

In a time of deep divisions in our country, it can feel challenging to exercise the traditional pathways of advocacy. Congress has been divided between the two main political parties since the mid-term elections of 2018, and there is little agreement on how to even define the problems that face us as a nation – much less resolve them. The resulting stalemate can make even the most optimistic among us feel cynical about contacting members of Congress to let them know how we feel and what we would like them to do as our elected representatives.

Yet especially in such challenging times, the best way to preserve and strengthen our democracy is to vigorously exercise the full spectrum of our rights as citizens, lifting our voices and taking action in a variety of ways. This includes contacting our representatives on the local, state, and national levels. Face-to-face meetings with elected officials are by far the most effective way to be heard by them, and such meetings are important both to voice our support when they do the right thing, and to push them to take more powerful action or to shift their position. When we organize Congressional visits with others who are grounded in the values of our faith, it can leave us feeling energized and more determined in our activism, no matter what the outcome of our visit.

The August recess, when your members of Congress are in their home districts, is an ideal time to organize a group of constituents to meet with them, especially when different organizations or congregations are represented by the group. The following steps will help you plan, prepare for, conduct, and follow up on an in-district visit. Please join your fellow Unitarian Universalists in this critical advocacy work!

**HOW TO BEGIN:** The first thing to do is to [find your members of Congress](#) and visit their websites. Every citizen has three members of Congress (two Senators and one Representative). Begin with your member's website for information on setting up a meeting; many offices require a written request. If you don't see the information posted, call the office and ask to speak to the person in charge of scheduling. Identify yourself as a constituent and member of your congregation (name the church, or the coalition you're representing), and request a meeting with the representative/senator. Let them know the specific issue you want to discuss. Setting up a visit may require several follow-up calls.

Given the current state of play with regard to several of the important pieces of legislation we support, we are asking UUSC supporters to focus on visiting your senators during this August Recess. However, meeting with members of the House of Representatives can also be helpful, especially as they can also influence their colleagues in the Senate.

*"It is important that we not allow our religious motivations to disappear into our political preferences...Given the public dominance of conservative religious voices today, if religious liberals don't speak up, no one else will know that there is another religious perspective."*

—Paul Rasor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness*

**ORGANIZING A GROUP:** You should begin organizing your group before you've received a final date and time from the congressional office. Groups are more likely than individuals to receive an appointment, and group visits have the added benefit of building relationships and skills among the participants. An ideal size is between 4-7 people; any larger than that will be challenging to coordinate.

First, think about who else within your congregation shares your commitment to immigration justice and other human rights priorities. If one or more people in your group are directly impacted by immigration policies, or work directly with migrants or asylum seekers, encourage them to come: personal stories are powerful. Reach out to your minister about joining you, and if you're active in community and interfaith circles, contact people there to see who is interested.

If you already know which days are available for your visit, find out how many people in your group can commit to those dates. If you don't yet have scheduling information from the congressional office, choose several dates that will work for the majority of your group so you can offer these in your next contact with the office.

**PREPARING YOUR PRESENTATION:** Before the date of your visit, it's important to know how your member of Congress has voted on the issue in the past (or other ways their views have been made public). You can often find out this information through their website; if it isn't there, call the office and ask specifically to know about their votes. During your visit, it's a good idea to thank them for their vote when they did the right thing, and to let them know you're aware of their past vote even when they didn't (e.g. *We know you refused to co-sponsor the Berta Caceres Act earlier this year, but we're asking you to reconsider*).

Think about what you want to say in advance. We provide background and talking points here, but you will be most effective if you consider your own commitment as well, so you can present your perspective personally and compellingly. No one is expected to be a human rights expert! But take the time to review not only the talking points, but also why you care about the issue so much. If you can couch your commitment and feelings within our Unitarian Universalist values, you also remind your members of Congress that there are progressive religious voices out there too, not just conservative ones!

Meet with your group in advance of your appointment. Talk through together the different perspectives from which you might speak, and decide together who will cover different talking points. For instance, if your minister or another religious professional is attending, they could lift up the ways our stance toward justice is grounded in our faith. If a migrant or asylum seeker is able to attend, they can speak directly to the challenges and injustice they have navigated. Personal stories have a lot of impact!

Be clear during your visit about what you want your member of Congress to do about the issue. This is where the specific "ask" comes in! Frame what you want in such a way that you're asking for a commitment: if you say, "please be sure to sign on to the Berta Caceres Act", a vague statement to think about it may be all that you get. If you say, "Can we count on you to co-sponsor the Berta Caceres Act as soon as you return from recess?" your representative is more inclined to give you a definitive answer.

Bring [our supporting materials](#) to leave with the office. It is helpful to share with the members of Congress and their staff the specific information and examples that demonstrate exactly why their action is so important to us. You can also include information about your local congregation and/or immigration coalition; be sure these include contact information!

**THE VISIT:** Dress neatly and conservatively. You might find it helpful to have a brief review and a moment of silence or a meditation or prayer right beforehand. Remember that the visit is also about relationship, so the way you approach it should be thoughtful and respectful, even if your congressperson is not friendly to the issue. Try to relax! Stick to the talking points you've all agreed to, and try to avoid speaking out of anger or frustration.

If your meeting is with staff members rather than your member of Congress, that's okay! Often the staff will know a great deal about the issue, and it's their job to pass on your concerns to the Senator or Representative. At the start of the meeting, lead with introductions: who you are, where you live, what congregation or group you represent. Members of Congress are always thinking about the next election, so naming your larger groups is a way of indicating you represent a lot more voters than are gathered in the room. One person should take the lead in introducing the reason for your visit. If there is anything you can genuinely thank the representative for, even if their vote or stance didn't have to do with this issue, that's also a good way to begin.

Invite each person to make their statement, and then conclude with the direct ask. Use your stories and support them with background facts. Be prepared for questions and the give-and-take of the visit, but keep uplifting your central message. If your representative doesn't agree with you on the issue or comes back at you with "alternative facts", don't be overly argumentative, but don't give up on making your points.

If you're asked something for which you don't know the answer, say so; you can offer to find the information and get it to them as a follow-up. Committing to get back to them gives you an opportunity to prove that you are credible, and gives you one more chance to advocate for what you believe in.

At the end of your meeting, press for a commitment. Will they take the action you've asked them for? If not, why not? If they're undecided, when and how will they make a decision? If you can, end on a positive note: if you have found common ground, you can name and honor that while still recognizing where you disagree.

**AFTER THE VISIT:** Debrief with your group. How did it go, and how did everyone feel about how they did with their piece and the responses they received? What testimony or arguments seemed to be most effective? What else might you do to follow up?

Take a photo of your group and email it to [info@uusc.org](mailto:info@uusc.org)! Tell us a little about how the visit went for you! We love to amplify the voices of UUs in advocacy, and we want to know how we can continue to support you going forward. Let your congregation know about the visit too – it lays the groundwork for others coming with you next time.

It's a good practice to follow up with the office by sending a thank you letter to the member of Congress or to the staff you met with, along with any information and materials you offered to provide. Building a relationship with your member of Congress is the best way to make your voice heard on the policy issues you care about.

---

**ONGOING ADVOCACY:** After meeting with your legislators, your group may feel energized to meet with members of Congress on an ongoing basis and continue to raise your voice about human rights issues. Here are some tools to help you deepen your advocacy going forward.

Indivisible has put together [guidelines](#) on how to frame your “asks” during a meeting. These are the concrete steps you are asking your members of Congress to take in order to advance human rights. Here are the key points to keep in mind about any well-defined “ask”:

**1. It's specific.** Asks are not about philosophizing, they're about prompting specific action. So your ask should be time-limited and precise. For instance, “Vote no on x bill,” or “Ask x witness about this issue at the hearing on September 2.”

**2. It's strategic.** The reason you're asking at all is because you want to achieve something. For instance, “Co-sponsor x bill” builds support for a policy you prefer, while “Make a speech about x issue” might not accomplish anything.

**3. It's seeable.** Trust but always verify. If the action you're asking for cannot be observed and verified, you will not be able hold your Member of Congress accountable for following through. You can check to see how they voted, you can watch the video of a hearing, you can ask to see the letter they sent.

[The Indivisible guide](#) also includes advice on how to prepare for a “town hall” event, in which members of Congress meet with constituents to hear their concerns and priorities. Many Senators and Representatives host “town halls” during the August recess, and asking a question at these events can be an important way to advocate for human rights.

*Note: We are grateful for the materials assembled on the UUA and on the Indivisible websites, some of which were adapted for this guide.*