



Effectively Using Public Meetings to Engage with Members of Congress

Town hall meetings and similar types of public forums with members of Congress are excellent venues to ask our national decision makers questions about policies to end hunger in the United States and around the world. Members of Congress often hold meetings in their home districts or states when Congress is in recess.

Tips for effectively making your voice heard at public meetings:

Get there early. Sometimes elected officials try to pack their “public” meetings with supporters and prevent those who have differing views or who are from different political parties from getting in. If you’re worried this may be the case, plan to be there at least an hour early.

Sit by the microphone. If a microphone is set up, plant yourself near it so you don’t end up in the back of the question line. If other people start lining up to ask questions before they are invited to, you should as well.

If you come with friends, don’t all sit together in a clump: There is strength in numbers, even perceived numbers.

Come with questions written down on index cards. Some members of Congress will try to control the questions by taking them in writing. If you have yours ready to go when you arrive, you have a far better chance of getting it read.

Refuse to take a non-answer for an answer. Ask your question, then wait for the response. If you don’t get an actual answer to the question, say so while standing up. Don’t be afraid to say, “That doesn’t answer my question,” then repeat it. Remember, elected officials work for you!

Wear brightly colored clothes. That will further draw attention to you when raise your hand to ask your question. Raise your hand high.

Don’t let yourself be interrupted. Sometimes other meeting participants can interrupt people who are asking questions. Depending upon how contentious the meeting is, some audience members could start booing and hissing



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over the sound of your voice. Don’t be surprised if they start yelling at you mid-question, but don’t stop asking your question. Keep talking. You have every right to ask your question and be heard. If you still have something to say, by all means, keep talking.

Have a few facts at your fingertips. Be ready to cite some statistics in the area you are asking questions about.

If there is no chance to ask questions, ask them anyway. A new tactic by candidates who don’t want to answer tough questions is to essentially filibuster with a PowerPoint presentation that offers a slanted picture of the issues rather than taking questions from the audience. Raise your hand if there is an appropriate place for a question. Go ahead and question the information being presented.

At the end of the event, try to be one of the first to work your way to the front of the meet-and-greet line. Shake

the hand of the member of Congress, and mention something to him or her about how important the fight against hunger and poverty is to you as a constituent. If you can get a group together to attend the forum, this works even better. If an office holder hears about hunger and poverty issues from many people during the meet and greet, he or she will realize how important an issue this is to constituents in your state.

Bring a digital camera, and ask to have your photo taken with the candidate. Taking a photo is a great way to extend the discussion with members of Congress and to get them to make specific commitments in the fight against hunger and poverty. Post the photo on Facebook or Twitter as a way of bringing the accountability of the public to the candidate.

After the event, find a member of the media or a blogger and offer a quote that can be included in a news report. Journalists want a local perspective on the event and will want to hear your feedback about the candidate's statement or answer to your question. But journalists will not find you—you've got to find them.

After the event, follow up and spread the word:

- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.
- Schedule a meeting with your member of Congress.
- Record the candidate's response to your question by video, photo, or notes, and share this information via YouTube, Facebook, other forms of social media, or email with your friends. Encourage them to go to a town meeting and ask a similar question, or tell them to contact their member of Congress.



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