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# Engaging with Congress

A Practical Guide for Policy Professionals

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# Course Objectives

- Understand the structure and dynamics of Congress
- Learn how Members of Congress receive and process information
- Identify congressional priorities and decision-making patterns
- Master the fundamentals of effective congressional engagement
- Common mistakes to avoid
- Building your engagement strategy



# Setting the Context

- Members of Congress face high-stakes decision making under pressure
- 535 different opinions, constantly changing priorities
- Limited time, overwhelming information flow
- Action bias - Members want to "do something" to show productivity
- Your role: Help them make informed decisions efficiently



# Congressional Structure - The Basics

- Two Chambers: House (435 members) and Senate (100 members)
- Majority and Minority parties control different levers
- Committee system acts as gatekeepers and validators
- Leadership structure drives agenda and timing
- Key Insight: Never assume "Congress" has one unified opinion

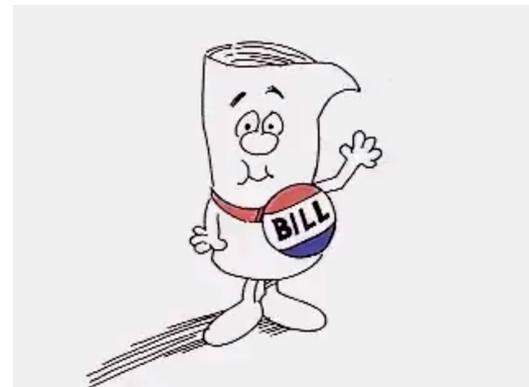


# How Congress Gets Information

- Primary Sources:
- Staff (often young, inexperienced, overcommitted)
- Constituents (most powerful voice)
- Advocacy groups and lobbyists
- Media coverage
- Reality Check: Each source has varying reliability, sophistication, and bias
- Your opportunity: Be the trusted, expert source

# Congressional Decision-Making Patterns

- The "Four Corners" Rule: Need one leader from each chamber/caucus
- Support vs. Non-Opposition: Critical distinction for strategy
- Constituent-Driven: Representatives want to serve those who elected them
- Anecdote > Data: One compelling story often outweighs statistics
- Cultural Issues: No legislative solutions, but endless legislative proposals



# What Congress Actually Focuses On

## The Reality Gap:

- Congress focuses on immediate, visible problems
- Complex, long-term solutions often get less attention
- Media coverage drives congressional priorities
- Constituent complaints become legislative priorities

## Common Priority Areas:

- Basic needs and quality of life issues
- Crisis response and immediate fixes
- Highly visible problems with clear victims
- Issues with strong constituent stories

Why this matters: Understanding this gap helps you position your priorities effectively

# The Power of One Story

- Example: 1,000 privatized homes on base, one Facebook post about black mold
- Result: Congressional focus shifts to black mold across the installation
- Lesson: Compelling anecdotes drive policy attention
- Your Strategy: Find and share the human story behind your data



# The Five Rules of Congressional Engagement

## Rule 1: Make It Accessible

- Provide background context
- Avoid acronyms and jargon
- Keep communications short
- Remember: Staff are pulled in 1,000 directions

## Rule 2: Make It Easy

- Always have a clear, specific ask
- Back it up with solid reasoning
- Provide ready-to-use materials
- Don't make them do extra work

# The Five Rules (Continued)

## Rule 3: Make It Real

- Find the local connection
- Identify constituents who benefit
- Connect to district/state priorities
- Show tangible, relatable impact

## Rule 4: Make It Realistic

- Don't oversell your solution
- Acknowledge limitations honestly
- Start small and build trust
- Avoid unproven, high-dollar asks

## Rule 5: Take Yes for an Answer

- Stop talking when they agree
- Don't pile on with more requests
- Avoid making counter-arguments to your own position
- Secure the win and move on



# Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Assuming expertise: Don't assume they know your field
- Information overload: Too much detail kills engagement
- Ignoring politics: Policy doesn't exist in a vacuum
- Being inflexible: Adapt to their constraints and timeline
- Talking past the sale: Know when to stop

# Building Your Engagement Strategy

- Step 1: Identify your champions (the "four corners")
- Step 2: Develop your local connections
- Step 3: Create accessible materials (one-pagers, fact sheets)
- Step 4: Time your approach to legislative calendar
- Step 5: Build relationships before you need them

# Working with Congressional Staff

- Remember: They're often your primary audience
- Respect their constraints: Time, competing priorities, limited expertise
- Be a resource: Provide analysis, not just advocacy
- Follow up appropriately: Persistent but not pushy
- Educate continuously: They learn on the job



# Measuring Success

- Immediate wins: Meetings secured, interest generated
- Short-term goals: Language in bills, reports, or letters
- Long-term impact: Sustained funding, policy changes
- Relationship building: Ongoing access and trust
- Remember: Not every interaction leads to immediate action

# Key Takeaways

- Congress operates on relationships, stories, and constituent needs
- Effective engagement requires understanding their constraints
- Success comes from making their job easier, not harder
- The five rules work across all policy areas
- Build relationships before you need them

# Additional Resources

## Recommended Reading:

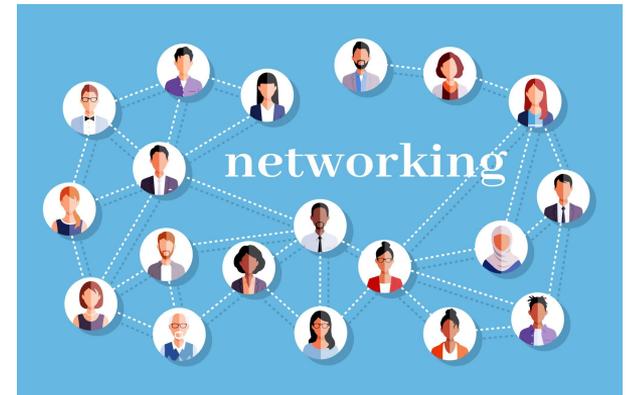
- Committee websites and staff directories
- Congressional Research Service reports
- Professional association guides

## Networking Opportunities:

- Hill events and briefings
- Professional associations
- Alumni networks

## Staying Current:

- Congressional calendars
- Policy newsletters
- Committee hearing schedules



# Questions & Next Steps

- Open Q&A

Invite to take other related modules (Appropriations, Negotiations)