

How to engage incumbents on the issues

Are there international issues presented in Maryknoll's voter reflection guide that move you to action?

Many of these are longstanding issues that members of Congress grapple with in their day to day work on legislation. In an election year everyone in the House of Representatives and several senators are up for re-election. Now the time to engage incumbents, and those candidates who are challenging them in the upcoming elections, on the global issues you care about most.

The following ideas are adapted from RESULTS, a nonprofit, grassroots advocacy organization committed to creating the political will to end hunger and the worst aspects of poverty. You can see more of RESULTS' materials at www.results.org

Once you have chosen the ONE issue of focus, here are some suggestions for preparing yourself to engage your incumbent representatives on the issues:

- 1) Research – what is your representative's record on this issue?
 - His or her website will have the positions they take on a number of issues. (Go here for Congressional websites: www.house.gov AND www.senate.gov)
 - Where has your representative demonstrated leadership on this issue?
 - What has been his or her resistance to getting involved in the issue?
- 2) Write a letter to your Member of Congress and send it to his or her local office.
 - Get the candidate's attention: Tell him or her that you are a constituent and that you will be determining how you vote in part based on this issue.
 - State the problem and offer some ideas on how to solve it (policy recommendations).
 - Call the member of congress to act. Remember, the more specific you can be, the better.
 - Ask the member to respond to you with what he or she plans to do.
- 3) Create a concise talk on this topic or issue. Practice this talk with a kindred spirit. This talk would prepare you to meet with your representative or one of his or her staff.
 - Ensure that your talk contains some element that will get the listener's attention. Facts and figures help; a very short story can also do the trick. It's also compelling for the listener to get a sense right up front, why this issue is important to you. (For example: "I received a letter from a missionary friend in Mombasa, Kenya who said that daily he encounters children in the streets selling things rather than going to school...")
 - Be sure that your talk states the problem and gives some policy recommendations.
 - Include a specific suggestion for action – (for example reintroduce "x" bill from last session, co-sponsor specific legislative initiatives that address this issue).
- 4) Meet with your member of Congress.
- 5) Ask a question about the issue at a town hall meeting or a candidate forum.
 - Research: Find out from the local office when and where your representative or senator will be speaking or holding a candidate forum. Familiarize yourself with your member of Congress's position on the issue and that of the other candidate if applicable. You can ask for a bio and background on candidates at their campaign headquarters.
 - Prepare questions ahead of time. Be assertive, courteous and persistent about getting an answer to your question.
 - Work with others to ensure that questions get asked and answered. Split up, sit in different areas of the room to maximize your impact; ensure that one of you takes notes capturing the promises made and other information given by candidates.
 - Stay on message: Don't get distracted or angry if your question is ignored or not answered. Courteously repeat the question and ask for an appropriate response.

Influencing public opinion

→ Write a letter to the editor: Letters to the editor are important tools to influence public opinion and to send a strong message to your representatives in Congress. Politicians and government agencies keep track of letters to the editor since they indicate what is important to their constituents.

Tips on generating a letter to the editor: Letters to the editor “react” to news and opinion already reported; they can keep an issue alive and the debate raging. Newspaper staff love letters to the editor – they are a sure sign that people are reading the paper. *If your letter, or one that represents positive action on an issue, is printed, be sure to send a copy to your representative and senators’ offices.* Share a copy with us at [Maryknoll Global Concerns](#).

- Be current: Responding to a recent article in the newspaper or to a very recent event is a great way to increase your odds of being published. Refer specifically to the article by using the name of the article and date, such as “In response to your recent article on child care ...”
- Search the newspaper’s website for recent articles, using search words like “climate change,” “poverty,” “HIV and AIDS” and “peace.” Or, collect newspapers for a few days before writing your letter, and then skim them looking for a “hook” upon which you can hang your response.
- Write your letter remembering the tips elaborated on for creating a talk to bring to your members of congress:
 - Be clear and concise: Keep your letter short and to the point and address only one subject. State the problem and make some recommendations for action.
 - Read it aloud to a friend: Have you made your point?
 - Can you shorten it and still make your point? Most papers will not print letters that are more than 250 words, or two to three paragraphs in length.
 - Be sure to check your grammar.
 - Connect the dots between poverty issues and the greater world at large: Are there connections you can briefly make relating your topic issues with other social justice issues, defense spending and how it affects what’s left for all other programs, such as education, debt relief? Any others?
 - Newspapers love debate: Question or challenge what others have said or done, without personally attacking anyone. An argument based on merit rather than emotion tends to sway opinion.
 - Start your letter off with a feisty first line.
 - Coordinate your efforts: Have as many people in your group send in letters to the editor at the same time to maximize your odds of getting published and to emphasize the importance of the issue. Whether they print your letters or not, you are letting the paper know that the community cares about these issues.
 - Maximize your efforts by sending your letters to more than one newspaper, but be sure to check the newspaper’s policy. Some newspapers expect the letter to the editor to be exclusive, so if you write to the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* be sure that they will not publish your letter before forwarding it to another paper.
 - Include your contact information (address, e-mail and a daytime and evening phone number). They won’t print this information, but may use it to confirm that you wrote the letter.

→ Inspire an editorial: As mentioned above, politicians read newspapers and keep track of editorial pages. You can also work through editorial writers to get your issues into the public realm, but it takes establishing a relationship with the press.

In forming a relationship with the press in your community, be prepared to be persistent. Writers for daily newspapers are busy. Be sure to ask up front if they have a moment to talk and be prepared to reschedule your call if they can't talk when you phone. Be ready for their possible abruptness and don't take it personally, stay polite and on message.

Call an editorial writer and inspire an editorial:

- Do your research: Read recent editorials in your paper and pick out the editorials that are closest to our issues.
- Call the paper to find out who wrote those specific editorials; most do not print their names but the paper will provide you that information. Record the contact information of the editorial writer to whom you'd like to pitch your story.
- Write a "talk," a clear concise statement of the issue and suggestions for action and follow up.
- Use this talk as your script when you call the editorial writer. Practice your talk.
- Call the editorial writer; if you reach voice mail, leave a message but don't count on a return call; it's up to you to make the personal contact with the writer.
- Engage the writer by complimenting them on a piece they wrote and asking if they have time to speak.
- State the issue simply and briefly; include that an editorial on this subject could make a huge difference.
- Inform the writer about the solutions, including why this issue is important now.
- Reiterate that you would like an editorial written and that you also would like to set up a face-to-face meeting with the writer to inform him/her about our issues.
- Plan for some other kind of follow up if you do not get a meeting.
- Keep upbeat and positive and stay on message no matter what comes at you.
- If you have made several contacts with one editorial writer who seems uninterested, it's okay to ask if another editorial writer might be more interested in your materials.
- Drop off, fax or e-mail some background information

Follow up:

- Phone in a day or two to see if they have any questions.
- Bring any new information to their attention.
- Be kind, be courteous and be persistent. These folks are busy; it may take several calls to even get on their radar screen. Don't give up!

For more tips on working with the press, go to the [RESULTS' Activists' Toolkit](#).

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