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## **GETTING YOUR MESSAGE OUT TO POLITICAL OFFICIALS**

Reaching out to your local, state and national representatives is an effective way of shaping US policy on Venezuela.

The most effective way of reaching out to Congress is having a nationally coordinated, unified message. The VIO will have information about your political official's position and can recommend ways of successfully framing your message. Likewise, there may be times when there will be the need for constituents to focus on specific issues, or to use of strategic opportunities. Please feel free to contact the Governmental Affairs department at the VIO should you have questions about current issues in Congress, or specific ways you can help support Venezuela. For example, if you live/work in a key district of a Senator who sits on the Foreign Affairs Committee, you might want your communication to reflect the current political situation, any bills that may already be on the floor, and the Senator's voting history. The VIO's Public Education department can also help direct you to any local campaigns or active groups in your area, so you can better synchronize your outreach plan. It is always more impactful to encourage other constituents to deliver the same message,

### **COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS: LETTER WRITING**

#### **PERSONAL LETTERS**

A personal letter to your elected official shows your level of commitment to the issue. Personal letters have a strong impact on elected representatives, especially if you are a constituent living in his/her district. Try to write letters that are both educational and logical and that reflect your concerns or support the issue at hand.

Keep in mind that letters to Capital Hill go through a screening process, and can take up to two weeks to reach their destinations. These days, it is advisable to fax a copy of your letter with a note that states that the original is in the mail, especially if the issue that you are writing about is time sensitive.

#### **TIPS FOR YOUR LETTER**

- Be brief.
- Be succinct, and to the point with your message. Address only one topic per letter.
- Be specific. If discussing legislation, for example, refer to specific bills with their reference number and reveal how their vote will affect your community.
- Be understood. Type your letter.
- Be supportive: Write a thank you letter commending them for their position when they do something right, or appreciation for their service.

- Make sure it gets to the appropriate office: [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) are both websites that list the addresses and fax numbers of your representatives
- Follow-up your letters with a phone call.

*Below is an example of an effective letter to Congress that promotes the social programs and achievements in Venezuela.*

### **Sample Letter**

(Your name and address here)

The Honorable (Name of Senator or Representative)  
(Room Number, Office Building)  
U.S. Senate/ U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 205(10-Senate), (15-House of Representatives)

Dear Senator/Representative (Last Name),

Thank you for your dedication to ensuring that US foreign policy reflects our values of democracy and justice. I am writing today to address Venezuela. I have been following the social and democratic initiatives being carried out there for some time, and I think that it sets a benchmark for regional development, and democratic participation. With the 1999 Constitution, the country's most historically marginalized sectors have finally been given a voice. Venezuela's efforts to decrease poverty, guarantee social, cultural and economic rights, and ensure that all Venezuelans have access to health care and education are a lesson for us all. As a teacher, and a member of the religious community in your district, I am heartened by this national movement towards justice.

I believe that there is indeed room for continued constructive and proactive dialog regarding Venezuela in the United States, and for a shift to a more benevolent foreign policy, and I thank you for your commitment to improving bilateral relations between the two countries. I urge you to act in your role in the United States Congress to recognize these innovative programs and Venezuela's democratic spirit, and to encourage other members of Congress to do so as well.

Sincerely,

(your name here)

## Email Correspondence

Email is another effective way to reach out to your representative but it tends to be overused and can be deleted. A personal letter will always be more effective.

### Tips for Your Email

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- Treat it as an electronic personal letter, and follow the same guidelines as you would for a personal letter.
- Rather than sending a general email to your Congress member, find out which staff member handles his or her Latin American or Foreign Policy related issues and email them directly. This will ensure that the message gets read by a knowledgeable staffer, rather than an intern.
- Organize an email “blitz” or campaign when appropriate. When a Member of Congress receives several emails on the same issue, he or she understands the relevance to his or her constituents.
- Headline your email submission by taking advantage of the email subject line.
- Include your home address.

### TAKING IT TO THE CAPITOL: VISIT YOUR REPRESENTATIVE

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A personal meeting, when done properly, can be the most effective way to influence your representative and build a strong, ongoing relationship. Keep in mind that most meetings will be with a staff member rather than with a Member of Congress. Often, staff members are more familiar with the specific policy details and can better understand how to respond to your concerns and make recommendations to Members of Congress regarding policy.

- Before the meeting you should familiarize yourself with the Member’s background, Committee assignments and general information. You can collect information about your representative by going to the following websites:
  - Committee assignments: [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)
  - Voting record: [www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)
- Write a letter requesting a meeting, listing your reasons for the meeting and clarifying your position in a concise way.
- Always follow-up your letter with a phone call.
- Determine who will be attending the meeting.
- Prepare all people attending the meeting with the talking points.
- Identify the person who will be facilitating the meeting.
- You will usually have approximately 20-30 minutes, but sometimes you may only have 5, so prepare an agenda and any materials to support your position.
- Confirm your appointment one week before, and the morning of the meeting

## **During the Meeting**

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- Make a personal connection with the person with whom you are meeting
- Introduce yourself and the community for which you represent.
- Explain the importance of the issue to you.
- If the Member has an opposing view, explain why you believe it is important for him or her to change his or her position
- Make a specific request and ask for an immediate response
- Set-up a follow-up conversation or meeting, in the interest of maintaining a good relationship with the office.
- Always be courteous and express your appreciation for the meeting.

## **After the Meeting**

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- Send a thank you letter
- Determine your next steps and plan for a follow-up.
- Send any information or materials you offered or mentioned during the meeting with a short note reminding your contact of your conversation and the importance of the materials. Ask for response.

## **Tips for an Effective Visit to Capitol Hill**

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- Acknowledge the Member's positive actions
- Stay focused on your agenda and assigned roles
- Be clear, concise and firm in your message and make sure not to get off track. Express your concerns and desired reactions from the office.
- Maintain open lines of communication.
- Keep your cool. Agree to disagree when necessary, but always be courteous.