



Live Well. Do Good.

FINANCE INSPIRATION BUSINESS IDEAS ISSUES

THE DAILY GOOD

Sign up to receive the best of GOOD delivered to your inbox each and every weekday.

EMAIL ADDRESS:

SHARE THIS

COMMUNITIES

What You Need To Know To Be A Citizen Activist

by *Emily Ellsworth*

Share 1547 November 29, 2016



Photo: Emily Ellsworth

I worked for Congress for six years, and during that time I learned the power of citizen activism. I met with hundreds of people. Some of them were professional lobbyists with polished pitches, but many were groups of concerned citizens who wanted to have their voices heard by their representative. After November 8, 2016, and the election of Donald Trump, thousands of people felt as if they'd been knocked down and as if they would no longer have representation in Washington, D.C. For those who want to make progress after the inauguration in January, there are a few things you need to know.

On November 11, 2016, I [tweeted out some advice](#) about the most effective ways to contact your representatives. Those tweets have now been viewed over 26 million times and have been featured in dozens of articles. Ever since, congressional phone lines have been [ringing off the hook](#) about presidential appointments, auditing the general election, and investigating the president-elect's finances. However, if you've never called your representative before, you may have a few questions about how those calls work.

Do Some Research

First, do some research before you call. After my tweets went viral, my Twitter mentions and email inboxes were flooded with questions about logistics: who is my member of congress; how do I find their phone numbers; when do they schedule town hall meetings, et cetera. In response to these questions, I wrote a [short guide](#) about how to contact your representative the smart way. It's a good place to start if you want an insider's view into Congress's day-to-day operations and what you need to know before you call.

Find Out About Your Representatives

Find out who your representatives are, both federally and locally. Know which committees your two senators and one representative sit on, as this will give you an idea of their legislative interests. Add their Washington, D.C., and state office phone numbers as contacts to your phone. Visit their websites and sign up for their email lists in order receive alerts about town hall meetings.

Know How Congress Operates

But, even more than these basic steps, you'll need to know more about how Congress operates. For instance, know which are federal issues and which are state issues. As a congressional staffer, I found that constituents sometimes confused legislation that was happening in our state legislature with what was happening in Washington, D.C. Issues that directly affect your state or city are handled on a local level. Some of these issues include education funding and allocation, Medicaid expansion and eligibility, and traffic laws.

You'll also want to understand the difference between the responsibilities of House of Representatives and the Senate. In many ways, their jobs overlap, but the Senate is the only legislative body that has the responsibility to vet and confirm presidential appointments. The House of Representatives is in charge of drafting the initial budget and passing it on to the Senate.

One of the reasons that research is so important is that it will prevent you from spinning your wheels or using your time to call or write about efforts that your representative has no control over. In my experience, I was willing to take hundreds of calls about my boss's position on an issue without much of a complaint. However, when we received a large number of phone calls about something beyond the scope of our responsibility—we were polite, but frustrated. When you see a call to action in an email, Facebook post, or tweet, make sure your time isn't wasted by doing some fact-checking before you call. A little time spent on research means you can ask insightful questions when you are on the phone and get more information from your representative and their staff.

Volunteer

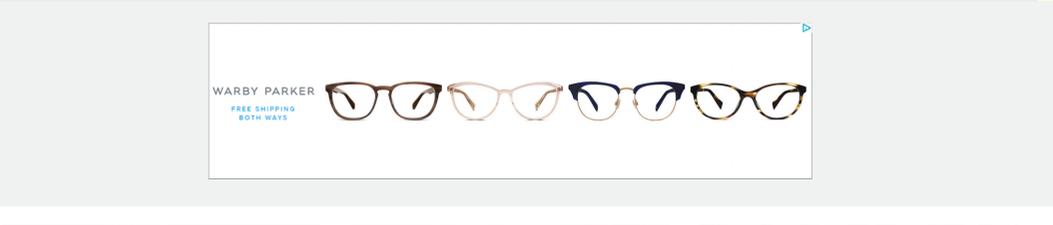
If you're new to citizen activism, you may not be sure where to start, beyond calls to action from social media or email. One of the best ways you can get involved is by volunteering and working with other citizen advocates and advocacy groups. The reason? They are equipped to do the research for you. Many of the people involved in these groups understand how Congress works and they create important legislative agendas that you can follow. They also have strength in numbers and can coordinate good calls to action that make a significant impact. They're also aware of initiatives in your state legislature and city councils. When combined with your other efforts, you'll have plenty to do and a good group of people to work with.

As a congressional staffer, I wished I heard more from constituents. Getting involved with your representative and community means that, regardless of your similarities or differences on policy positions, you are having a dialogue with the office that represents you in Washington, D.C. These conversations, based on real stories and experiences, are what will continue to open minds and shift the conversation to real solutions.



RECENTLY ON GOOD

- J.K. Rowling Roasts Trump For His Latest 'Unbelievable' Achievement** TRUMP Tod Perry
- SNL's 'Neil DeGrasse Tyson' Will Celebrate The Eclipse In A Most Unusual Way** MONEY Penn Collins
- Fox CEO Rips Trump's Response To Charlottesville, Pledges \$1MM To The Anti-Defamation League** MONEY Penn Collins
- What If Every Student Could Be a Genius?** GOOD BRAND STUDIO for XO
- Red Sox Ask Boston To Change Street Named After Racist Former Owner** SPORTS Robert Silverman
- An NFL Player Tested The League's New Celebration Policy With Some Sweet Moves** SPORTS Penn Collins
- Not Everyone Is Happy With Tina Fey's Cake-Eating Bit** CULTURE Kate Ryan



Steve Bannon Removed From White House Chief Strategist Role

He's believed to have been behind Trump's disastrous Charlottesville response. by [Tod Perry](#)

Tim Cook, Critical Of Trump's Response To Charlottesville, Pledges \$2MM To Fight Hate

The letter to Apple employees takes a stronger stance than our president did. by [Penn Collins](#)

From Charlottesville To Athens, People Around The World Mourn Heather Heyer

"If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." by [Tasbeeh Herwees](#)