



CIVIC ACTION TOOLKIT

HOW TO BE POLITICALLY ENGAGED EVEN
AFTER ELECTIONS



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Introduction

Yasmin Jaramillo



Hello Patriots,

Welcome to the Civil Action Toolkit, your guide on all the various ways you can be politically engaged. Of course, the number one way to be involved in politics is to vote, and we know Mason students are great about this. In the 2016 election, about 65% of Mason students voted, in comparison to the national average of all institutions, in which 50% of students voted. We do a great job of voting, but we can do even better by learning about different ways we can be involved in politics. In this toolkit, we highlight some of the many ways you can work to be civically engaged. Included is information on how to contact your elected officials and what to say when doing so. This is a great way for you to tell your elected officials what you want to see from them and how you feel about the actions they are taking. If you are looking for other ways to voice your opinions and concerns, we provide you with information on how to go about inspiring public action and starting petitions.

A great way to show your support for your political party or candidates you care about is fundraising, which we cover and provide you with information on how to go about doing so. Then, we provide you with information on external resources and how you can utilize them to be politically engaged. All of these sections were created by students, for students, to give you the tools you need to be civically engaged year-round and not only just during election season. You all have the ability to voice your concerns and really make a difference in politics, and this toolkit is designed to provide you with the resources and skills that will help you to do so. While it is a simple way to be civically engaged, voting is still very important so do not forget to vote any chance you get. To end, if you are looking for another great way to get involved, join Student Government! You can go to sg.gmu.edu or contact sg@gmu.edu for more information on how to join.

Public Action

Camden Layton

Information on how to become active in the community with others who support the same issues as you do.

Protests

1. Some helpful tips for protesting:

a. Wear practical clothing. If it's raining, dress appropriately. If it's hot, dress appropriately. If

it's cold, dress appropriately. Always make sure you are wearing comfortable shoes when you are going to be doing a lot of walking.

b. Bring snacks and water! Protesting can end up being a lot longer than anticipated and staying hydrated is super important.

c. If possible, bring at least \$100 with you if bail money is needed. Usually, protests will not get out of hand and you will not be arrested, but it is better to be on the safe side.

d. If approached by a policeman or you feel as if your rights are being violated, remain calm as it is unwise to start yelling. You are lawfully not required to give anything other than your name to an officer and can ask to remain quiet until a lawyer is present.

e. Many may come to a protest in the form of a counter-protestor. They are lawfully allowed to be there as long as they do not disrupt the event. Do not

give into these protestors as your rights are not protected if you incite violence.

2. Because we live so close to Washington, DC, there are always protests happening on a range of different issues. Some websites you can look at to know when they happen:

<https://crowdvoice.org/>

<https://www.resistancecalendar.org/>

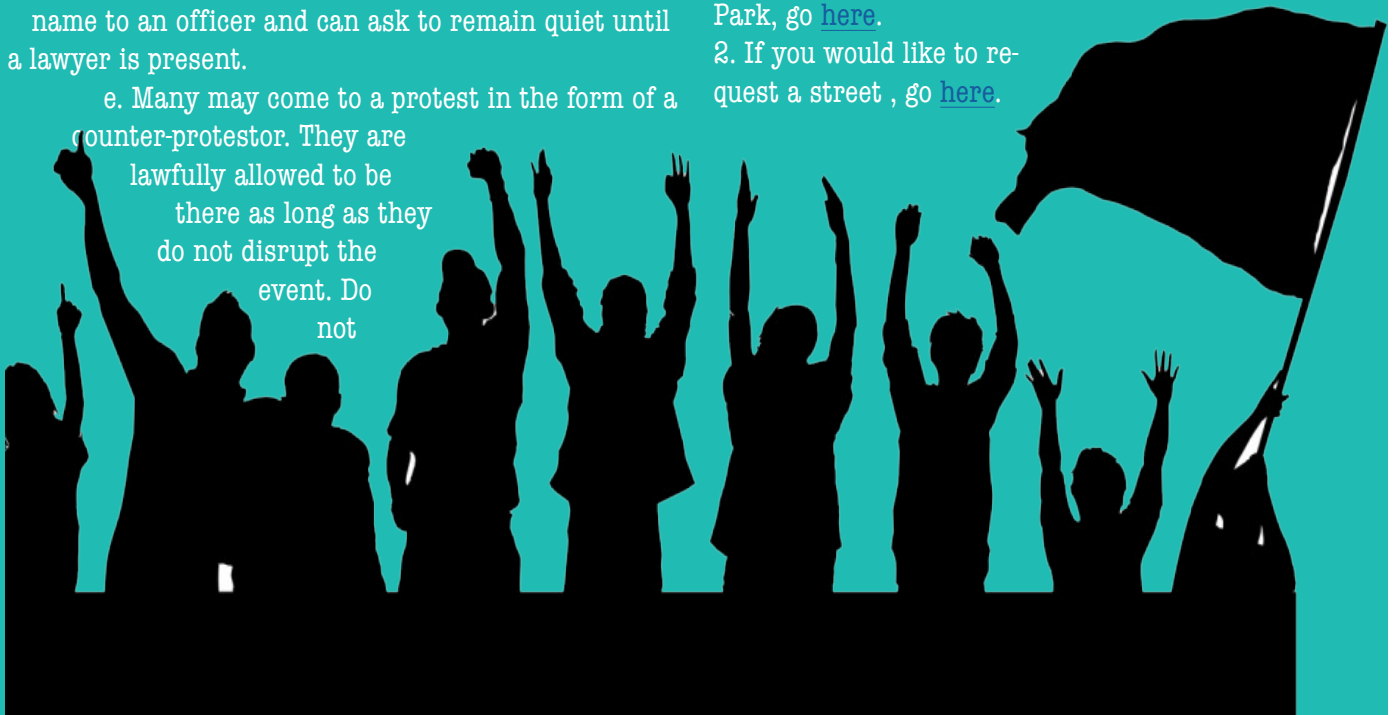
<https://www.eventbrite.com/d/dc-washington/rallies/>

3. When planning for a protest, you may need to obtain a protest permit. In most cases, you will not need to obtain a permit if you anticipate less than 50 participants, but if necessary there are different processes depending on where you plan on going:

a. If in DC, there are separate processes you must go through depending on if you intend on being on a National Park or on just the streets.

1. If you would like to protest on a National Park, go [here](#).

2. If you would like to request a street, go [here](#).



b. In Fairfax County, visit this [application](#).

c. If you have any further questions, reach out to the respective government offices and they are willing to work you through the application process.

Town Halls

1. One way to get to know your representative better and voice your concerns is by going to townhalls. These are normally informal discussions on how they stand on a variety of different topics.

2. The best way to know when these are occurring is to go to your representative's social media or website and see what they have posted for upcoming events. Most elected officials also have an email list that they use to continually update their constituents on when town halls and office hours are happening.

3. Before you go:

a. Read up on what they have been doing lately for context on what others may want to discuss.

b. Prepare a few questions or topics you'd like to talk about in advance so, if given the chance, you can let your voice be heard.

Sources:

https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_pdf_file/shortened_protest_kyr_6.1.18.pdf

<https://washingtonpeacecenter.org/permitprocess>

https://www.aclude.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/aclu_8.5_x_11_trifold_v21.pdf



How to Contact Your Elected Representatives

Joseph Fernando

Learn how to get in touch with your federal, state, and local elected leaders

How to Contact Your Elected Representatives

Contact Federal Elected Officials

- **President**—Contact the president of the United States by filling out the online contact form or by calling the White House switchboard at 202-456-1414 or the comments line at 202-456-1111 during business hours.

- **Members of U.S. Congress**

- o **U.S. Senators**—Get contact information for your Senators in the U.S. Senate.

- o **U.S. Representatives**—Find the website and contact information for your Representative in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Contact State Elected Officials

- **State Governors**—Learn how to get in touch with your state governor.

- **State Legislators**—Find the names and current activities of your state legislators.

Contact Local Elected Officials

- **U.S. Mayors**—Locate mayors by name, city, or population size.

- **County Executives**—Search on a map or by your ZIP code to find the head of the executive branch of government in your county. (The county executive may be an elected or an appointed position.)

Other Local Government Officials—Get contact information for your city, county, and town officials in your state.

How to Call Your Elected Representatives

- Learn the general script on how to talk on the phone with your federal, state, and local elected leaders

Sample Script

- Here is a sample of a good script for calling your elected official about a law:

You: Hello, I would like to make a comment to **[elected official's name]** about **[problem or policy]**.

Staff member: Certainly. Please go ahead.

You: Thank you. My name is **[your full name]**, and I live at **[address]**. I'm calling to urge **[elected official's name]** to support laws that **[fix the problem you are calling about - explain that here]**. I care about this because **[reason]**.

Staff member: I will give your message to **[elected official's name]**. Would you like for him/her to send a response to you?

You: **[Yes OR No]**. Thank you for your time, good-bye.

Staff Member: Thank you for your comments. Have a good day.

General Tips

- Learn the general tips when contacting your federal, state, and local elected leaders

Top 10 Tips for Calling Elected Officials

1. Once connected to your elected official's office, identify yourself as a constituent to the receptionist. Clearly state your first and last name, your hometown, and why you are calling. Ask politely to speak with the staff who handles health care. Sometimes, the receptionist will indicate that you will need to leave your comments with him/her. If that is the case, you still should ask for the name of the health staffer, so that you have that information and record it for future reference.

a.

Example: "My name is Jessie Johnson. I am from San Francisco, and I would like to speak with the health legislative assistant about a health care issue that is important to me."

2. If transferred to the staffer, or if you are put into the staffer's voicemail, reintroduce yourself and immediately identify the topic you are calling to discuss.

a. Example: "My name is Jessie Johnson. I am from San Francisco, and I am a parent with a child with Spina Bifida (or I am someone who was born with Spina Bifida), and I am calling to urge Representative/Senator to support increased funding for the National Spina Bifida Program."

that require intervention and support. The National Spina Bifida Program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention plays a key role in helping to improve the lives of people with this condition."

3. Make a few brief points as to why the issue is of concern to you, your community, and the nation, and why the elected official should take action. You may want to use written notes to help you stay on topic and remain clear, while articulating your case.

a. Example: "Spina Bifida is the nation's most common, permanently disabling birth defect, which impacts virtually every organ system in the body. People who live with Spina Bifida face a host of medical, educational, professional, and social challenges that require intervention and support. The National Spina Bifida Program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention plays a key role in helping to improve the lives of people with this condition."

4. Be clear as to what you are asking the elected official to do (e.g., cosponsor a particular bill, vote for or against a specific measure, sign a "Dear Colleague" letter, proclaim October as Spina Bifida Awareness Month, etc.).

a. Example: "I am calling to urge the Representative/Senator to show his/her support for people with Spina Bifida, by calling for increased funding for the National Spina Bifida Program in the coming year. A Dear Colleague letter calling for a boost in funding is being circulated, which I hope he/she will sign-on."

5. Be polite in your tone and language. On average, staffers receive more angry calls from impolite constituents than polite callers.

Taking time to be polite will go a long way in getting your message across. The staffer on the other end of the phone is overworked, overwhelmed, underpaid, and receives dozens – if not hundreds – of calls a day. Also, be sure not to use any "lingo" or "slang". You should not assume the person on the other end of the phone is familiar with the issue you are discussing, so be as clear and concise as possible.

6. Keep it brief. Limit your call to no more than five minutes, unless the staffer asks you questions and seems engaged in the discussion. office detailing the Senator's views on Spina Bifida and my request."

7. Specifically request a written response from the office on the elected official's position or action on the issue you addressed.

a. Example: "I would like a letter from your office detailing the Senator's views on Spina Bifida and my request."

8. Provide your full name, mailing address, e-mail address, and phone number.

a. Example: "My name is Jessie Johnson. 123 Main Street, San Francisco, CA 94123. My phone number is 415-555-1234. I look forward to hearing back from your office."

9. Thank the staffer for his/her time and indicate that you appreciate his/her willingness to listen and record your comments. Be sure to record the name of the staffer and the day and time you spoke, so you can have it for future use and in case you need to follow up.

9. Thank the staffer for his/her time and indicate that you appreciate his/her willingness to listen and record your comments. Be sure to record the name of the staffer and the day and time you spoke, so you can have it for future use and in case you need to follow up.

a. Example: "May I have your first and last name for my records? Thank you very much for your time and for recording my views and seeing that I receive a response from the Senator. Goodbye."

10. If you do not receive a response within a reasonable timeframe (approximately a month), either call or write to follow-up and request a response. Reference your phone call and mention with whom you spoke and the topic to help facilitate a meaningful reply.

Other Tips

• Be sure to keep in touch with the offices of your Members of Congress to establish a relationship, and make yourself available as a local resource on the issues. There are times when you and an elected official will have to "agree to disagree," but over time, you also may find that the policymaker may be supportive and helpful on other matters.

• It is best to contact the Member's Washington, D.C. offices, as they are better equipped to handle a greater volume of constituent calls, and most policy staff are located in the Capitol Hill office, not in the district.

• Keep in mind the person answering your call in the Member's Washington, D.C. office is most likely an intern so please be patient with them as they handle the high volume of constituent calls to assist with policy staff.

• Understand that if the switchboard is full or the main office is taking a while to answer your call, please call back later during business hours (9:00 AM - 5:30 PM). If they still do not answer, you have the option of leaving a message on their voicemail if made available.

Tips on Writing to Your Elected Officials

• Letters and faxes are an extremely effective way of communicating with your elected officials.

Many legislators believe that a letter represents not only the position of the writer but also many other constituents who did not take the time to write.

• Keep it brief: Letters should never be longer than one page, and should be limited to one issue. Legislative aides read many letters on many issues in a day, so your letter should be as concise as possible.

2. State Who You Are and What You Want Up Front: In the first paragraph, tell your legislators that you are a constituent and identify the issue about which you are writing. If your letters pertains to a specific piece of legislation, it helps to identify it by its bill number (e.g. H.R. ____ or S. ____).

3. Hit your three most important points: Choose the three strongest points that will be most effective in persuading legislators to support your position and flesh them out.

4. Personalize your letter: Tell your elected official why this legislation matters in his community or state. If you have one, include a personal story that shows how this issue affects you and your family. A constituent's personal stories can be the very persuasive as your legislator shapes his or her position.

5. Personalize your relationship: Have you ever voted for this elected official? Have you ever contributed time or money to his or her campaign? Are you familiar with her through any business or personal relationship? If so, tell your elected official or his staff person. The closer your legislator feels to you, the more powerful your argument is likely to be.

6. You are the Expert: Remember that your legislator's job is to represent you. You should be courteous and to the point, but don't be afraid to take a firm position. Remember that often your elected official may know no more about a given issue than you do.

Example of a good letter →

Your Program's Letterhead

Today's Date

My Name
My Program
My Address

The Honorable (Name of Official)
(Title of Official)
P O Box _____
City, State Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms. (Last Name),

I am writing this letter to request your presence/that you please consider/to inform you about etc.

[Do not forget to explain the importance and relevance of the event in a concise format.]

Thank you for your time and attention to my request.

Sincerely yours,

Signature

Printed Name & Title

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Sources Used

1. How to Contact Your Elected Representatives
 - a. <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials>
 - b. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/contact>
 - c. http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm
 - d. <http://www.house.gov/representatives/>
 - e. <https://www.usa.gov/state-governor>
 - f. <https://www.congress.gov/state-legislature-websites>
 - g. <https://www.usmayors.org/mayors/>
 - h. <http://explorer.naco.org/>
- i. <https://www.usa.gov/local-governments>
2. How to Call Your Elected Representatives
 - a. <https://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/fact-sheet-how-to-call-your-elected-officials.pdf>
3. General Tips
 - a. <http://spinabifidaassociation.org/advocacy/top-10-tips-for-calling-elected-officials/>
 - b. <https://www.aclu.org/other/tips-writing-your-elected-officials>
 - c. <https://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/resource/invitingpublicofficials.pdf>

Tips for Writing Effective Letters to Elected Officials

- ✓ Use plain white paper. Make sure that the writer's complete name and street address appear on the letter.
- ✓ Letters may be typed or written in longhand. Keep in mind that letters written in longhand are every bit as effective, if not more so, than typed letters, as long as they are legible.
- ✓ Remember to keep your writing brief and polite. Ask a friend to proofread your letter for spelling and grammar before you send it.
- ✓ The purpose of the letter must be clearly stated. The best letters are concise, direct, and straightforward. Do not beat around the bush.
- ✓ Above all, be polite. Never threaten or attempt to intimidate. Kindness and tact pay off big.
- ✓ Never fail to say, "Thank you for your time and attention."
- ✓ The correct letter closing for all correspondence is "Sincerely yours,"

Political Fundraising

Ryan Carver

Campaign Finance Rules Governing all US Elections EXCEPT Presidential Elections

* You may donate \$2,700 per election to a federal candidate or the candidate's campaign committee. A primary race, a runoff, and a general election are considered separate elections, meaning you can donate \$2700 for each of these separate elections if you would like to.

* You may donate \$5,000 per calendar year to a PAC that supports federal candidates. This limit applies to a PAC (political action committee) that supports federal candidates, meaning that you are donating to a committee that will then decide who to make political donations too with your money.

* You may donate \$10,000 per calendar year to a State or local party committee. This limit applies to a PAC (political action committee) that donates money to state or local government candidates.

* You may donate \$33,900 per calendar year to a national party committee. This limit applies separately to a party's national committee, House campaign committee and Senate campaign committee.

* You may donate \$100 in currency (cash) to any political committee. (Anonymous cash contributions may not exceed \$50.) Contributions exceeding \$100 must be made by check, money order or other written instrument.

Campaign Finance Rules Governing President Elections

* You may donate only \$2,700 to a Presidential candidate during a primary election campaign.

* You may not make any contributions to the Campaign of any Republican or Democratic nominee during a general election that has received federal campaign funding.

*

You may donate only \$2,700 to a Presidential candidate during a general election campaign if that candidate is not a federally funded Democratic or Republican nominee (aka a "Third Party" or "Independent" Candidate).



Prohibited Contributions

- * Corporations and Unions are not allowed to make contributions to political candidates using business or union bank accounts
- * Federal Government Contractors are not allowed to make contributions to political candidates using business accounts
- * It is prohibited to make a campaign contribution in someone else's name
- * Foreign nationals without lawfully permitted US residency are prohibited to make campaign contributions, but foreign nationals with US residency status ("Green Card" status) are able to make campaign contributions

Other Helpful Campaign Contribution Tips:

- * Donated services and items to a political fundraiser, selling fundraising tickets, offering personal loans, and pre-candidacy support (giving a potential candidate money to "test the political waters) are all considered to be pertaining to contributions, meaning you are not permitted to spend beyond federal limits on these items (\$2,700)
- * If you plan on making a campaign contribution, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) encourages you to clearly designate your contribution for a specific purpose, be it a general, primary, or runoff election, to avoid issues with over-contributing during a certain election cycle
- * Any PAC or political "group" with a focus on political campaign donations must account for its political donations after reaching \$1000.00 donated per year to political campaigns, and is required to divulge that information to the IRS

If you ever have any questions or concerns about campaign finance regulations or want to report a campaign finance irregularity, please do so with the contact information listed below.

Federal Election Commission
1050 First Street, NE Washington, D.C. 20463
Telephone: 202-694-1100
Toll Free: 800-424-9530
TDD (for the hearing impaired): 202-219-3336
Email: info@fec.gov



Petitions

Abby Dundore

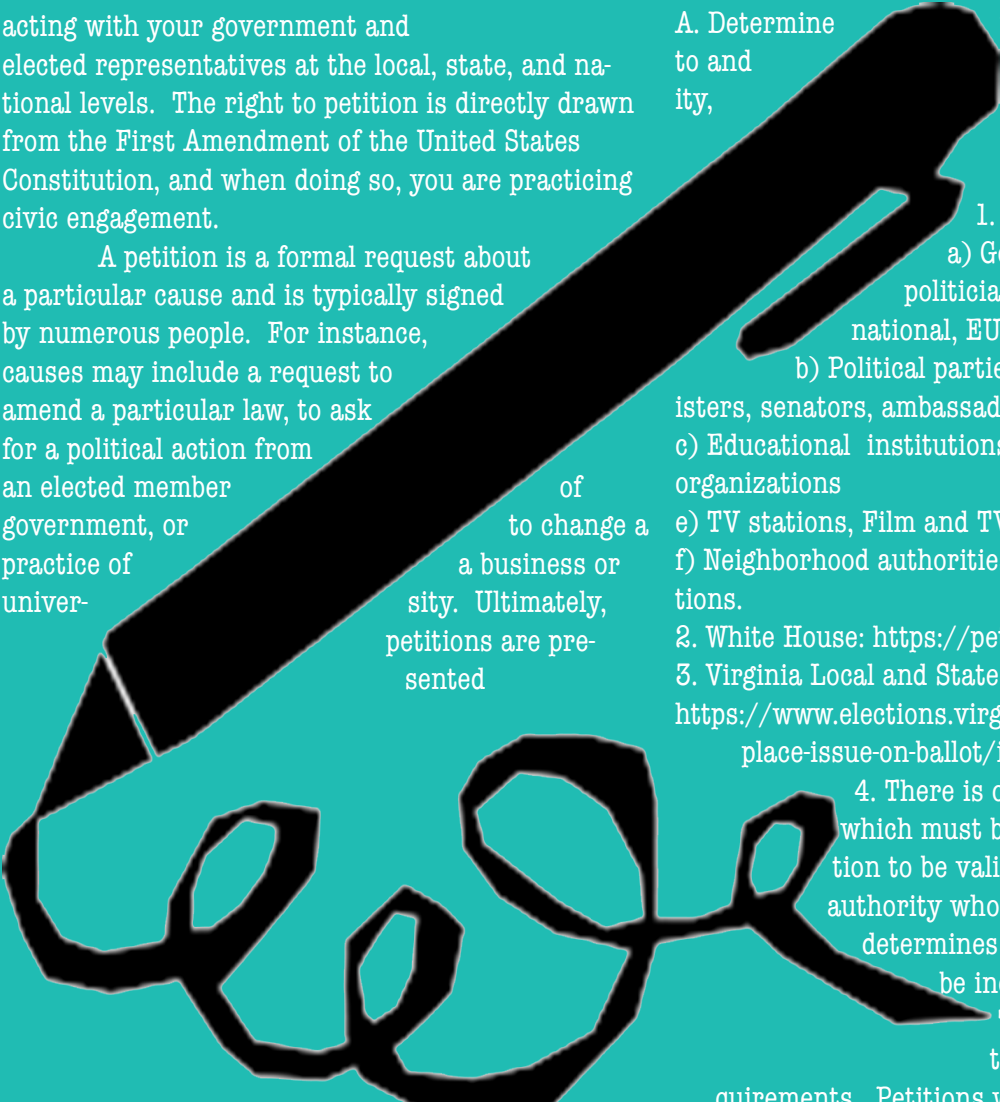
What are petitions?

Petitions are another excellent tool for interacting with your government and elected representatives at the local, state, and national levels. The right to petition is directly drawn from the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, and when doing so, you are practicing civic engagement.

A petition is a formal request about a particular cause and is typically signed by numerous people. For instance, causes may include a request to amend a particular law, to ask for a political action from an elected member of government, or to change a practice of a business or university. Ultimately, petitions are presented

to an authority, such as a representative of Congress, city council member, the president, or a public entity, like the White House. Petitions may also be addressed to non-governmental entities and authorities like television shows and educational institutions. They can be both written and oral; and are transmitted to the populace by various means, including chain email, social media, petition websites, and paper documents.

Writing an Effective Petition

- 
- A. Determine to and to, who you are petitioning depending on the authority there may be different requirements.
1. Popular targets include:
 - a) Governments, parliaments, politicians (local, state, federal, national, EU, UN)
 - b) Political parties, presidents, prime ministers, senators, ambassadors, campaigners
 - c) Educational institutions
 - d) Sports and Media organizations
 - e) TV stations, Film and TV producers, studios)
 - f) Neighborhood authorities or home owner associations.
 2. White House: <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov>
 3. Virginia Local and State Government: <https://www.elections.virginia.gov/election-law/place-issue-on-ballot/index.html>
 4. There is often required information which must be provided for a petition to be valid. Depending upon the authority who will receive the petition determines what information must be included in the petition. Thus, it is always best to research these requirements. Petitions written to governmental entities tend to have stricter rules and regulations in comparison to other targets.

Examples:

Requirements to Petition the White House

Website: <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/about#step-by-step>

Gather 10,000 signatures in 30 days

Common Requirements for signatures to be valid

Signers may be required to provide their:

- Mailing address
- Precinct number
- Voter registration⁴

B. Title

1. The title should be short and clear. Before the argument, this will be the first piece of text that a potential signer will read, also making it their first impression of the petition.

2. The two elements of the title are to focus on the solution and to communicate urgency

3. The following website provides examples of title examples: <https://www.change.org/start-a-petition>

C. Argument

1. The first sentence an authority being petitioned to will see, as well as potential signer, is the argument. The following website provides many tips on creating a concise and effective argument: <https://www.useful-community-development.org/how-to-start-a-petition.html>

2. Notably, arguments should be clear, rational, and reasonable. Words that may appeal to potential signers can be italicized or bolder, as it should be expected that not every potential signer will have the time to thoroughly look over the entire argument.

3. The argument should be kept to ideally one paragraph and, at most, three paragraphs long.

D. Signatures

1. Depending upon the petition, the number of required signatures will be different.

2. When campaigning for signatures on a paper document, it is advised to have a few signatures

(possibly your signature and those of your group) at the top of the page, as this can encourage others to sign the petition⁵.

3. For online petitions, sharing your petition on as many social media platforms as possible is best. Not all authorities accept online petitions, so this should be another consideration when deciding how signatures will be obtained.

Useful Links and Resources

1. <https://www.gopetition.com/info/how-to-create-a-winning-petition-campaign>

2. <https://www.elections.virginia.gov/election-law/place-issue-on-ballot/index.html>

3. <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov>

4. <https://www.useful-community-development.org/how-to-start-a-petition.html>

5. <https://www.change.org/start-a-petition>



External Resources

Abby Dundore

There are many beneficial resources available to develop and promote better civic engagement. Various external resources are included with links and descriptions below.

OpenSecrets: Center for Responsive Politics

About: OpenSecrets is a non-partisan, independent, and non-profit resource. According to the site, it is the most comprehensive resource for lobbying data and federal campaign contributions. The site produces money-in-politics (tracking money in U.S. politics) reporting to promote better transparency and engage Americans about money's influence in politics.

Contact Information:

- <https://www.opensecrets.org/about/>
- Phone - (202) 857-0044
- Fax - (202) 857-7809
- Email - info@crp.org

Countable

About: Countable provides summaries about upcoming legislature in Congress, allows users to tell their lawmakers how to vote on bills, as well as contact their lawmakers directly through email. When voting on a bill, the “yay” or “nay” is automatically sent to the elected official.

Contact information:

- <https://www.countable.us>

Contact information: <https://www.avaaz.org/page/en/about/>

- Email portal - <https://avaaz.desk.com/customer/portal/emails/new>

DATA.GOV

About: This is the official page of the U.S. government's open source data. Following the 2013 Federal Open Data Policy, the site provides newly-generated government data, while maintaining security and privacy. The following link leads directly to DATA.GOV's data catalogue: https://catalog.data.gov/dataset#topic=uncategorized_navigation

Contact Information:

- <https://www.data.gov>
- Email - datagov@gsa.gov

Avaaz: A World in Action

About: This is the world's online activist network, and has thousands of volunteer activists. Their motivation is as follows:

“We take action – signing petitions, funding media

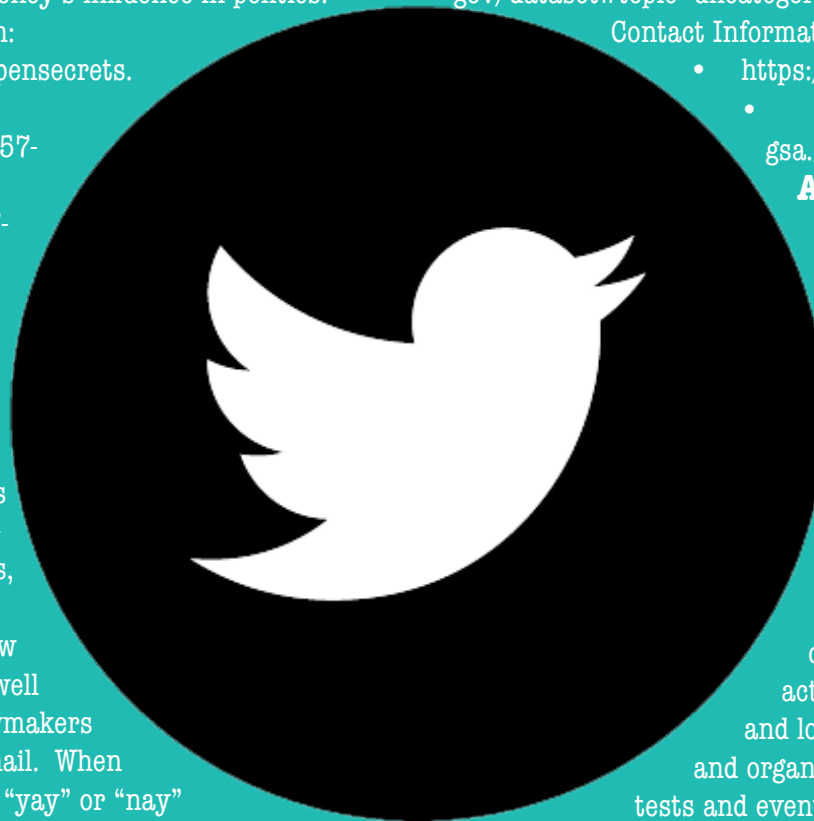
campaigns and direct actions, emailing, calling and lobbying governments,

and organizing ‘offline’ protests and events – to ensure that the views and values of the world's people

inform the decisions that affect us all.”

Contact information: <https://www.avaaz.org/page/en/about/>

- Email portal - <https://avaaz.desk.com/customer/portal/emails/new>



Virginia Elections Hub

About: Elections Hub is a comprehensive portal for nonpartisan information on Virginia politics, candidates, and campaigns. Virginia-centric information on issues, races, candidates, and districts are all available. They also release summary videos and webcasts about issues in legislatures and races. They also take Mason interns!

Email portal: <http://va.onair.cc/>

Causes

About: According to the website, Causes is the largest online campaigning platform, and the user can support and organize campaigns at the community-level.

Contact Information:

- <https://www.causes.com>

Fairfax County Virginia

Contact Information:

- <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov>
- Email link - <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/contact/MailForm.aspx?agId=100844>
- Twitter - <https://twitter.com/FAIRFAXCOUNTY>
- Phone - (703) 324-7329

The Commonwealth of Virginia

Contact Information:

- <https://www.virginia.gov>
- Governor's Office: <https://www.governor.virginia.gov>
- Phone - 804-786-2211
- State Government Directory - (804) 786-0000



GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
STUDENT GOVERNMENT
sg.gmu.edu