



# How to Get Politicians to do Things for You

People sometimes ask: “Why don’t elected politicians hear us?” This brief guide is intended to make sure they do. If you follow its three guidelines, you won’t always get what you want, but at least you’ll have a fighting chance.

## 1. Voting, Campaigning, Organizing and Just Showing Up Matters

a. If your elected representatives won’t help you protect your home and neighborhood from flooding or other environmental hazards, vote against them! Voting is a cheap and effective way to change the status quo.

b. If your elected representatives know you are willing to campaign for them, they are more likely to help you. By the same token, if they know you are willing to campaign against them, they are also more likely to help. Either way, you win. Electoral campaigning is fun and important, so give it a try!

c. Get organized. While it is important for you to vote and campaign for the candidates and issues that matter to you, it is even more important for you to organize your family, friends and neighbors to do the same. Even five people going door to door in favor of a candidate can sway a local election. Ten can change the outcome in a statewide race; 20 a race for the US Congress!

d. As Woody Allen once said, “80% of life is just showing up.” Voting, campaigning, and organizing all requires showing up. (Ok, you can vote by mail.) If you really want to make an impact, you have to actually show up – online can only get you so far.

## 2. Think globally, act locally. It’s an old expression but it’s still true, especially when it comes to electoral politics.

a. Get to know your local councilman, mayor and state representatives. Go to public meetings and town halls. Talk to their staff and supporters. Always be friendly and polite (but please see the exception to this rule at the bottom of this section\*).

b. Find out what agencies are responsible for managing the flooding or other issues that concern you. Is it the Department of Water and Power? Is it the Sanitation District? (These departments have different names in every state or district.) Do some research online. If you still can't find out, ask your tech-savvy children, neighbors or friends to help.

c. When you have identified your local or state legislators, or the heads of the responsible agency, make appointments to see them. Be persistent! Most politicians know that failing to meet determined constituents is the surest way to make enemies and lose an election. Bring two or three friends with you (be sure to tell the appointments secretary how many you will be). Practice in advance what you are going to say and who is going to say it. Wear a big button that identifies you and your cause, or a tee-shirt or baseball cap – that will convey that you are organized and united. At your meeting, be clear, succinct and polite. Bring photos illustrating your issues. Make a specific, (polite) demand and establish a time to follow-up. Thank the individuals and praise them profusely. Politicians like to be liked.

\*Okay, here is the politeness exception: If you find that no matter what you do, your legislators or agency heads won't meet with you or listen to you, it is time to be rude. Gather a group of constituents, call the press, rally in front of the official's offices -- avoid blocking any roads -- and shout slogans. Don't be vulgar but be strong. Chant things like: "Hey hey, ho ho, Rep. Soandso has got to go!" And carry signs that read: "Rep. Soandso – You can run but you can't hide from the voters," or "I Flood and I Vote!"

### **3. You too can make a law! It's not as hard as it sounds.**

a. If you already done steps one and two above, you are good to go.

b. Contact your favorite legislator and tell him or her you'd like a new law requiring, for example, the creation of a dedicated fund for stormwater management. He or she will probably say, "OK, great. Go ahead and write a basic draft of the law and gather supporters. Once you have 30 or so, come back to me, and I'll convene a special public hearing to discuss it." Legislators love to introduce and pass laws – it's what they are paid to do!

c. After a series of hearings, your friendly legislator will say to you, "Ok, this is great. Let's write the actual bill. My staff can help you. After you have the bill, please go and gather support from other legislators. Report back to me when you think you are getting close to a majority."

d. When you have good support, tell your legislator. She or he will then bring it to a vote. And voila! You have made a new law that will help you, your neighbors, and many others. You will in fact be a models for communities everywhere.

So that's it, except for four more, quick, essential and final rules: 1) Organize; 2) Organize; 3) Organize; 4) Have fun!