

# Make Your Voice Heard

How to communicate effectively with your elected officials

Courtesy of



## The League of Women Voters



We are a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. The Okaloosa League strives to be a voice for citizens and a force for progress on the Emerald Coast.

## “All politics is local.”

- Usually attributed to former House Speaker Tip O’Neill
- Actually coined by AP Washington Bureau Chief Byron Price in 1932
- Regularly ignored by the electorate everywhere
- Municipal Election turnout for March 2017
  - Crestview: 5.05%
  - Cinco Bayou: 15.29%
  - Fort Walton Beach: 15.95%
  - **Laurel Hill: 46.86%**



## Democracy depends on VOTERS

- Change is inevitable; progress is not.
- Your elected representatives work for YOU, not the other way around.
- Be present: At local meetings, at the district office, in the Capital, over the phone, by mail or email, on social media.
- Be the change you want to see!



## ABCs of communicating with your elected officials

- Research: Know who represents you locally, statewide and federally.
- Understand what your elected officials can and can't do.
  - For example, don't complain about the President to your County Commission.
- Find your niche.
- Contact the appropriate representative about the issues that matter to you, and that he or she can affect.
- **Be specific!**



## 2017-18 Voter's Guide <http://www.govote-okaloosa.com>

The screenshot shows the website for Okaloosa County Supervisor of Elections, Paul Lee. The navigation menu includes VOTERS, WAYS TO VOTE, CANDIDATES, ELECTION INFO, PROGRAMS, and HELPFUL LINKS. The main content area features several sections:

- Public Notices:** Notice of Special Election Sheriff Personnel Board.
- 2017-2018 Voter's Guide:** This link is circled in red.
- 2017 FSASE Scholarship:** Link to more information.
- Polling Place Changes:** Link to more information.
- Public Records:** Exemption Passes for Military Voter Registration Record - Read more.
- View all Public Notices and Press Releases:** Link to Here.
- 2017 Municipal Elections (3/14/2017):** OFFICIAL RESULTS. SSL secured. Learn more...
- 2017 Municipal Election (03/14/2017):** A bar chart showing Total Ballots Cast by Party (Rep, Dem, Other) and Precinct.
- Dates To Remember:**
  - January 2017:** 2nd - 6th: Candidate Qualifying Week
  - February:** 13th - Book Closing. Last day to register for March 14 election
  - March 2017:** 6th - 10th - Early Voting SOE office locations only, 8am-5pm
  - 14th - Municipal Elections:** Cinco Bayou, Crestview, Fort Walton Beach, Laurel Hill, Shalimar

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS<sup>®</sup> OF OKALOOSA COUNTY  
*A force for progress on the Emerald Coast since 1962!*  
 Home | Donate | Contact Us | Join Us

**Welcome to League:**  
**A force for progress on the Emerald Coast, encouraging the active and informed participation of citizens in their government!**

**1st Circuit Community Alliance**  
**LOCATION UPDATE:** This event has moved.  
 All about the **1st Circuit Community Alliance:** Join League for a "brown bag" lunch on **Wednesday, 22 March, from 11:30-12:30 in Rm 130, Student Services Center, NWFSC** (1000 College Blvd, Niceville), when guest speaker Phyllis Gonzalez, DCF's 1st Circuit Community Development Administrator, will explain how this collaborative partnership supports vulnerable children in our community. **RSVP today!**

**LWV 2017 Legislative Summit:** Join Leaguers from across Florida in Tallahassee on **28-29 March** to network, learn and lobby your legislators. Get details, check out our **2017 Legislative Priorities** and register today.

**Florida Women's Day at the Capitol:** The Florida Commission on the Status of Women hosts this unique program to inform women about statewide issues and inspire them to work together to create a better Florida. The event will be held on the **22nd floor of the Capitol on 29-30 March**. Read the **schedule**. Register.

**Voter Information**  
**2017-18 Voter's Guide Okaloosa County**  
 Your trusted source for non-partisan, fact-based voter info.

## Research

- **US Congress:** Write and vote on national laws that then go to the Senate for a vote or the president for a signature.
  - They don't litigate or prosecute or handle state or local issues.
- **State Government:**
  - The Legislature writes and votes on state laws that then go to the Governor for a signature, and they control funding for local schools, roads, transportation, etc.
  - State Attorneys & Public Defenders uphold the law with the judiciary.
- **County & Municipal Government:** This is where the rubber meets the road in your community.
  - Local zoning, permitting, infrastructure, etc., are under their aegis.



## Finding your niche

- What issues speak to YOU?
  - For federal spending programs like Medicare, Social Security, defense, healthcare, research, etc., start with your Congressman.
  - For confirmation of presidential appointees and advice/counsel on treaties, start with your Senators.
  - For state programs like Medicaid, transportation, or electoral reform, start with your state legislator and Senator.
  - For local issues like public safety (police, fire, EMT), schools, infrastructure, or zoning, start with your County Commission, municipal officers or local Constitutional Officers (Clerk of Courts, School Superintendent, Supervisor of Elections, Tax Collector, Property Appraiser, Sheriff).



## Focus on a few key issues

- Write down the issues that are most important to you.
- Determine your “bandwidth” and amount of time you can dedicate to volunteer work.
- Search Google, Facebook, and LinkedIn for groups in your area. Be as broad or specific as you’d like.
- Visit their websites and attend volunteer orientations.



## Contact your representative

- Use social media: Most representatives have Facebook and Twitter accounts.
  - Be advised: They use social media to communicate their messages quickly and easily, rather than as a way to engage in discussions with constituents.
  - If you use it, be sure to identify yourself as a constituent!
- Email: The *other* quick and inexpensive electronic communication.
  - Use the form provided on your representative's website: it's there for security reasons to prevent viruses and spam.
  - The more personal the email, the better: Form emails are easily recognized and not always that effective.



## Personal emails

- Heartfelt and personal stories from constituents about how a specific piece of legislation affects them are important.
  - Not easily "batched" like form emails: A staffer has to read them individually.
  - One persuasive email with a personal story is likely to make its way around the staff as well as to the representative.
  - Individual stories have the power to change the minds of lawmakers.
- Ask for a specific action! It makes responding to your letter easier.
- Be brief and respectful! Outline the legislation or issue of concern, include your personal story and a call to a specific action.



## Personal letters (yes, *snail mail*)

- A personal letter is one of the best ways to get someone to read your message, but the normal postal system, plus security on the receiving end, slow things down.
- Keep your letter brief, targeted, and from the heart.
- Be sure to identify yourself as a constituent and include your contact information so you can receive a response.
- Staffers often look for letters to pass along to their bosses, so the more personal, the better.



## What about faxes?

- Offices generally don't have dedicated fax machines. They have multifunction copy machines.
- Faxes aren't printed out: they are sent to an email inbox and put with other letters.
- When people "spam" fax machines with the same message to every member of Congress or the State House, they just get deleted.

**Advice from a former Congressional staffer:**  
Stick to phone calls, emails and personal letters.



## Phone calls

- It's the fastest way to register a call to action, because staffers can tally calls immediately on a specific topic.
- Only call the representatives who represent you and identify yourself as a constituent.
- Be brief and respectful: Don't make it a negative experience and don't tie up phone lines for other constituents.
- Call only once about an issue: Phone calls are better when targeted.
- Ask for a specific action and ask that your opinion be recorded.



## Script for phone calls

- Identify yourself as a constituent by name and city.
- State your specific call to action and pose your question to the staffer.
- Wait for the staffer to respond.
- Tell your personal story about why this particular call to action matters to you.
- Ask for your opinion to be recorded and end the call.



## Town Hall meetings

- Not every representative has them, but attend them if you can.
- Go with a likeminded group, so you have a higher chance of having your question(s) selected, asked and answered.
- The more brief and pointed your question(s), the better.
- Don't "hog" the microphone: It's OK to question a policy or be critical, but be sure to ask a specific question!
- Watch your email and social media, or just call the office to ask about when meetings are planned.



## In-person meetings

- If your group is concerned about a specific issue, set up a meeting with a staffer to discuss your concerns as a group.
- If your group has specific expertise, let the staffers know.
- Come prepared with what you'd like to bring up as well as your specific call to action.
- Be prepared to share your personal stories.
- Leave a SHORT factsheet to underline your message.
- Be brief and polite, and signal your desire for sincere dialog if you're coming from a place of opposition.



## Conclusion

- Know who your representatives are, what they do, and how to contact them.
- Do some research before you call, to make sure you're calling the right person about the right issue.
- To make a difference requires a LOT of people contacting their representatives about how the laws they are writing affect YOU.
- Use personal stories to your advantage: Make calls and write letters when it can make the most impact.
- Use the phone, email and letters to get responses on the issues and **encourage your friends to do so as well!**



## Sources

1. "Call the Halls: Contacting your representatives the smart way," by Emily Ellsworth (<http://lwvokaloosa.org/documents/CallTheHalls.pdf>)
2. Tips for contacting your legislators, League of Women Voters of Okaloosa County (<http://lwvokaloosa.org/Legislature.html>)
3. Effective Communication with a legislator, The Florida Senate (<https://www.flsenate.gov/About/EffectiveCommunication>)
4. 2017–18 Voter's Guide for Okaloosa County (<http://www.govote-okaloosa.com/Portals/Okaloosa/Documents/Voter%20Guides/2017-2018%20Voter%20Guide%20Final%20for%20web.pdf>)

