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Finding, Tracking, Advocating - Keeping Up with Legislation and Legislators

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Finding, Tracking, Advocating
Keeping Up with Legislation and Legislators
Why Bother?

“...our democracy depends on us for more than simply casting our votes. **Our representatives also need to hear directly from us, either through letters or in person**... On any given issue that comes up on Capitol Hill, you can bet they’ll be hearing from lobbyists, interest groups.... But **in order for our representatives to do their jobs well, they also need to understand their constituents**....”

Lee Hamilton, Congressman, 1965 - 1999

http://72.32.58.69/radio_commentaries/cornerstones_of_active_citizenship.php
Online Sources for Political News

- **CQ Roll Call**  [http://www.rollcall.com/](http://www.rollcall.com/)
  Detailed reporting of all the doings on the Hill. Covers numerous policy areas, influential staffers, lobbying, etc. Good reference material on member seniority, fundraising, and media appearances. Individuals can register to set up email alerts.

- **CQ Weekly**  [http://library.cqpress.com/cqweekly/](http://library.cqpress.com/cqweekly/)
  Weekly news and analysis of people and events in Congress. Tables track key votes, presidential support votes, party unity, status of appropriations bills, etc.

- **National Journal**  [http://www.nationaljournal.com](http://www.nationaljournal.com)
  Good news coverage of Congress, US politics, some key sectors like Defense, Energy, and Health Care. Also hosts the subscription-only Almanac of American Politics, a useful source for all kinds of info on members and staffers.
Online Sources cont.

  Good source for news on Congress and Capitol Hill

- New York Times, Washington Post, and other news sites often have good political coverage.

- Any number of political or issue sites, such as:
  - Townhall [http://townhall.com/](http://townhall.com/)
Other Sources

- **E-mail alerts**
  - ALA Washington Office
    - [http://www.ala.org/offices/wo/](http://www.ala.org/offices/wo/)
  - WVLA Listserv: [WVLA-LIST@listserv.wvu.edu](mailto:WVLA-LIST@listserv.wvu.edu)
  - Many advocacy groups will send you alerts

- **Twitter**
  - ALA Washington Office [https://twitter.com/ala_wo_leginfo](https://twitter.com/ala_wo_leginfo)

- **Facebook groups** [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)
Finding Federal Legislation

- **http://beta.congress.gov/**
  Replacement for THOMAS legislative system. Contains all legislation from 1973-present; the Congressional Record and committee reports from 1995-present. Can search or browse for legislation by category, member, or committee. No tracking options.

  Note: THOMAS is still available until end of 2014 at [http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php](http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php)

- **https://www.govtrack.us/**
  Contains all legislation from 1973-present, some limited info on bills from earlier periods, roll call votes from 1789-present, and much more. Best source for tracking bills, members, and committees. Also tracks some state legislation.
Finding Legislation cont.

- [http://www.opencongress.org/](http://www.opencongress.org/)
  Data from 109th Congress (2005)-present. Track bills, members, and committees; compare members voting records; get permalinks to individual lines of bill text; create tracking widgets. Includes an interactive message builder for contacting all 3 reps at once.

- [http://scout.sunlightfoundation.com/](http://scout.sunlightfoundation.com/)
  Uses open data to create email or SMS alerts for bills in Congress, court opinions, federal regulations, state bills, GAO reports, and speeches in Congress. Can also add RSS feeds from any source to customize alerts.
Finding Legislation cont.

- https://www.popvox.com/
  Not a discussion forum but rather a place for action. Makes it easy to contact Members of Congress. Open API and several interesting widgets for visualizing and mobilizing support/opposition to bills.

  Covers major bills, votes, and nominations. Provides recent actions and links to full text of bills. Can browse by subject category and get feeds for all their trackers.
YOUR MESSAGE IN THE LANGUAGE OF CONGRESS

1. Find a bill you care about.
2. Choose to support or oppose it.
3. Share your opinion with Congress and the world.

GET STARTED
Latest Major Vote

THURSDAY | H.Con.Res.96

Approves GOP Budget
Establishing the budget for the United States Government for fiscal year 2015 and setting forth appropriate budgetary levels for fiscal years 2016 through 2024.

Passed in the House by 6 Votes
Yes Votes Dem 6 Rep 219
No Votes Dem 193 Rep 12
Details of the Vote on H.Con.Res.96
Article: House Approves Budget With Big Spending Cuts

House

No session scheduled for today.

Votes
- Major Votes
- Most Recent

Bills
- Likely to Be Considered Today
- Major Bills
- Recent Actions
- By Category

Senate

No session scheduled for today.

Votes
- Major Votes
- Most Recent

Bills
- Likely to Be Considered Today
- Major Bills
- Recent Actions
- By Category
Following Committees

- Govtrack and OpenCongress good for tracking committee bills and activity
- Senate: https://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/committees/d_three_sections_with_teasers/committees_home.htm
- House: http://www.house.gov/committees/
- No standard format for Committee sites; some have lots of useful info—reports, press releases, hearing video and transcripts, etc.—but many do not.
- Many committees have subcommittees with their own websites (the link for the minority party is sometimes buried in the footer).
Votes

- Roll call votes (also linked from Congress.gov):
  - Senate (1989-present): [https://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/a_three_sections_with_teasers/votes.htm](https://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/a_three_sections_with_teasers/votes.htm)

- Govtrack has roll call votes back to 1789
- NYT Inside Congress has nice graphic view of votes [https://politics.nytimes.com/congress/votes](https://politics.nytimes.com/congress/votes)
Calendars and Schedules

- U.S House
  - floor schedule: http://majorityleader.gov/Floor/
  - committee hearings schedule: http://docs.house.gov/committee/
  - today's calendar and history of legislation: http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/getTodaysHouseCalendar.action

- U.S. Senate
  - floor schedule: https://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/legislative/d_three_sections_with_teasers/calendars.htm
  - committee hearings schedule: https://www.senate.gov/pagelayout/committees/b_three_sections_with_teasers/committee_hearings.htm
  - today's Legislative Calendar: http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/getTodaysSenateCalendar.action
Finding WV Legislation

West Virginia Legislature

http://www.legis.state.wv.us/index.cfm

http://www.legis.state.wv.us/Bill_Status/bill_status.cfm
Bill status for the West Virginia Legislature back to 1993

http://www.legis.state.wv.us/billstatus_personlized/PBT/persbills_login.cfm
Create an account and then follow bills of interest. Multiple lists can be set up and named.
Free Apps

Examples:

- **Congress** and **Open States** (both from The Sunlight Foundation)
- **TrackBill**
- **Pocket Congress**
- **WV Bills - WV Legislature Live Updates**

Available through the App Store, Google Play, and various websites.
Now What? - Advocacy!

- Be prepared before you contact your legislator
  - If your organization has a position, know what it is.
  - If this is on your own, do some research.
  - Know what your legislator’s position is on the issue and why (previous votes, political party, pressure from constituents/influential groups).
  - Know the arguments of the opposing side and be prepared to counter them.
Advocacy cont.

- Decide how you want to contact your legislator
  - E-mail – personal or through a website
  - Written letter or fax
  - Telephone
  - Personal visit – district office, DC office, local town-hall event

- Decide when to contact your legislator
  - During the committee hearings
  - Just before a floor vote
Written communication

- Be clear and concise
  - Address only one issue
  - Specify the bill number
  - Be explicit about what you want the legislator to do
- State your position (for or against) and make two or three of your strongest arguments.
  - Tell how the issue affects you, your family, and your community.
- Identify yourself and your constituency.
- Ask for a reply.
- Avoid form letters/emails – rewrite them as personal communications.
- Be aware that written letters to the DC office may be delayed for security checks.
Telephone

- Same general rules as for written communications
  - Can be especially effective right before a vote
- Call congressional offices directly or through the switchboard.
  - Or, call the district office (especially on Fridays or during recesses)
- Ask to speak to the aide who handles the issue you are interested in.
  - Don’t expect to talk to the legislator.
  - If the aide is not available, leave a brief message.
- Let them know you are a constituent.
- If the legislator supports your position, express your appreciation and thanks.
- Be brief!
Personal Meetings

- Very often the most effective lobbying effort.
- Make arrangements at least 3 weeks ahead for office visits.
  - Be aware that you will probably meet with an aide
  - Provide:
    - your name/address
    - who will be attending
    - when and where you want to meet (give alternatives)
    - how much time you need (not over 30 minutes)
    - the issue you want to discuss.
- Contact the scheduler a few days later to confirm details
- Follow-up after the meeting – thanks to legislator and staff involved, and provide additional info that was asked for.
Testifying Before A Hearing

- Always be prepared before you give testimony.
  - Develop a comprehensive statement of your position
  - Get a rough vote count of how legislators are likely to vote
  - Try to find out about outstanding issues and concerns
  - Find out any requirements, e.g. how many copies of your statement, how many witnesses, time limits

- Choose witnesses who will be credible and effective:
  - people directly affected by the legislation or subject experts
  - high-ranking, well-informed volunteer in your organization
  - the chief staff officer or other senior staff of your group
  - individuals and organizations that represent legislators’ constituents
Testifying Before A Hearing cont.

- Write out your testimony in advance.
  - Make sure that it is clear, concise, and persuasive.
  - Include personal stories whenever possible to show how the issue affects real people.
- Give oral statements from a brief outline (not read); maintain eye contact with committee members.
- Prepare a summary of your testimony for distribution at the hearing to legislators, the media, and other attendees.
- Anticipate questions legislators might ask and plan how to respond.
- Don’t be afraid to admit you don’t know something – offer to provide the information after the hearing.
- Give friendly legislators questions for you, and responses to the opposing arguments.
Testifying Before A Hearing cont.

- Get other groups to sign onto your testimony to strengthen the impact of your statement.
- Consider bringing your supporters to be in the audience.
- Ask committee members to vote in support of your position!
- Follow up with legislators, both friendly and hostile.
Do’s for Advocates

- Address the legislator properly and respectively.
- Know the status of the legislation, and refer to the bill number.
- Use your own words.
- Be brief and explicit, courteous and reasonable.
- Personalize your concerns: how will this bill/issue affect you.
- Write to say you approve, not just to criticize or oppose.
- Always keep off-the-record comments confidential.
Don’ts for Advocates

- Don’t begin with “As a citizen and tax payer…”
- Don’t apologize for taking up their time – just be brief and use the time effectively.
- Don’t be arrogant, condescending, blustering, or threatening towards the legislator or their staff.
- Don’t argue with the legislator – just state your position.
- Don’t get away from your talking points.
- Don’t mention, hint, or imply anything about campaign contributions!
Acknowledgement

This presentation was inspired by Jeremy Darrington’s Keeping Up with Congress webinar (February 21, 2014), part of the North Carolina Library Association’s Help! I’m an Accidental Government Information Librarian series.


The presentation slides are at http://www.nclaonline.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov/Webinars_KeepingCong_2%2021%202014.pdf