

Tips on Understanding Your Elected Officials

Elected officials have many people trying to influence their decisions and placing demands on their time. These competing priorities include everything from their official responsibilities, to campaign promises and local constituent priorities. If you want to successfully influence an elected official's decisions, you need to understand these competing priorities and frame your issue so your concerns are a very high priority for the decision-maker.

While it is beneficial to know their biographies and their opinions, it is just as important to investigate their voting records and try to understand what influences their votes.

Official Websites

You can find the official websites of each of your Members of Congress at the U.S. Senate's website (www.senate.gov) or the U.S. House's website (www.house.gov). Many governors, state legislators and candidates also have their own websites.

Biographical Information

- *Almanac of American Politics* (<http://www.politics-now.com/>) provides the history of elected officials, including how they got elected, the issues that were most discussed during their campaigns and other analysis.
- Project Vote Smart (<http://www.vote-smart.org>) offers records on your officials including key and recent votes, past voting records, issue positions, campaign finances, interest group ratings, speeches and public statements.
- LexisNexis (<http://www.lexisnexis.com>) provides legal, news and public records.
- State Democracy (<http://www.StateDemocracy.com/>) helps you compare examine voting scorecards.

Voting Record

- The ACLU's *National Freedom Scorecard* (<http://scorecard.aclu.org>) provides you with a quick summary of important civil liberties measures and how your elected officials have voted.
- *Thomas* (<http://thomas.loc.gov>) provides records on legislation, congressional votes and committee information
- *Congressional Record* (<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord>) is published daily when Congress is in session and supplies constant updates and records of the congressional proceedings.

Campaign Contributions

- Open Secrets (<http://www.opensecrets.org>) gives you the inside information on who contributes to your elected officials' campaigns.
- Government Information Awareness (<http://opengov.media.mit.edu/>) supplies all the background information on who is donating to Members of Congress.

Other Resources

- Congressional Budget Office (<http://www.cbo.gov>) gives you cost estimates for how much proposed bills would require if they were enacted and supplies you with a monthly and yearly review of the congressional budget.
- General Accounting Office (www.gao.gov) evaluates the use of public funds and advises Congress on funding and policy decisions.

In addition to this online research, it is critical that you work with local constituents and understand the background of your elected official. Read local newspapers and talk to people who work for the elected official currently or have done so in the past.

Speak to the elected official's needs and interests. If you jump right to the attack, you will simply put them on the defensive and create unnecessary conflict. Find a logical, well-researched argument that you can present to the elected official that clearly lays out why they should act on a given issue. Make it easier for them to make the decision you want.

Remember: if you do get a chance to talk with your Representative or Senator, you are likely to get only a minute or two to state your case and make your request.



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