

Here's Why You Should Call, Not Email, Your Legislators

by Daniel Victor

Kara Waite, an English teacher at Bunker Hill Community College in Charlestown, Mass., made a rule for herself: For every political rant she posts on Facebook, she must pick up the phone and call a legislator.

“It’s kind of a swear jar for political action,” Ms. Waite said recently.

Ms. Waite, who volunteers for liberal causes and who created a widely shared document last week to teach others her methods, figures that a phone ringing off the hook is more difficult for a lawmaker to ignore than a flooded inbox.

Activists of all political stripes recommend calling legislators, not just emailing — and certainly not just venting on social media. Several lawmakers, along with those who work for them, said in interviews that Ms. Waite is right: A phone call from a constituent can, indeed, hold more weight than an email, and far outweighs a Facebook post or a tweet.

To understand why, it helps to know what happens when someone answers the phone at a legislator’s office.

Even if you don’t speak directly to the lawmaker, staff members often pass the message along in one form or another.

Emily Ellsworth, whose jobs have included answering phones in the district offices of two Republican representatives from Utah — Jason Chaffetz, from 2009 to 2012; and Chris Stewart from 2013 to 2014 — said the way your points reach a lawmaker depends on how many calls the office is getting at the time and how you present your story.

In some cases, it’s a simple process. When a caller offered an opinion, staff members would write the comments down in a spreadsheet, compile them each month and present reports to top officials, she said. If the lawmaker had already put out a statement on the issue, the staff member would read it to the caller, she said.

But a large volume of calls on an issue could bring an office to a halt, sometimes spurring the legislator to put out a statement on his or her position, Ms. Ellsworth said. She recommended the tactic in a series of tweets shared thousands of times.

“It brings a legislative issue right to the top of the mind of a member,” she said. “It makes it impossible to ignore for the whole staff. You don’t get a whole lot else done.”

When her branch in Utah received a lot of calls, she contacted the Washington office and coordinated the messaging, involving the communications director, the legislative director or the chief of staff, Ms. Ellsworth said.

While scripts found on the internet can be useful for people uncomfortable talking on the phone, she suggested making the phone calls as personal as possible. In some cases, if she was moved by a call, she would pass on the comments to her district director, she said.

“What representatives and staffers want to hear is the individual impact of your individual story,” she said. “I couldn’t listen to people’s stories for six to eight hours a day and not be profoundly impacted by them.”

Representatives in Congress may not be able to respond to individual phone calls, but your odds may be higher if you contact officials at the local or state levels. A New York State Senator, Phil Boyle, a Republican, said that one of his staff members would contact him after a constituent called his office, and that he would try to call everyone back. That’s a perk exclusive to those who call in, since he sometimes gets more than 300 emails per day, he said.

“I couldn’t possibly do that for emails,” Mr. Boyle said.

When it’s a subject in which he lacks expertise, he said, the calls have made a difference. In one case, several retired law enforcement officers called him about a gun control law that was enacted in 2013, worried that they would have to give up their service revolvers.

Senator Boyle, who said he doesn’t use firearms much, was unaware of that possibility and proposed an amendment to grant them an exception. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo granted the exception seven months after the law was passed.

Most calls can be handled by staff members, said Brian Kolb, the Republican minority leader in the New York State Assembly. Many callers just want to express an opinion and don’t even offer a name, he said.

In other cases, callers who want to talk out an issue more fully could be directed to a staff member who has expertise in the area, said State Senator Liz Krueger, a Democrat in New York.

Ms. Waite, who has had a calendar reminder for each Monday morning alerting her to “call party leadership,” said that first-time callers often fear they will be quizzed or interrogated, but that they generally just need to offer their opinion and basic personal information, like name and city.

She implored people to be courteous, since the staff members might be getting many calls.

“Communicate in a way that someone can’t ignore,” Ms. Waite said.