



VISITING YOUR LEGISLATORS

Important Points to Remember

As you visit your legislators, you will want to be mindful of various characteristics of the legislative process. These qualities influence how policy is made, including the effects of your interaction with congressional staff. Remember the following points about the legislative process, knowing that policymaking is not a straightforward process:

The legislative process is deliberately complex, ensuring that proposed new laws and policies receive the fullest possible consideration. Most bills introduced never receive any action, and few of those considered become law. A legislative proposal may be introduced year after year before it gains consideration. Hang in there and consider how to approach your goal when you try again.

Every legislative body has informal customs and practices. These customs and practices can be as important as the body's formal rules. For example, key policy decisions are made by the leadership in some legislatures, by a policy committee in others, and by the majority party members in yet others. Who is making the decisions?

All of government including the legislature is political. Candidates for most legislative seats are nominated through partisan political processes and chosen in partisan elections. The political party that wins a majority of seats in each legislative body also wins the right to pick the leaders of that body, and often the staff. Consider how party politics might shape your approach.

Legislative proposals may be weighed subjectively. They are often considered not only on their merits but also on these basic political questions:

- How will the bill affect the legislator's reelection prospects?
- What are constituents (citizen voters) saying about the issue?
- What are the views of the news media, community and business leaders, and local interest groups?
- What will be the impact on the economy and jobs?
- Are any significant local campaign supporters taking a public position on the issue?
- What is the advice from the legislator's staff members and advisers?
- Is this issue consistent with the legislator's previous votes on related matters, and with his or her political and economic philosophies?
- Do these political factors need to be addressed explicitly during your congressional visit, or implicitly as you shape and practice the message you are attempting to deliver?

The legislative process is customarily very open. Every interested citizen usually has the opportunity to offer input and express opinions at various stages of the process. Public comments are welcome. Although the process is complex, with many hidden and open factors influencing it, the government is of and by the people. Do not be shy about expressing yourself; just approach your meetings in full awareness of the context in which you are working.

When you participate actively in the political process, you are joining a lively discussion on public policy. Legislators lobby (attempt to influence) each other and are influenced, in turn, by the executive branch of government, other public and private interests, and self-styled activists.