sites - can be good for raising awareness about a subject, but are typically not effective advocacy. Where internet petitions are often most useful is in identifying people interested in a common cause and building excitement.

If you do sign an internet petition, make sure that the petition asks for your full address. Elected officials do not pay attention to signatures without street addresses. Also, make sure that the petition identifies the target and when the petition will be delivered. There is no point in signing a petition to the president if the president’s office is never going to receive it.