



How to Talk to Lawmakers

We all have a constitutional right to petition the government.

You have something to say to your elected officials, and they need to hear from you. There are many ways to get in touch with them.

» **Places to Meet with Your Representative and Senators**

During recess, make an appointment to meet with your Representative or Senators (or their legislative staff) in their district offices. Or attend a town hall meeting or other district meeting that your Representative or Senators may hold.

» **Research the Issue Before You Arrive**

Become familiar with your issue and determine your strongest arguments. The Americans United web site is a good place to find information, fact sheets, and brochures on church-state issues. Try to think of personal or local examples to support your arguments. And, if there is a specific bill you plan to discuss, you should know the number and/or the name of the bill.

» **Know Your Legislator**

Research your legislator's position on your issue and tailor your arguments to that position. Also try to demonstrate how your issue affects your legislator and his or her constituency and district.

» **If You Are Going in a Group, Provide a Range of Support**

Try to bring a diverse group, so that people can represent different perspectives. Show the legislator that all of you agree on the issue, even though you may reach that agreement for different reasons. For example, if opposing a voucher bill, you may want to provide the perspective of a teacher, a parent, a person of faith and a civil liberties supporter.

» **Agree on Talking Points and Plan the Meeting Beforehand**

Make a list of key arguments ahead of time and if you can't agree on a point, leave it out altogether. Talk before the meeting and decide who will discuss which talking point. Also, decide who will start the conversation.

» **Always Give Your Best Arguments**

If you know a legislator agrees with you on an issue, it's still valuable for him or her to know that his or her constituents support his or her stand

on an issue. If you know a legislator disagrees with you on an issue, it's still important for him or her to know that some of his or her constituents don't like the stand he or she has chosen on that issue. Sometimes just knowing that there's a vocal minority may cause a legislator to rethink his or her position.

» **Bring Up Personal, Political, and Professional Connections and Provide Personal and Local Examples**

Be sure to bring up any connections, such as memberships in the same community organizations, common contacts or previous meetings. You can also take the opportunity to thank the legislator for previous votes or actions that he or she has taken that you supported. Personal stories and connections help your legislators better remember you and your issues.

» **Don't Be Afraid to Say, "I don't know"**

During your visit, you may encounter a question that you cannot answer. Fear not! It's okay to admit you don't know the answer. You can simply contact someone at the AU national office, and then get back to his or her office with the information requested. Whatever you do, never pretend you know something if you do not. Legislators will appreciate honesty, your willingness to find an answer to their questions and your commitment to the issue at hand. It also provides you with the perfect opportunity to get back in touch with them again about the issue.

» **Leave Materials and Contact Information**

Leave a few pages (not too many or it is too overwhelming) of information, such as recent editorials, letters of support from advocacy organizations or talking points.

» **Send a Thank-You Letter**

Promptly send a personal letter thanking the legislator or staff member for meeting with you. Include your main talking points, commitments that were made, and attach any additional information.