

Get Heard Guide

LOCAL ELECTIONS EDITION

2021-2022



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Did you know that contacting elected officials is your First Amendment right

The Founding Fathers of the United States knew the importance of ongoing dialogue between elected officials and the constituents they represent. While contacting your elected officials has become a much more modern and tech-savvy interaction, it is still one of the most important civic duties we can perform outside of voting. And the good news is your voice matters even past your vote! Why? Because after an election, officials begin to set priorities and get down to the business of creating policies that will impact your daily life. In many cases, fiscal and budget issues are high priority for newly elected officials, so it's good practice to express your concerns or thoughts at the outset of their terms and continue to follow up afterwards.



Why Should You Contact Your Elected Officials?

While it may seem a bit intimidating to contact a public official, or unrealistic to think they will listen to you, **your elected officials are there to represent you and your community** and make decisions based on your needs. So how will they know what you need unless you speak up? And they actually want to hear from you! **The best way to keep them informed on what their districts want is for you to reach out and share your thoughts.**

Once in office, elected officials need to take a more bipartisan approach to getting things done. If enough constituents are voicing similar concerns, it's likely that your elected official will take notice (and action). However, it's important to remember that while individuals and advocacy groups can use Internet-based tools like email and social media to increase the volume of messages to their elected officials, the resources available to help elected officials review and respond to these messages have actually declined. As a result, elected officials and their staff can only spend so many hours in a day on each group's concerns.

So, how do you navigate this situation? **Think of every contact point with your elected official as an opportunity to build a long-term, qualitative relationship.** Research from the Congressional Management Foundation suggests that **broader, more dynamic and diverse activities, conducted over a longer period of time with the goal of developing relationships between constituents and congressional offices, are more successful advocacy strategies.** Equally helpful is when high-quality, one-on-one interactions (like a phone call or virtual meeting) are followed by other personalized interactions, such as written messages and communications from people who are part of groups in your district or state that represent many constituents.

Who Are My Elected Officials? What Issues Do They Handle? How Do I Contact Them?

Many issues are handled at multiple levels of government, so it can be confusing at times. The most important thing to remember is to determine who is affected by the issue (e.g. local residents, state residents, etc.). This will help you understand if you need to contact a local or county official, a state official, or a member of your state's Congressional delegation.



Federal Elected Officials

Federal officials, those who work in Congress, often receive the most attention because their roles influence the lives of all citizens and residents, regardless of where they live. Each state's Congressional delegation consists of two U.S. senators and a number of House representatives. The number of representatives is based on the population of the state, and each representative has a district they represent within the state.

- [Find your U.S. Senators](#)
- [Find your U.S. House Representative](#)

Federal officials oversee national policy. Examples of issues the federal government manages include, but are not limited to:

- Federal budget and taxes
- National defense
- Healthcare
- Agriculture and food
- Foreign relations
- Environmental regulations

Citizens often think federal elected officials can solve every problem in the nation, but this is simply not true. Keep reading to find out who else needs to hear from you.

State Elected Officials

State government is led by (1) a governor, who oversees the executive functions of the state and sets the state's priorities, and (2) a state legislature, which oversees legislative responsibilities including state taxes and funding for education, social services, and other programs. In addition, every state has its own court system, which functions much like the federal court system and U.S. Supreme Court.

Governor

A governor is the chief executive officer or the head of state. Governors' responsibilities include creating policy and budget recommendations to the state's legislative branch, enforcing state laws, and commanding the National Guard. Governors set priorities and visions for states, and they work with the legislature to enact policy. While it varies from state to state, governors generally oversee most or all state departments and agencies, including education, social services, natural resources, the DMV, among others.

- [Find your state's governor](#)

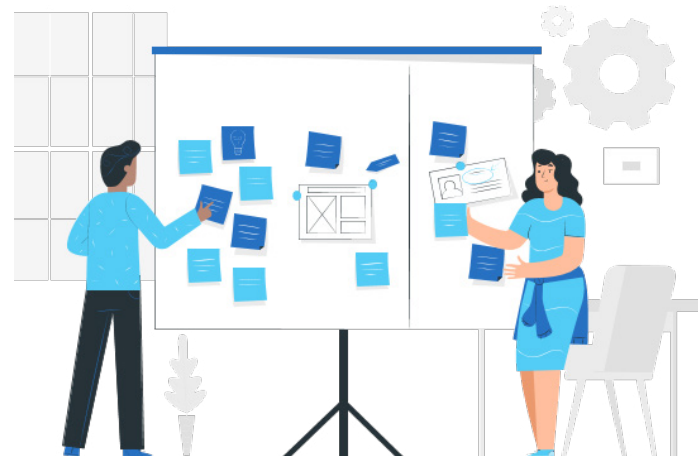
State Legislature

State legislatures can be looked at as a mini-Congress. The state legislative branch works with the governor to create laws and establish a budget. State legislatures have special committees to review bills before they go to the floor of the chamber. State legislatures also have leadership that work with the governors and political parties to set priorities and introduce new policy initiatives, as well as oversee resources, including budget, within the state government. States vary in the number of legislative members: some states have as few as 20, others have as many as 400. States also vary in how often their state legislatures meet: some meet year-round, others meet 30 days every other year.

- Visit your state legislature's website to find your state representatives

State officials oversee state-related policy; however state officials may communicate with federal officials on relevant issues, so it's never a bad idea to tell them what you think about important federal issues. Examples of issues state governments manages include, but are not limited to:

- Education funding for K-12 through higher education
- State budget and taxes
- Public health
- Transportation
- Commerce
- Conservation and natural resources
- State policing and public safety
- Congressional Redistricting Congressional districts (every 10 years)



Local Elected Officials

Local government can vary from town to town, city to city, and county to county, and it is important to understand the difference between what happens at a town or city level vs. the county level. This can be one of the more confusing aspects of local government.

➡ *Counties*

County Supervisor/Commissioner

Elected officials, often called Supervisors or Commissioners, typically lead counties. This role generally oversees many administrative and financial aspects of the local government including approving county budgets, overseeing county spending, and hiring county employees. For very rural areas, county officials may be your only local government.

- [Look for your county executive contact information](#)

➡ *Municipalities*

Mayor or City Manager

These executives have many important responsibilities, including creating a yearly budget for a town or city council to approve; overseeing city departments, like police, fire, housing, and transportation; and introducing new city laws.

- [Find your mayor's contact information](#)

City Council

A city council represents the legislative branch of city government. They are responsible for voting on laws and budgets to be passed. City council members ultimately have the final say on which laws will be passed and sometimes appoint department heads.

- [Search for city, county and town officials](#)

Local governments oversee the local issues that impact your day-to-day life. Examples of issues local governments manage include, but are not limited to:

- Property taxes
- City budgets and taxes
- Policing and public safety
- Public transit, largely for cities (this could also be the state level)
- Public health ordinances
- Housing ordinances
- Trash and recycling programs
- Local school funding

You've Made Contact. Now What Do You Say?

- ➔ **Introduce yourself.** Note where you are from and where you go to school, especially if either of those locations are in the elected official's district. Sharing your personal story is a helpful way to resonate with elected officials. Establish a personal connection to the issue you would like to discuss to underscore why it is important, why you care about it and why, as their representative, they should too.
- ➔ **Describe the issue you would like to discuss.** This is where you need to show that you understand the issues and their impact on your life and others. Be prepared with facts and figures as well as personal anecdotes. It is possible that the person receiving your correspondence is unfamiliar with the issue, so provide enough background information so that they can understand. If you have any expertise on a particular issue, you should feel empowered to offer yourself as a resource to your elected official. Come prepared with thoughtful, solution-oriented ideas to share.

Developing your Personal Story—Referencing your participation in Up to Us is a great way to share your personal interest and commitment to our nation's fiscal future. Be sure to share with the person you're speaking with information on what you learned while participating in Up to Us, what you heard from your peers, and why you feel it is important for elected officials to take action on this issue now.

- ➔ **Make a specific request.** What specifically are you asking them to do about the issue? Your request might be to support a certain piece of legislation or an issue more broadly, or it could be for more information, such as asking what their plans are to address the issue or what they think should be done. You can also request a virtual meeting with your elected official so you can explain the nitty-gritty details on your stance and see their reactions in real-time.
- ➔ **Be appreciative.** Be sure to thank them for their time.

Who Exactly Are You Contacting?

The first person you speak to—via email, phone or even in a meeting—is often a staff member who works for the elected official rather than the official themselves, especially if you are reaching out to a federal office. **But don't be shy! Staffers are likely to be your peers, interning or working their first job post-graduation.**



Do's & Don'ts of Contacting Elected Officials

Your time, and their time, is important! Save yourself time and hassle by paying attention to these do's and don'ts.

DO

- **Be specific.** Have a specific issue in mind, and what you'd like your elected official to do about it before you reach out. If it's easier, write out what you want to discuss before getting in touch. You may want to include a few compelling facts to add urgency to your message.
- **Be personal.** Say where you're from and include your ZIP code. This will prove that you are a constituent and a member of the local community, to underscore that your voting decisions will have an impact on the elected official you're reaching out to. Make your message personal by explaining how you/your community is being affected.
- **Be brief.** Keep your message to the point by limiting yourself to two to three supporting points.
- **Be respectful.** It's great to be passionate about a cause but remember that the people you're reaching out to are humans too. Remember to thank the person for their time and let them know how you will follow up.

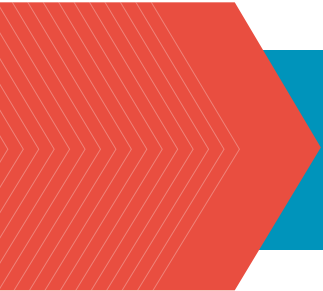
DON'T

- **Don't expect to speak personally with your elected officials.** They have many demands and pressures that take up their time, and usually have teams responding to their social media messages or staffers to answer their calls.
- **Don't get angry.** Whether you're calling or sending a note, avoid personal attacks, emotional arguments and threats—they won't help you get your points across.
- **Don't include attachments if you're sending an email.** Elected officials rarely print or read attachments to emails. Instead, you can offer to provide supporting documents on request.
- **Don't reach out to elected officials who don't represent you or your community.** The best way to break through to Congress is by contacting your own elected official. You have the power of a vote for their seat, which warrants their attention to the issues you as their constituent care about. Channel your energy and passion on the issues that matter most to you by starting conversations with your local and state officials, because those are the people who will bring real change to your communities.

What To Expect After You've Contacted Your Elected Officials

If you've requested a response from the elected official you reached out to, be patient—they may be backlogged with responding to other constituents. If you haven't requested a response, then don't expect to hear back.

Meanwhile, keep track of your elected officials' legislative actions, initiatives and priorities. Federally elected officials have very robust websites that provide information on their priorities, initiatives, bills they have sponsored or co-sponsored, social media and contact information. This is a great place to start when seeking out information on your elected officials or tracking their legislative actions.



Then, spread the word! Share resources like this with your friends and family who want to reach out to their elected officials and continue the conversation on social media. The more voices that join your cause, the more attention you'll get.

The Most Important Way You Can Get Heard Is Voting

Elected officials are more likely to make the changes you want if they know you are a reliable voter. Simply put, they know you will hold them accountable if you are a registered voter and have an active voting record. This is just one reason why it is critical to vote in every election at all levels of government.

How do federal, state, and local elections differ?

The biggest difference is that state and local elections occur more frequently. While the Presidential election takes place every four years and many state or local elections occur at the same time, many more elections happen in your state and local community every year that have direct and immediate impacts on your day-to-day life and future. [Find out](#) when elections are coming up in your state.

Why are local elections so important?

The decisions made by local governments have the greatest impact on your everyday life and because these policies affect the community you live in, it is important to exercise your right to vote in local elections and stay connected with these elected officials once they take office. Local election turnout is generally very low and is routinely decided by a handful of votes, meaning your vote can have significant influence.

How do local elections influence what happens at the state level?

Local elections are often where a lot of innovation happens because local officials have less oversight and more flexibility and authority to act. Some of the most revolutionary policies and programs started at the local level and sparked interest at the state and federal levels to ensure more Americans could benefit from good thinking and policy. Issues like civil rights and women’s suffrage were first enacted at the local and state level, which created momentum for bigger movements.

How can I remember all these elections?

You can sign up for election reminders [here](#). Voting tip: make a plan and consider voting early if you can.

Most importantly, make sure you are registered to vote. Each state creates their own voting laws, so it is important to check your registration status, identify the election calendar, and ensure you know where to go to vote and if you need an ID to vote.

- Find out how to register to vote in your state [here](#).

Lastly, get involved! You can [sign up](#) and train to be a part of the process in your voting precinct. You can be a poll worker, serve on a committee, or an election judge.



It’s Up to Us to Get Heard

Whether you’re passionate about health care, higher education, clean energy technology or national defense, you have a vested interest in making sure we get our fiscal policy on a sustainable path.

Through Up to Us, you can get loud about our long-term fiscal and economic challenges and be heard about how this issue affects you.

Young people across America like yourself are getting educated about fiscal policy and making changes at their colleges and universities with Up to Us. In addition to reaching out to your elected officials, you can [sign the pledge](#) to let local representatives know that you are concerned about the nation’s fiscal future, or [get involved](#) by learning about how you can make a difference in your own community.

In all of your outreach to elected officials, remember to be nonpartisan in your discussions. **After all, charting a better course for a sustainable fiscal future isn’t a partisan issue—it’s a matter of basic math.**