

CHAPTER 2: HOW YOUR MEMBER OF CONGRESS THINKS

“There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader.”

- Alexandre Ledru-Rollin

This chapter explains how congressional offices and the people within them work, and what that means for your advocacy strategy.

IT'S ALL ABOUT REELECTION, REELECTION, REELECTION

To influence your own Member of Congress (MoC), you have to understand one thing: every House member runs for office every two years and every Senator runs for election every six years. Functionally speaking, MoCs are always either running for office or getting ready for their next election – a fact that shapes everything they do.

To be clear, this does not mean that your MoC is cynical and unprincipled. The vast majority of people in Congress believe in their ideals, and care deeply about representing their constituents and having a positive impact. But they also know that if they want to make change, they need to stay in office.

This constant reelection pressure means that MoCs are enormously sensitive to their image in the district or state, and will work very hard to avoid signs of public dissent or disapproval. What every MoC wants – regardless of party – is for his or her constituents to agree with the following narrative:

“My MoC cares about me, shares my values, and is working hard for me.”

- What every MoC wants their constituents to think.

If your actions threaten this narrative, then you will unnerve your MoC and change their decision-making process.



HELP, MY MoC IS IN A SAFE DISTRICT!

If your MoC is in a heavily Democratic or Republican district, you may assume that they have a safe seat and there's nothing you can do to influence them. This is not true! The reality is that no MoC ever considers themselves to be safe from all threats. MoCs who have nothing to fear from a general election still worry about primary challenges.

More broadly, no one stays an MoC without being borderline compulsive about protecting their image. Even the safest MoC will be deeply alarmed by signs of organized opposition, because these actions create the impression that they're not connected to their district and not listening to their constituents.



HELP, MY MoCs ARE ACTUALLY PRETTY GOOD!

Congratulations! Your Senators and Representative are doing what they should. They're making the right public statements, co-sponsoring the right bills, and voting the right way. So how does this change your strategy? Two key things to keep in mind:

1. Do NOT switch to targeting other MoCs who don't represent you. They don't represent you, and they don't care what you have to say. Stick with your own local MoCs.
2. DO use this guide to engage with your MoCs locally. Instead of pressuring them to do the right thing, praise them for doing the right thing. This is important because it will help ensure that they continue to do the right thing. Congressional staff are rarely contacted when the MoC does something good — your efforts locally will provide highly valuable positive reinforcement.

WHAT DOES A MoC'S OFFICE DO, AND WHY?

A MoC's office is composed of roughly 15-25 staff for House offices and 60-70 for Senate offices, spread across a D.C. and one or several district offices. MoC offices perform the following functions:

- » **Constituent services.** Staff connect with both individual constituents and local organizations, serving as a link to and an advocate within the federal government on issues such as visas, grant applications, and public benefits.
- » **Communicate with constituents directly.** Staff take calls, track constituent messages, and write letters to stay in touch with constituents' priorities, follow up on specific policy issues that constituents have expressed concern about, and reinforce the message that they are listening.
- » **Meet with constituents.** MoCs and staff meet with constituents to learn about local priorities and build connections.
- » **Seek and create positive press.** Staff try to shape press coverage and public information to create a favorable image for the MoC.
- » **Host and attend events in district.** Representatives host and attend events in the district to connect with constituents, understand their priorities, and get good local press.
- » **Actual legislating.** MoCs and staff decide their policy positions, develop and sponsor bills, and take votes based on a combination of their own beliefs, pressure from leadership/lobbyists, and pressure from their constituents.

WHAT YOUR MoC CARES ABOUT

When it comes to constituent interactions, MoCs care about things that make them look good, responsive, and hardworking to the people of their district. In practice, that means that they care about some things very much, and other things very little:



MoC CARES A LOT ABOUT	MoC DOESN'T CARE MUCH ABOUT
Verified constituents from the district (or state for Senators)	People from outside the district (or state for Senators)
Advocacy that requires effort – the more effort, the more they care. Calls, personal emails, and especially showing up in person in the district	Form letters, a Tweet, or Facebook comment (unless they generate widespread attention)
Local press and editorials, maybe national press	Wonky D.C.-based news (depends on the MoC)
An interest group's endorsement	Your thoughtful analysis of the proposed bill
Groups of constituents, locally famous individuals, or big individual campaign contributors	A single constituent
Concrete asks that entail a verifiable action – vote for a bill, make a public statement, etc.	General ideas about the world
A single ask in your communication – letter, email, phone call, office visit, etc.	A laundry list of all the issues you're concerned about

WHAT YOUR MOC IS THINKING: GOOD OUTCOME VS. BAD OUTCOME

To make this a bit more concrete and show where advocacy comes in, below are some examples of actions that a MoC might take, what they're hoping to see happen as a result, and what they really don't want to see happen. Some MoCs will go to great lengths to avoid bad outcomes – even as far as changing their positions or public statements.



EXAMPLE ACTION	DESIRED OUTCOME	BAD OUTCOME
Letter to Constituent	Constituent feels happy that their concerns were answered.	Constituent posts letter on social media saying it didn't answer their questions or didn't answer for weeks/months, calls Congressman Bob unresponsive and untrustworthy.
In-district Event	Local newspaper reports that Congresswoman Sara appeared at opening of new bridge, which she helped secure funding for.	Local newspaper reports that protestors barraged Congresswoman Sara with questions about corruption in the infrastructure bill.
Town Hall / Listening Session	Local newspaper reports that Congressman Bob hosted a town hall and discussed his work to balance the budget.	Local newspaper reports that angry constituents strongly objected to Congressman Bob's support for privatizing Medicare.
Policy Position	Congresswoman Sara votes on a bill and releases a press statement hailing it as a step forward.	Congresswoman Sara's phones are deluged with calls objecting to the bill. A group of constituents stage an event outside her district office and invite press to hear them talk about how the bill will personally hurt their families.