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Letters to Congressmen

Congressmen have well-established methods for learning both the public reaction and the attitudes of specially interested groups on matters with which Congress and the nation have had long experience—for example, taxes, public works, and foreign affairs. They receive the recommendations of the Executive Branch and the advice of staff members and other trusted counselors; they are waylaid by lobbyists; they listen to witnesses at committee hearings; and they read newspapers and the daily mail.

Communication with Congress on scientific and technical issues must follow established patterns, for the legislative process is the same whether Congress is considering a new dam or a new accelerator, the Post Office budget or the budget of the Atomic Energy Commission. Thus on issues involving science and technology Congress gets advice through all the usual means. All, however, have their shortcomings. Sometimes, it is charged, the selection of witnesses to appear at committee hearings is biased. Congress always wants an independent appraisal of Executive recommendations. Lobbysts, almost by definition, are special pleaders. The mail may give a distorted representation of informed judgment. For example, antivivisectionists and persons who believe that research animals are often mistreated have written many letters in support of current proposals to establish federal controls over the use of animals in research and teaching, but there have been few letters about these proposals from biologists and medical researchers.

Congressmen are aware of these difficulties and recognize the need for a wide basis of advice. In order to have a source of information that is independent of the Executive Branch, Congress established the Science Policy Research Division of the Library of Congress. To supplement its other resources, Congress sometimes asks the National Academy of Sciences or other scientific bodies for advice or special studies. But the paucity of letters from scientists on matters about which they are concerned and well informed often puzzles congressmen; they ask, "Why don't we hear from the scientists on this? Aren't they interested?"

Is it worth while to write a letter to a congressman? Not always. The letter may go to a congressman who is not interested, or it may arrive at a time when there is nothing he can do about it, or it may be forgotten in the welter of other mail and other business. Congressmen get junk mail, requests for favors, and much other mail that is not germane to pending legislation. Sometimes they are flooded by letters so nearly identical as to be the obvious result of an organized campaign.

Congressmen get few letters, however, that present a carefully reasoned analysis of why a decision one way or the other would be desirable. The rarity of such letters makes them stand out from the pile of other correspondence. Letters of this kind are particularly likely to be influential if they come from someone the congressman knows, or come with an introduction by a mutual acquaintance; if they come at the time legislation is being drafted, hearings are being held, or a vote is pending; or if they go to a congressman who is serving on the appropriate committee or who has shown a personal interest in the matter at issue.

There can be no guarantee that every letter will result in the desired action. Nevertheless, it is worth while for one who has well-formulated views which he can explain clearly to write to appropriate members of Congress. This is a recognized channel of communication that congressmen understand and use. At the lowest level, the volume of mail is interpreted as a measure of interest. At a higher level, the thoughtful, cogent analysis of an issue may help to achieve a sound decision.

—DAEL WOLFLE