



The American College of  
Chest Physicians

Guide for

**Communicating  
With Members of  
Congress**



## Introduction

Elected officials count on, and need, constituent input to become effective legislators. Ongoing communication is the only way your congressional representative will know and understand how you, the voter, feel about particular issues.

This guide for *Communicating With Members of Congress* outlines the various communication tools available to you, as a member of the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP) and as a concerned citizen. While the guide refers specifically to communicating with members of Congress, the suggestions and methods covered can easily apply to any elected representative at every level of public service.

Letters, e-mails, phone calls, personal visits, and group meetings are typical ways in which constituents get their message to legislators. As a member of the medical community, your responsibility in communicating with members of Congress is especially great, as you are a patient advocate. Who better to explain the complex nature of medically related policy decisions than those involved with them on a day-to-day basis?

*“ACCP’s support and involvement were extremely important for me in crafting tobacco regulation legislation.”*

*—Senator John McCain, R-AZ*

## Tips on Communicating With Members of Congress

### Do:

- **Do** identify clearly the subject or subjects in which you are interested. Do not just use the House and Senate bill numbers. Remember, it is easy to get a bill number wrong.
- **Do** state why you are concerned about an issue. Remember, you can be most effective in conveying your message by relating the issue to your own personal or professional experiences. Explain how you think an issue will affect your patients, the medical profession, your community, or your family.
- **Do** restrict yourself to one or, at most, two topics. Focus your arguments.
- **Do** put thoughts into your own words. This is especially important if you are responding to something you have read. If a member of Congress receives numerous letters or e-mails with nearly identical wording, he or she may discount them as part of an organized pressure campaign. However, pressure campaigns have worked when mail was so voluminous that it had to be weighed, rather than read.
- **Do** try to establish a relationship with your own representative and senators. In general, you will have more influence as a voting constituent. If you do not know your congressional district, use the ACCP Grassroots Advocacy Web site at [www.capwiz.com/chestnet](http://www.capwiz.com/chestnet). Enter your zip code, and the site will identify your representative and senators.
- **Do** communicate while legislation is being considered by congressional committees and subcommittees, as well as when it is on the House and Senate floor.
- **Do** use the ACCP Grassroots Advocacy Web site, [www.capwiz.com/chestnet](http://www.capwiz.com/chestnet), to sign up to become an ACCP Grassroots Advocate, and participate in action alerts and contact Congress today!

- **Do** find out the committees and subcommittees on which your representative and senators serve. Members of Congress have much more influence over legislation within their committees' and subcommittees' jurisdictions.

## **Don't:**

- **Do not** threaten. Do not ever hint, "I'll never vote for you unless you do what I want." Present the best arguments in favor of your position, and ask for their consideration. It is not necessary to remind any public official of electoral consequences. Mail, e-mail, and phone calls will be considered without veiled threats.
- **Do not** pretend to wield vast political influence. Contact your member, functioning as a constituent, not as a self-appointed spokesperson for the medical community. There are times, however, when you will represent a group of physicians or the ACCP; in those instances, do not fail to mention your spokesperson status. In such cases, also remember there is strength in numbers. Notify your legislator of the number of ACCP members in your district and state.
- **Do not** use trite phrases or clichés. They can make your e-mail/letter sound mass-produced when it is not. Just be yourself.
- **Do not** become a pen pal. Some congressional offices will discount mail from seemingly tireless letter-writing constituents.

*"I believe that every ACCP member should establish a relationship with his/her representative in order to make a dent in the decision-making process with regard to our issues of interest."*

*—Mohammed Sahloul, MD, FCCP*

## Correspondence

E-mails are the most convenient and common way of communicating with elected officials in today's world. Although members of Congress can receive hundreds of e-mails each week, your e-mail will have an impact. Be sure to include all of your contact information, including your home address, so the member knows you are a constituent.

When writing a letter, be sure to do the following: write on personal or business stationery, type your name and address at the end, sign it, and either fax or send it as a PDF file via e-mail. Due to security precautions, posted mail now often takes weeks to reach each congressional office.

Representatives read a significant portion of their correspondence personally, and many ask their staff to select the most interesting and revealing correspondence. Congressional offices keep a weekly and, in some cases, daily count of how correspondence is running on particular issues.

Your correspondence counts! Be sure to avoid "form" letters (*ie*, Dear Colleague/Friend), and be yourself!

*"The ACCP Capitol Hill caucus was a great opportunity to learn about the interplay of politics and patient care. It made me realize how important this form of patient advocacy is."*

*—Franklin McGuire, MD*

## Telephone

Telephone calls are a very powerful tool to make your views known to a member of Congress. A phone call is more personal than an electronic message and usually has more impact. You may contact your member in Washington by phoning the Capitol Switchboard. Simply call (202) 224-3121 and ask for your member's office, or give your home zip code if you do not know their name. If you call, most likely you will speak with staff. Ask to speak to the legislative aide who is handling the specific issue about which you are calling.

If you leave a voicemail message, include your name and phone number so that the staff person can call you back. Identify yourself as a constituent and a physician, and state your location (town or city) and request for action.

Telephone calls can also be used to learn where a member of Congress stands on an issue, which you can then incorporate into follow-up correspondence. Be sure to do your homework before you call. Chances are good that the staff person on the other end will specialize in your issue of concern.

If you truly want to talk to a member of Congress rather than a person on the staff, get a group together, and try to set up a prearranged conference call. A question-and-answer session, conducted from the privacy of your office, is often convenient. Once again, you should do your homework and know the arguments in opposition to, as well as in support of, your views.

Remember: members of Congress debate issues at great length; in a dialogue, they have as much of an opportunity to persuade you, as you have to persuade them.

## Face-to-Face Meetings

Meeting a member of Congress or a member's staff face-to-face is the best way to present your views.

While it may be difficult to arrange a one-on-one meeting with a representative or senator in Washington, it is always worth the effort. If the member is unavailable in Washington, try to meet with him/her by visiting the district or regional office. Arranging a group meeting can improve your chance of a face-to-face meeting. Call the member's Washington office, ask for the administrative assistant, and inquire how you can best arrange the meeting. Also, be sure to attend the ACCP Capitol Hill Caucus, where you will have an opportunity to meet with your congressional delegation and/or their staff.

Another way to meet with members of Congress is to invite them to address an audience with a question-and-answer session included. While almost any organization can be the host, a hospital can be an ideal setting, because members are always enthusiastic about visiting places with large numbers of constituents. A hospital visit also offers the perfect opportunity to educate the member about medicine and the day-to-day effects of health-care policy on your patients.

Call a member's Washington office, and ask for the scheduler. If you are flexible regarding the date, make an offer months in advance. If you aim for a traditional congressional recess, you will have a good chance of getting an appointment at home. Please note that several congressional offices have schedulers in Washington and at home, so be prepared to make another call!

Getting the face-to-face meeting, however, is only the first step. If you want a meeting to serve your purposes, investigate the issues of concern thoroughly—both pro and con. Think of the best way to express your views in the forum in which you are meeting, and be prepared to discuss issues with someone who has likely acquired extraordinary skills for dealing with people—a politician.

Do not underestimate a member of Congress. He or she did not get elected by underestimating you.

## **When To Meet With Members of Congress**

Congress traditionally convenes shortly after New Year's Day, although members often shuttle back to their states and districts in January. Usually, there is a 10-day recess scheduled around Lincoln's birthday, Easter, Memorial Day, and Independence Day. Congress goes home on the first of August and reconvenes after Labor Day.

Short 4- or 5-day breaks are taken for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Columbus Day. Adjournment for the year is invariably set in October and, invariably, missed. During nonelection years, Congress may sit through early or mid-December, taking a break for Thanksgiving. During election years, Congress adjourns in early October, in order to campaign—sometimes reconvening in December, if absolutely necessary.

*"I have come to realize that it is OUR responsibility to make sure our legislators are informed about the issues that confront medicine, from the medical perspective."*

*—Paul Banick, MD, FCCP*

## **Addressing Correspondence**

The Honorable (full name)  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

**or**

The Honorable (full name)  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

## **Sending E-Mail to Congress**

Follow the same suggestions as for a printed letter. Identify the topic in the subject line.

Many members now have Web sites with an e-mail link for you to use. To access a member's Web site, visit [www.congress.org](http://www.congress.org), or go to [www.capwiz.com/chestnet](http://www.capwiz.com/chestnet) and click on "Elected Officials".

## **Calling Members of Congress**

If you do not know the phone number for a member of Congress, call the Capitol Hill switchboard, at (202) 224-3121, and ask to be connected with the member's office.

## Glossary of Legislative Terms

The following terms are those most frequently used when dealing with the congressional legislative process. A passing familiarity with this glossary will enable you to effectively communicate with members of Congress.

**Act:** A bill after it has been signed into law.

**Adjournment:** Congress ends a legislative day (which can last longer than 24 hours) by *adjournment*. To adjourn *sine die* means to conclude a legislative day without setting a day to reconvene (which usually happens at the end of a session).

**Advice and Consent:** The Constitution mandates that the President secure the *advice and consent* of the Senate in treaties, which requires a two-thirds majority of those present. For executive and judicial appointments, a simple majority of those present is required.

**Amendment:** A change of a bill, motion, act, or the Constitution.

**Appropriation:** A formal approval to draw funds from the Treasury for specific purposes.

**Authorization:** A law creating a program and establishing funding limits. The actual amount of funds to be drawn from the Treasury is established by an appropriations act.

**Bill:** A proposed law.

**Budget:** The President's annual proposal to Congress, usually submitted in January, for federal expenditures and revenues for the coming fiscal year (which starts October 1).

**Budget Authority:** Allows the federal government to incur a financial liability, typically a contract for direct payment, a loan, or a loan guarantee.

**Budget Resolution:** House- and Senate-passed guidelines, and later caps, on federal budget authority and outlays. The *budget resolution* is not submitted to the President for signature or veto. It is considered a matter of internal congressional rules and procedure. Bills that would exceed budget caps are subject to a point of order—although waivers have been granted regularly in both the House and Senate.

**Clerk of the House:** The chief administrative officer of the House of Representatives, responsible for taking votes, certifying passage, printing and distributing legislative documents, and internal budgeting and accounting.

**Cloture:** Closing off debate. The Senate put an end to unlimited debate in 1917, when it provided that two thirds of those present may invoke the “rule of *cloture*” and set a time limit for discussion. In 1975, support necessary for cloture was changed to three-fifths of the entire Senate. In 1979, a 100-hour cap on debate was imposed after cloture was invoked to limit the use of delaying amendments.

**Committee of the Whole Expediting Procedures:** A different set of legislative rules apply when the House resolves itself into “the *Committee of the Whole House* on the State of the Union.” Only 100 members need to be present to conduct business, rather than 218. After general debate, members can speak on individual amendments for only 5 minutes, rather than an hour. The kinds of motions that may be made are more limited than under general House rules, and the Speaker designates a chairman to preside over the proceedings, rather than preside himself. Historically, voting in *Committee of the Whole* was secret, but the House began permitting recorded votes in 1971. Votes on final passage usually occur after the *Committee as a Whole* has “risen” or dissolved itself. The Senate generally limits the use of the *Committee of the Whole* to treaty ratifications.

**Companion Bills:** Identical bills introduced separately in both the Senate and the House.

**Conferees/Conference Committee:** The House and Senate appoint *conferees* to a *conference committee* to resolve differences between House- and Senate-passed versions of the same legislation. The Speaker of the House and the Senate majority leader appoint *conferees*, although, by tradition, they usually appoint majority and minority members, in a five-to-two ratio, from the committees that had jurisdiction over the legislation.

**Congressional Record:** A verbatim report of all that is said and done in the House and Senate (although members have an opportunity to revise their remarks before publication), except for executive sessions. Whole speeches that are inserted into the record often have not been delivered on the floor. An appendix contains material from representatives who did not speak on the floor, published by permission as “extensions of remarks.”

**Continuing Resolution:** Legislative vehicle to continue government funding, usually at current levels. Used in lieu of appropriations bills that have not been passed.

**Engrossed Bill:** Final copy of a bill, passed by either the House or Senate amendments. The bill is then delivered to the other chamber.

**Enrolled Bill:** Final copy of a bill that has passed both the House and Senate in identical form.

**Executive Session:** A meeting closed to the public.

*“The punishment wise men suffer from indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by unwise men.”*

*—Plato*

**Filibuster:** Delaying tactics to prevent action on a bill. In the Senate, which has a tradition of extended debate, a member may *filibuster* by speaking continuously (reading from the telephone directory, if it is so desired). But a member also retains the floor while yielding to a colleague for a question or by calling for the presence of a quorum (which necessitates a roll call). If the Senate recesses, a member regains the floor when the Senate reconvenes. In the House, *filibustering* is more difficult because members are ordinarily prohibited from speaking more than an hour, and most legislation is considered while the House is in Committee of the Whole, which restricts the kinds of motions that may be offered.

**Fiscal Year:** The federal government's *fiscal year* runs from October 1 through September 30.

**Franking Privilege:** The right of a senator, representative, or member of the federal government to use the US Postal Service free for official business.

**Germaneness:** House rules require that amendments to a bill must relate to the subject matter under consideration, that they be germane. Any member may raise a point of order that an amendment is nongermane and should be ruled out of order. However, the Speaker has considerable discretion in ruling on *germaneness* points of order, which, by deciding which amendments are or are not to be considered, gives him a powerful tool to shape legislation. The House, by majority vote, often accepts the recommendation of its Rules Committee that specified nongermane amendments are permitted. This gives the Rules Committee, which is controlled by the majority party, considerable power to push its legislative agenda by combining unrelated items. In the Senate, the majority party has far less power to control the legislative agenda. Amendments do not have to be germane, unless they are offered to a general appropriations bill. Even then, the Senate can decide to accept them as germane by a simple majority vote. All amendments offered after cloture has been invoked, however, must be germane.

**Lobbying:** The process of attempting to influence the passage, defeat, or content of legislation by individuals or a group, other than members of Congress.

**Majority Leader:** The leader of the majority party in the Senate is called the *majority leader*. The *majority leader* in the House is second in command of the majority party, after the Speaker.

**Mark-Up:** A committee or subcommittee drafting session where proposed legislation is modified.

**Minority Leader:** Leader of the minority party in the House or Senate.

**Omnibus Bill:** Bill regarding a single subject that combines many different aspects of that subject, most frequently used in the appropriations process.

**Pairing:** Members of Congress who are going to be absent for an important vote will often *pair* with another member who would have voted for the opposite side, on matters where a two-thirds majority is required—two members in the affirmative *pair* with one in the negative. *Pairing* is recorded in the Congressional Record but is not included in the voting results. A “live” part of a *live pair* occurs when a *paired* member is on the floor and votes “present.” House rules provide guidelines for *pairing*. The Senate considers the practice a voluntary arrangement among senators, and the *live pair* is counted for purposes of determining whether a quorum is present and if business may be conducted.

**Point of Order:** An objection by a member of Congress that the pending matter or proceeding is in violation of the rules. The presiding officer accepts or rejects the objection, subject to appeal to the full House or Senate. The power of the presiding officer to rule on *points of order*, however, is stronger in the House than the Senate.

**President Pro Tempore:** The temporary presiding officer of the Senate, who serves when the Vice President of the United States is absent (which is most of the time).

**Previous Question:** Members of the House of Representatives may cut off debate and force a vote on an amendment or bill by a motion to “move the *previous question*” but not when sitting in the Committee of the Whole. Moving the *previous question* is not permitted in the Senate.

**Privilege:** Certain kinds of business are considered *privileged* and take precedence over other bills, motions, and questions. Appropriations bills in the House, for example, may be reported from committee and brought to the floor with little or no delay. Questions pertaining to the conduct of members, and the safety, dignity, or integrity of proceedings, are considered *privileged*.

**Private Bills:** Legislation that would benefit individuals or business entities. The House and Senate have different rules for considering *private bills*.

**Quorum:** A majority of members duly chosen and sworn, 218 in the House, and 51 in the Senate (in the absence of deaths or resignations). A *quorum* is necessary to conduct business. Senators may object to the absence of a *quorum* at almost any time, which makes *quorum* roll calls an integral part of Senate parliamentary tactics. House rules are more restrictive, especially while sitting in Committee of the Whole. The presiding officer often controls *quorum* calls, using the delay to further his legislative goals.

**Ranking Members:** The members of the majority and minority party on a committee next in seniority after the chairman.

**Recess:** Concludes legislative day, with a set time for reconvening, usually after more than 3 days of adjournment.

**Reconciliation:** Process by which the authorizing committees in the House and Senate change the various programs they administer in order to meet the federal budget target figures.

**Report:** A printed record of a committee's actions and views on a particular bill or matter. Copies may be obtained from the Clerk of the House or the Secretary of the Senate.

**Rider:** A legislative *rider* is an unrelated item that is attached to a bill so it may *ride* to approval. Because of the germaneness rules, *riders* are more common in the Senate than the House. *Riders* are often attached to appropriations bills.

**Secretary of the Senate:** The chief administrative officer of the Senate who is responsible for taking votes, certifying passage, printing and distributing documents, and internal budgeting and accounting.

**Speaker of the House:** Presiding officer of the House, leader of the majority party in the House (although there is no constitutional requirement that the *Speaker* be a Representative), and next in line to the Vice President for succession to the presidency. The *Speaker* is one of the most powerful positions in Congress.

**Suspension of the Rules:** An expedited procedure for considering legislation in the House. Time for debate is severely restricted; no floor amendments are allowed, but a two-thirds majority is required for passage.

**Tabling Motion:** A proposal to remove a bill from immediate consideration. It is often used to kill a measure.

**Unanimous Consent:** Almost any rule in the House or Senate can be overlooked by *unanimous consent*. The Senate relies on *unanimous consent* agreements to define legislative ground rules for particular measures, which protect the rights of the minority party and force members to work with one another. The House uses *unanimous consent* agreements relatively sparingly—usually to adopt a noncontroversial measure—and legislative ground rules are set by majority vote (often party line).

**Whip:** Assistant leader for each party in each chamber who keeps other members of the party informed of the legislative agenda of the leader. Also tracks sentiment among party members for certain legislation and tries to persuade members to be present and vote for measures important to the leadership.

*“Speech is power; speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel. It is to bring another . . . into your good sense.”*

*—Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## **Congressional Web Sites**

**United States Senate:**

[www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)

**United States Senate Calendar of Business:**

[www.gpoaccess.gov/calendars/senate/index.html](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/calendars/senate/index.html)

**United States House of Representatives:**

[www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov)

**United States House Leadership:**

[www.house.gov/house/orgs\\_pub\\_hse\\_ldr\\_www.html](http://www.house.gov/house/orgs_pub_hse_ldr_www.html)

**United States House Committee Schedule:**

[www.thomas.loc.gov/home/hcomso.html](http://www.thomas.loc.gov/home/hcomso.html)

## **Congressional Information**

**Thomas:**

<http://thomas.loc.gov/>

**Government Printing Office:**

[www.access.gpo.gov](http://www.access.gpo.gov)

**Federal Register:**

[www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html)

**Congressional Record:**

[www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html)

## **Other**

**ACCP Grassroots Advocacy:**

[www.capwiz.com/chestnet](http://www.capwiz.com/chestnet)

**The White House:**

[www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)

**The Federal Judiciary:**

[www.uscourts.gov](http://www.uscourts.gov)

**National Association of Attorneys General:**

[www.naag.org](http://www.naag.org)



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