



STRENGTHENING GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY: A TOOLKIT FOR THE EVERYDAY ACTIVIST

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Introduction

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the leading advocacy association on behalf of children with exceptionalities and the professionals who work on their behalf. One of the most effective components of our public policy work is the group of grassroots advocates who work tirelessly on CEC's behalf. CEC influences laws, regulations, and programs affecting special and gifted education; promotes the education profession; and serves as a resource to policymakers and professionals who work on behalf of children with exceptionalities.

The purpose of this toolkit is to make grassroots advocacy more accessible to CEC members and empower CEC members to participate in the policymaking process at the local, state/provincial, and federal levels.



What is Grassroots Advocacy?

A grassroots advocate is someone who supports and/or defends a cause; and persuades other like-minded individuals to support the cause. Grassroots advocacy is a group effort focused on creating or modifying specific public policies. Advocacy is implemented at the local, state/provincial, and federal levels.

*“Politics ought to be the part-time profession of every citizen.”
—Dwight D. Eisenhower*

Grassroots Advocacy Networks

The purpose of a grassroots advocacy network is to initiate participation by people sharing similar views and goals on issues. In order to facilitate interest and activity in the network, responsibilities and goals should be created for everyone in order for them to feel pride and ownership.

Common Advocacy Myths and Misconceptions

- I don't have time!
- I am intimidated/scared. I am not an expert in policy or politics – I am just a regular person.
- I'm shy.
- It doesn't make a difference. I have heard that Congress deletes constituent e-mails, ignores phone calls and/or sends generic responses to letters.
- My Members of Congress just doesn't seem to care about education. So why bother?
- I'm a Democrat and my Member of Congress is Republican. Or, I'm a Republican and my Member of Congress is a Democrat.
- I can't make it to Washington to meet with my Members of Congress.

The Truth About Advocacy

- Taking action can take less than 5 minutes by using CEC's Legislative Action Center.
- You possess the content knowledge relating to the issues CEC advocates for.
- You can send an e-mail, fax a letter, or place a brief phone call to show your support.
- Despite rumors to the contrary, congressional offices count all calls, e-mails, faxes, and letters that they receive from constituents. In fact, all congressional offices have systems and entire staffs in place to respond to constituent communications.

What Influences Legislators

The most important influence on elected officials is the concerns of their constituents. After all, their constituents vote them into elected office.

Here are a few of the other things that affect elected officials' decision making:

Personal interests/ life experiences: Every elected official has a policy issue that he/she feels connected to. Effective advocates will seek out these legislators who are affected by/connected to an issue and then frame their message in those terms. This is an effectual way to identify and nurture congressional champions.

Political parties: At times, elected officials are swayed by what their political party believes is important. Successful advocates capitalize on issues important to the Member's political party.

The media: Media coverage of events and in turn, the public perception of an issue will often have an influence on what elected officials talk about in hearings and introduce as legislation.

Scholars and researchers: Members of Congress are unapologetic generalists who are rarely experts on more than a few issue areas. They rely on people just like you to educate them on topics where they are lacking. Be sure to take a few minutes to show that you are a knowledgeable and trusted source.

Community-based advocates: As a constituent, or as a voter from back home, you have a huge impact on the decision-making of elected officials. Legislators enjoy talking to and listening to the concerns of their constituents from the district or state!

Grassroots and the Federal Government

Grassroots Advocacy and the Legislative Branch

Congress is the legislative branch of the U.S. federal government. This governing body develops legislation and resolutions, determines which government agencies and programs will be created, and approves and appropriates all funding spent by the government. The U.S. Constitution grants Congress the following powers: to raise revenue, establish a military, declare war, regulate commerce, and provide for the general welfare.

Congress has the ability to enact the legislation; but it is the executive branch that is charged with implementing legislation. However, Congress maintains oversight powers and may investigate how the executive branch is administering Congressionally-approved legislation and programs.

Congress is comprised of two houses: the Senate and the House of Representatives. There are 100 senators (2 from every state). The House of Representatives has 435 members, with the allocation of representatives based on each state's population. States with larger populations have more representation in the House of Representatives.

Grassroots Advocacy and the Executive Branch

The executive branch of Government makes sure that the laws of the United States are obeyed. The President of the United States is the head of the executive branch of government. This branch is very large so the President relies on the Vice President, department heads (Cabinet members), and heads of independent agencies to implement laws.

- **President:** Leader of the country and commands the military.
- **Vice President:** President of the Senate and becomes President if the President can no longer do the job.
- **Departments:** Department heads advise the President on issues and help carry out policies.
- **Independent Agencies:** Help carry out policies or provide special services.

Political Action Committees (PACs)

Political Action Committee (PAC) — A political committee organized for the purpose of raising and spending money to elect and defeat candidates. Most PACs represent business, labor or ideological interests. PACs can give \$5,000 to a candidate committee per election (primary, general or special). They can also give up to \$15,000 annually to any national party committee, and \$5,000 annually to any other PAC. PACs may receive up to \$5,000 from any one individual, PAC or party committee per calendar year. PACs have been around since 1944, when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed the first one to raise money for the re-election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Non-profit organizations are prohibited by law from having a PAC.

Writing a Letter to Your Members of Congress

Your Members of Congress want to hear from you! Constituents like yourself are the reason that legislators were elected and therefore, they want to keep you happy in order to remain in office. Furthermore, they rely on you to educate them about what is happening in their constituency and what legislation is most important to their constituents. Writing a letter to your Member of Congress only takes a few minutes of your time, but it ensures that your representatives know how you want to be represented.

Be sure to provide all of your contact information so that your Member of Congress' office can reply.

Dear Senator _____,

Engage

As your constituent and a special educator in the public school system, I am disappointed that IDEA, the revolutionary legislation that has afforded students with disabilities access to a free and appropriate public education, has never been fully funded.

Problem Despite an increase in students receiving special education, the federal commitment to full funding continues to decline, leaving states and localities to pay the balance.

Inform about the Solution At a time when school districts across the country are confronting numerous fiscal crises resulting from unfunded mandates, Congress must fulfill its promise to children with disabilities and fully fund IDEA.

Call to Action I urge you to uphold Congress' promise to America's 6.9 million children with disabilities by supporting legislation that would provide mandatory full funding for IDEA. I look forward to your reply on this issue.

Note: All mail sent to Congressional offices in Washington, DC is now screened for security purposes. Therefore, we suggest you fax a copy of your letter to Congress, mail the letter to the local district office, and contact your members of Congress via e-mail. You can find all the necessary contact information for congressional offices on CEC's website (www.cec.sped.org).

Building Relationships and Grassroots Advocacy

The key to successful advocacy is the ability to establish successful and mutually beneficial relationships. You are unlikely to accomplish your objectives if you only call on lawmakers to ask for a favor or complain about an issue that is affecting you. It is advantageous to establish an on-going relationship with your Members of Congress and their staffers.

Identifying Your Members of Congress

To find out who your Members of Congress are, and their contact information visit CEC's Legislative Action Center <http://capwiz.com/cek/> and enter your zip code. Each constituent is represented by 2 senators and 1 representative. The representative services a specific geographic area, their district; and the two senators serve the entire state.

Know the Role of Your Legislators in Congress

Although any Member of Congress may introduce a bill, few can ensure that the bill gets passed by being on the key committees. Identify which (if any) of your members sit on the major committees addressing education. The two committees that have jurisdiction over education issues are the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and the House Education and Labor Committee.

5 Ways to Get Involved

1. Schedule a meeting with your Member of Congress while he/she is back in your home state. Members of Congress want to meet with constituents.
2. Email Congress directly by personalizing a letter CEC has written on the CEC Legislative Action Center: (<http://capwiz.com/cek/home/>)
3. Submit an op-ed to your local newspaper or call in to a radio talk show.
4. Generate community action by making a presentation at a local meeting, speaking with friends and colleagues and simply distributing this packet.
5. Invite your Member of Congress to tour a school or college and let them see for themselves the positive contributions federal dollars make to your school.

Attending a Town Hall Meeting

Members of Congress spend a considerable amount of time in their home districts. Therefore, they often meet with constituents and interest groups, and hold town hall meetings.

Attending an event hosted by your Member of Congress and asking questions is an effective method of grassroots advocacy.

Moreover, the media are oftentimes at these events and cover the content of the town hall meetings. Media coverage will help influence your Member of Congress, educate the community in the room, and have it covered by a local paper.

Tips on Attending a Town Hall or Candidate Forum

1. Be Prepared.

Most people don't approach their Members of Congress with a well-researched, well-rehearsed pitch. Constituents who come to town hall meetings with thoughtful arguments, good data, and persuasive stories always get remembered.

2. Tell a Personal Story.

Members of Congress are always looking for firsthand accounts of the impact that policies have on their constituents. Think in advance of how a policy might affect you or your family, business, or community.

3. Use Numbers If You Have Them.

Politicians live for one thing: 50 percent plus 1. This keeps them re-elected and employed. Use numbers by mentioning things like, "I have 50 employees," "I represent 100 people in my union," or "There are 500 people in my community affected by this bill."

4. Be Respectful.

Some constituents start a conversation with, "I pay your salary so you better listen to me." It doesn't matter if you're talking to your grocer or a public official – starting any conversation with another person in a rude manner is not a very tactful way to persuade them.

5. Go in Groups.

Nothing says "listen to me" to a public official like an angry mob. This is not to suggest that you should bring pitch forks and torches to your next town hall meeting, but a chorus is better than a solo performance.

6. Talk to Staff.

Every Member brings staff to town hall meetings. Tell them your story before the meeting (also ask a public question during the meeting) and get their business cards.

7. Leave Paper.

Any documents passed to state-based staff will likely be faxed to the legislative assistant in Washington who covers your issue.

8. Follow Up Politely.

Politely persistent people are more likely to persuade politicians. Congressional offices are often overworked, so an elected official often responds to an individual who just follows up with a phone call a few weeks after attending a meeting.

9. Get Your Network to Multiple Meetings.

Hearing the same thing in different places signals to a politician that there may be a deeper problem afoot.

10. Demonstrate That You're Not Going Away.

If you continue to show your presence at town hall meetings, the legislator must deal with you, even if it's only to avoid an uncomfortable encounter at a future town hall meeting.

Communicating with Congress

As a citizen in a democratic country, it is both your right and duty to communicate with your elected officials about issues that are important to you. Moreover, it is your responsibility to speak out on issues that affect you. Communication with Congress is a powerful tool for effective advocacy. Grassroots communication—through letters, emails, faxes, phone calls, Town Hall meetings, and visits, produce results in Congress. In many cases, when a member of Congress is undecided on a particular issue, he or she will look at the constituent communication and feedback that they received on the issue. After all, you have powerful leverage—your vote that keeps he or she in office.

CEC's Legislative Action Center

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying <http://capwiz.com/cek/home/>. The browser tabs include "CEC | Legislative Action Center" and "CEC | Policy & Advocacy". The website header features a blue banner with the text "POLICY & ADVOCACY" and a navigation menu with buttons for "Home", "Elected Officials", "Issues & Legislation", "Elections & Candidates", and "Media Guide".

The main content area is titled "Take Action!" and contains several call-to-action items:

- Thank your Senators for Supporting the Preservation of Medicaid Reimbursements**
- Protect Medicaid Reimbursements for Children with Disabilities**
Urge Your Senators to Take Action Today!
- Urge your members of Congress to retain key provisions in the "College Opportunity and Affordability Act of 2007" Conference Report**
- Help Make Gifted Education Widely Available!**
Urge your Congressperson to co-sponsor gifted legislation
- Support IDEA Full Funding Legislation**

Below the "Take Action!" section is a "Find Your Elected Officials" section with a sub-link for "Elected Officials" and a small icon of the U.S. Capitol building.

The left sidebar contains a "Policy & Advocacy" menu with links to "Children and Youth Action Network (CAN)", "Legislative Action Center", "Public Policy Updates", "IDEA Resources", "CEC Policy Resources", "CEC Professional Policies", and "CEC Press Releases". Below this is a "teaching & learning center" logo and a list of links: "Accreditation & Licensure", "Current Special Ed Topics", "Exceptionality/Topic Areas", "Evidence-based Practice", "Financial Aid", "Instructional Strategies", "Professional Role", and "Professional Practice".

The browser's status bar at the bottom shows the URL <http://capwiz.com/cek/issues/alert/?alertid=11069266>.

Writing Letters to the Editor of Media Outlets

Be Current - An effective way to increase the potential that your letter will be published is by responding to a recent article in the newspaper or to an issue that has garnered a lot of attention. Reference the article specifically by using the title of the article and date it was published, such as “In response to your recent article ‘The Status of No Child Left Behind Reauthorization’ published January 8, 2008.”

In order to find pertinent issues about special education, you can do a search on the newspaper’s website for recent articles, using search words like “education,” “disability,” “No Child Left Behind” and “IDEA.” Alternately, collect newspapers for a few days before writing your letter, and then skim them looking for a “hook” that you can hang your response on.

Be Clear and Concise — Keep your letter short and to the point. Stick to one subject and check your grammar. After you have written your letter, read it out loud and listen to it. Have you made your point clear? Can you shorten your letter and still get your point across?

Most newspapers will not print letters that are more than 250 words, or two to three paragraphs in length. The shorter the letter, the better the chance that it will be published.

Draw Correlations between special education issues and other national policy issues. Relate your issues with other social issues and how they affect one another.

Maximize Your Impact by encouraging as many people in your network to send in letters to the editor at the same time to maximize your odds of getting published and emphasize the importance of the issue. Regardless of whether your letter is printed, you are letting the paper know what issues the community cares about!

Include Contact information — include your address, e-mail and a daytime and evening phone number. They won’t print this information, but may have to confirm something with you.

If your letter is printed, be sure to send a copy to your members’ of Congress offices!

Please send CEC’s Policy and Advocacy Services a copy also so we can track our effectiveness!

Activating Your Advocacy Network

(GAIN)

Get Attention and Interest

From the beginning of your advocacy campaign or action alert, you must immediately get your member's attention. Essentially, you must deliver the message of why it is so important for them to care about the issue, and in turn, take action on it.

Address the Problem

Here you present causes of the problem you introduced. How widespread or serious is the problem?

Informing Solutions

Inform your network about the solution to the problem you just presented. Develop your solution by examples of how and where it has worked, how it is proven and cost-effective and how it has benefited the poorest. You could cite a recent study or report, or discuss a new bill introduced by a Member of Congress.

Now Take Action!

Now that you have presented a compelling case to your network, activate them! Make the action something specific so that you will be able to follow up with them and find out whether or not they have taken it. Present the action in the form of a yes or no question.

Meeting with Members of Congress: The Basics

1. When you call the office, the scheduler will need some important information from you, so be prepared! They will ask for the date, what you would like to speak to the member about, and approximately how many people will be attending the meeting.
2. Call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask to be connected to your Member of Congress's office or dial the number directly if you have it, or dial their local office number to schedule a local meeting. If you don't know who your representative is, visit our website and use your zip code.
3. Ask to speak to the scheduler. If he or she is unavailable, leave a message with your name and phone number requesting a meeting. Keep in mind that these people have hectic schedules, so make follow up calls if you do not receive a call back. When you speak to the scheduler, request a face-to-face meeting with your member of Congress and the legislative assistant who works on education issues.
4. Make a reminder to reconfirm your meeting a few days before your appointment is scheduled.

You may be unable to meet with your member of Congress directly, but do not be discouraged. Congressional staff has an enormous impact on the public policy process and do much of the legislative work. Having a meeting with the legislator's staff is key to building a relationship with your representative or senator.

A Typical Congressional Office

Although it can be disappointing, on many Capitol Hill visits you may only get to meet with the staffers due to the nature of Congress. However, meeting with staffers can be advantageous over direct Member contact. Staffers can become advocates for CEC's cause. They have the time and resources to focus on particular issues and gain a greater understanding.

It is also important to expect and appreciate youth. Most congressional staffers are quite young; however, they are typically extremely bright and very capable. They may be much younger than you, but they have the ear of the legislator who you are trying to get to listen to your issues. Here is a brief run-down of the types of folks you might meet in a congressional office:

- **Staff Assistant:** This staffer typically handles the front desk duties, which include answering phones, greeting visitors, sorting mail and coordinating tours. In some offices they may handle policy issues as well. After some service in this position, they can be promoted to Legislative Correspondent or Legislative Assistant.
- **Scheduler/Executive Assistant:** This person schedules the Representatives or Senators time and in many offices may even handle a policy issue or two. This is the staffer that you likely spoke with when you set-up your meetings with your elected officials.
- **Legislative Correspondent:** This staffer drafts mail in response to constituent comments or requests. In addition they might handle a few legislative issues as well.
- **Legislative Assistant:** An LA handles the bulk of the policy work in a congressional office. A House office usually will have two to four while a Senate office might have as many as twelve depending on the size of the state's population and the seniority of the Senator in Congress.

- **Legislative Director:** There is usually one legislative director in each office. This person handles policy issues and oversees the legislative policy staff.
- **Press Secretary/Communications Director:** This individual is responsible for fielding all calls from the media and is often the spokesperson for the office.
- **Chief of Staff:** The chief of staff or administrative assistant oversees the entire operation of congressional offices. They may handle a few legislative issues but most of their time is spent ensuring the office runs smoothly both in Washington, D.C and back in their home state or district.

Tips for a Powerful Meeting with Your Member of Congress

Before the meeting:

1. Do your homework.

Find out what issues your representatives or senators care about and their legislative priorities. You can do this by taking a look at their website (available at: <http://www.house.gov/> or <http://www.senate.gov/>) and finding out what Congressional Committees they sit on (available on their website). Furthermore, read their most recent press releases available on their website, as well as look up their recently introduced bills through the Library of Congress Web site, (<http://thomas.loc.gov>).

2. Practice speaking.

Create an agenda for the meeting and practice. Be brief, clear, and to the point and don't be afraid to show your passion.

3. Choose a secretary and manager for the meeting.

Choose one person who will be responsible for taking notes and writing down any commitments your member of Congress made and any follow up that needs to be done after the meeting. Also, choose someone who will "manage" the overall meeting, keeping the group on task and making sure all the requests are covered.

4. Inspire yourselves.

Prior to the meeting, spend at least a few minutes having each person speak about why he/she cares about this issue and why you are going to this meeting.

At the meeting:

1. Connect with your representatives, senators and legislative staff.

Establish a personal connection with your member of Congress and their staff in the meeting by asking them to share their goals and the issues they care about. Share your own vision and concerns.

2. Acknowledge your member of Congress.

It is rare that our representatives and senators hear the words “thank you” from their constituents. Always thank them for the supportive actions they have taken or just be sure to thank them for taking the time to meet with you. Most likely your point person in the office will be a Legislative Assistant but be sure to take time to thank them as well. Praising a good Legislative Assistant in front of their boss is always a good thing.

3. Be concise.

Summarize your request in 5 minutes or less.

4. Be prepared to summarize opponents’ arguments on the issue.

Know the other side of the coin. There may be very articulate arguments against what you are asking for. Be prepared and do your homework on any opposition. Have talking points prepared to defend your position. Never attack. If you don’t know the answer or how to respond tell the Legislative Assistant or Congressperson you will get them further information.

5. Don’t be a zealot.

Fair, balanced and thoughtful conversations will keep the door to your member’s office open even if you don’t find common ground. Always leave with a thank you and a commitment to follow up with relevant information.

6. Don’t be a know-it-all or talk down to a staff member.

Many staff members are very young and may not know about our issues. Our professionalism and knowledge can be an example of effective, savvy grassroots lobbying.

6. Make the issues real.

One of the most powerful ways we can advocate for our issues is to have someone speak who has been directly affected by these issues and can tell their experiences. Another possibility is to tell the story of a specific family or to show a video during your meeting that puts your legislator in the shoes of others for a few minutes and makes the issues real.

7. **Paint the big picture and the small picture.**

For example, one person could tell their story about how the issue has affected her/him personally (the small picture); then, someone else could flesh out the current national or global statistics and impact (the big picture).

8. **Make specific, clear requests and ask for an answer.**

Often, the main reason groups have unsatisfactory meetings is that their requests were not clear and specific enough. Your Members of Congress need to know what you want them to do (what bill you want them to sponsor, what other representative or senator you want them to speak to, how you want them to vote). However, in addition to the specific requests you bring, don't be afraid to ask the senator or representative what else they see they could do on your issue (whether they say yes or no to your original request).

9. **Know your next steps.**

In the meeting, ensure that the next steps for follow up are clear (what your group will do next, what the legislator/legislative assistant will do next) and that you know which legislative assistant to contact for follow up. After the meeting, send a prompt thank you note and follow up on requests with the legislative assistant.

A typical format for a meeting with a Member of Congress

Don't be surprised if walking into a congressional office feels a little overwhelming. Telephones will be ringing, a few TVs will likely be showing the latest floor debate and any number of staffers will be running in and out, from one meeting to another.

This is why you must fully prepare your message beforehand and be ready to deliver a clear message that will linger in the mind of the Member or staffer. One of the most important elements of a successful meeting is to have a clear and powerful **5 minute message**. Here are a few other things to do at a meeting to get the best results:

- **Before the meeting:** Arrive 10-15 minutes early to meet with your group. Review your talking points and what you are planning to ask of your elected official. Review what each person will contribute to the meeting and assign one person to begin the meeting and one person to end the meeting. Make sure not to show up too early as many congressional offices are small and have little or no waiting facilities.
- **Introductions:** Everyone should briefly introduce themselves at the start of the meeting. This is a chance to make a distinct connection that you are from their district or state.

Key Steps Within Meeting Introductions:

- Introduce CEC briefly, and your professional role.
- Allow each participant to say who they are and what they do professionally.

- Overview the issues you would like to discuss and ideally give the member of Congress and Legislative Assistant materials relating to the content that will be discussed during the meeting, including issue briefs, talking points, and CEC’s Budget Book.
- **Acknowledgements.** Acknowledge your member of Congress for any previous actions.

If your group needs information about a specific Representative or Senator, consult CEC’s Legislative Action Center at <http://capwiz.com/cek>.

- **Presentation of CEC’s issues and requests.** Strategize which issues you would like your member of Congress to take more of a leadership role on. Make specific requests and ask for their answer right then. If they are unwilling to make a commitment, set a date to follow up. Also, carefully record any questions, objections, promises or concerns.
 - **Local stories of how the issue affects you and voters back home:** Be sure to provide the legislator with local stories and/or local statistics from the home district. Lawmakers especially appreciate real-life examples that put a face on an issue. Explain why you are there and how certain legislation, or lack of appropriate legislation, affects you and the other constituents.
- **Plan for follow up.** During the meeting set a specific timeline for follow up with the Congressional staff. Be sure to record your plan for follow up.
- **Send a “Thank You” letter.**
- **Follow up.** Be sure to follow up with the Legislative Assistant. Following up ensures that your effort in meeting and speaking powerfully about CEC issues is most effective.

Understanding Congress

Major Constitutional Powers of Congress

- Lay and collect taxes
- Appropriate money for specific purposes
- Regulate commerce
- Establish rules for immigration
- Declare war
- Raise and support armies

The Two Houses

Congress is divided between two governing bodies: the House of Representatives and the Senate. Representatives serve two-year terms and Senators serve six-year terms.

Congressional Leadership

House of Representative	Senate
Speaker: Presides over the House. Chooses priorities and sets the annual and daily legislative schedule.	President Pro Tempore: Presides over the Senate in the absence of the Vice President.
Majority Leader: Schedules time for floor debate on legislation.	Majority Leader: Chooses priorities and sets the annual and daily legislative schedules.
Minority Leader: Advocates for the minority party's concerns and procedural rights.	Minority Leader: Advocates for the minority party's concerns and procedural rights.

Understanding the Legislative Process

Three Main Categories of Legislation

1. **Authorizing legislation:** A bill that creates a new federal program, extends the life of an existing program, or repeals an existing law. Typically, authorizing bills set a limit on the amount of funds that can be spent annually by a program over a period of 3 to 5 years. An authorizing bill does not provide operating funds.
2. **Appropriations legislation:** A bill that allocates funding for specified federal programs. Unlike authorizing legislation, which remains in effect for 3 or more years, an appropriations bill must be enacted every year. Annually, Congress passes 13 appropriations bills to keep the federal government operating.
3. **Entitlement legislation:** A measure that guarantees a specific level of benefits to people who meet certain eligibility requirements set by law, such as Medicaid, Medicare, and social security. Entitlement programs do not need to be reauthorized or annually funded.

In Congress, the first step of the legislative process is when a member(s) introduces a bill. Bills introduced in the House are assigned an “H.R.” number, and Senate bills are given an “S” number.

From an advocate’s perspective, the legislative process begins before a bill is introduced in Congress. When an issue or problem surfaces, advocates seek out a congressional champion, a member whose beliefs and voting record indicates that the member would be willing to be a leader on the particular issue. The next step is to establish broad support for your congressional champion’s bill. The grassroots network must be activated and encouraged to ask their Members of Congress to co-sponsor the bill. Constituent support will provide an incentive for other Members of Congress to co-sponsor and give support to the bill.

The Committee System

Congressional committees handle specific legislative issues confronting Congress. Because the issues that Congress handles are so diverse and specialized, Congress relies on individual committees to work on legislation related to the committee’s jurisdiction. For example, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee holds broad jurisdiction over the United States’ health care system, schools, and employment and retirement programs.

Within the committees, specific issues are delegated to subcommittees whose role is to research and analyze the policy issues and legislation, and make a recommendation to the entire committee. For example, the House Education and Labor’s subcommittee Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee focuses on programs such as education from early learning through the high school level including, but not limited to, elementary and secondary education, education for children with disabilities, and the homeless and migrant and agricultural labor.

Floor Action

Once a committee approves legislation, the bill becomes eligible for debate on the House and Senate floors. Typically, floor debates are scheduled on short notice. Therefore, responsiveness and timing is of critical importance. Any communication to your Members of Congress about the bill must be sent as close

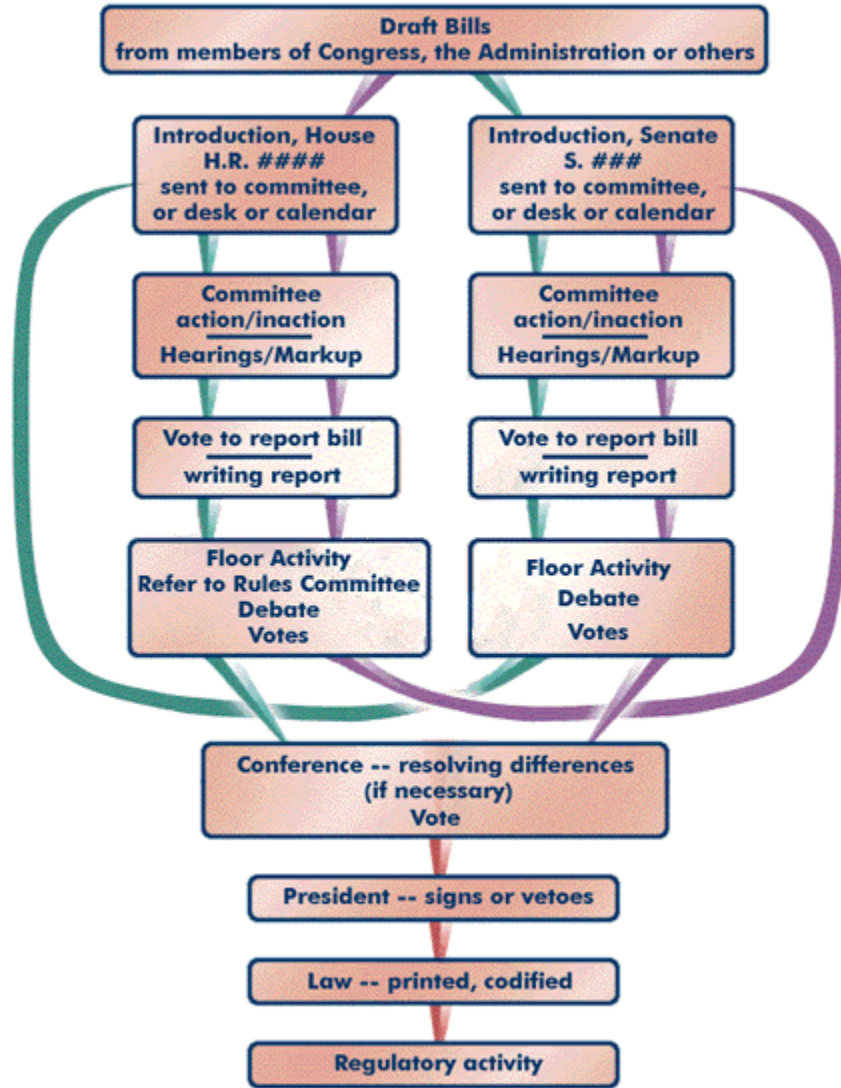
to the timing of the vote as possible. CEC sends out Action Alerts to our grassroots advocates, urging them to take action and contact their Members of Congress on a specific piece of legislation.

Conference Committee

In the majority of cases, the House and Senate will pass different versions of the same bill. When that occurs, a small amount of members from each chamber are appointed to serve on the conference committee. In the conference committee, the group attempts to work on a compromise piece of legislation. In some cases, conference committee members only need to resolve minimal differences.

The end result of the conference committee is a conference report, which contains the compromise bill and a section-by-section description of the compromise agree upon. After the House and Senate vote on the conference report, the bill is sent up to the President for approval or veto.

How a Bill Becomes Law



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Congressional Terminology

Types of Legislation

Bill - A legislative proposal that if passed by both the House and the Senate and approved by the President becomes a law. Each bill is assigned a bill number. HR denotes bills that originate in the House and S denotes bills that originate in the Senate.

Private Bill - A bill that is introduced on behalf of a specific individual that if it is enacted into law only affects the specific person or organization the bill concerns. Often, private bills address immigration or naturalization issues.

Public Bill - A bill that affects the general public if enacted into law.

Simple Resolution - A type of legislation designated by H Res or S Res that is used primarily to express the sense of the chamber where it is introduced or passed. It only has the force of the chamber passing the resolution. A simple resolution is not signed by the President and cannot become Public Law.

Concurrent Resolutions - A type of legislation designated by H Con Res or S Con Res that is often used to express the sense of both chambers, to set annual budgets or to fix adjournment dates. Concurrent resolutions are not signed by the President and therefore do not hold the weight of law.

Joint Resolutions - A type of legislation designated by H J Res or S J Res that is treated the same as a bill unless it proposes an amendment to the Constitution. In this case, 2/3 majority of those present and voting in both the House and the Senate and ratification of the states are required for the Constitutional amendment to be adopted.

Other Terms

Calendar Wednesday - A procedure in the House of Representatives during which each standing committee may bring up for consideration any bill that has been reported on the floor on or before the previous day. The procedure also limits debate for each subject matter to two hours.

Cloture - A motion generally used in the Senate to end a filibuster. Invoking cloture requires a vote by 3/5 of the full Senate. If cloture is invoked further debate is limited to 30 hours, it is not a vote on the passage of the piece of legislation.

Committee of The Whole - A committee including all members of the House. It allows bills and resolutions to be considered without adhering to all the formal rules of a House session, such as needing a quorum of 218. All measures on the Union Calendar must be considered first by the Committee of the Whole.

Co-Sponsor - A member or members that add his or her name formally in support of another member's bill. In the House, a member can become a co-sponsor of a bill at any point up to the time the last authorized committee considers it. In the Senate a member can become a co-sponsor of a bill anytime before the vote takes place on the bill. However, a co-sponsor is not required and therefore, not every bill has a co-sponsor or co-sponsors.

Discharge Petition - A petition that if signed by a majority of the House, 218 members, requires a bill to come out of a committee and be moved to the floor of the House.

Filibuster - An informal term for extended debate or other procedures used to prevent a vote on a bill in the Senate.

Germane - Relevant to the bill or business either chamber is addressing. The House requires an amendment to meet a standard of relevance, being germane, unless a special rule has been passed.

Hopper - Box on House Clerk's desk where members deposit bills and resolutions to introduce them.

Morning Hour - A 90 minute period on Mondays and Tuesdays in the House of Representatives set aside for five minute speeches by members who have reserved a spot in advance on any topic.

Motion to Recommit - A motion that requests a bill be sent back to committee for further consideration. Normally, the motion is accompanied by instructions concerning what the committee should change in the legislation or general instructions such as that the committee should hold further hearings.

Motion to Table - A motion that is not debatable and that can be made by any Senator or Representative on any pending question. Agreement to the motion is equivalent to defeating the question tabled.

Quorum - The number of Representatives or Senators that must be present before business can begin. In the House, 218 members must be present for a quorum. In the Senate, 51 members must be present however, Senate can conduct daily business without a quorum unless it is challenged by a point of order.

Rider - An informal term for an amendment or provision that is not relevant to the legislation where it is attached.

Sponsor - The original member who introduces a bill.

Substitute Amendment - An amendment that would replace existing language of a bill or another amendment with its own.

Suspension of the Rules - A procedure in the House that limits debate on a bill to 40 minutes, bars amendments to the legislation and requires a 2/3 majority of those present and voting for the measure to be passed.

Veto - A power that allows the President, a Governor or a Mayor to refuse approval of a piece of legislation. Federally, a President returns a vetoed bill to the Congress, generally with a message. Congress can accept the veto or attempt to override the veto by a 2/3 majority of those present and voting in both the House and the Senate.