

Making Your Voice Heard



Almost immediately after the 2016 presidential election, protests erupted in many cities across the country. In the days that followed, protests continued including high school walkouts, freeway closings, and other demonstrations. Protestors, many of them young people, were eager to express their opposition to potential policies advanced by the Trump campaign, including those relating to immigration and deportations. While most of the protests were peaceful, some demonstrators caused damage to public and private property, resulting in numerous arrests.

People in the United States have many options for making their opinions heard on issues facing the country and their communities. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees the rights of free speech, free press, petition, and assembly. These rights assure that political parties, interest groups, and individuals can influence the making of laws and governmental policies. The First Amendment allows peaceful methods for influencing elected representatives. Other amendments and laws seek to assure the right to vote and participate in elections.

Choosing the best way to influence the political process can be a challenge. Questions arise about what method would be the most effective. What benefits does a particular approach offer? What are its potential costs? Political experts and everyday people often debate these questions. Not everybody agrees.

One approach to affecting public policy and opinion is by demonstrating. A demonstration can include marching, picketing, and walkouts by large numbers of people. Demonstrations have certain benefits. They can capture the attention of the news media and draw attention to the issue or cause. If large numbers of people are involved, demonstrations can show that many people have strong feelings about the issue. If demonstrations disrupt normal business, they can put pressure on officials.

Demonstrations can also have a downside. If they disrupt peoples' lives, they can cause resentment and alienate those who might be supportive. If they become violent, they can sway public opinion against the marchers. Because demonstrations can get so much media attention, they can solidify opposition.

In addition to demonstrations, there are many other methods for affecting local, state, and national policy. Voting and participating in election campaigns are very important. We live in a representative democracy. This means that we elect presidents, governors, and mayors who are part of the executive branch of government. We also elect representatives who serve in the legislative branch, such as the U.S Congress and Senate, upper and lower houses of state government, and county and city councils. It is important to select, vote for, and support representatives who will support and further the issues and policies that are important to you. Those who are eligible to vote need to register and vote in every election to try to assure that their voice and interests are heard. Even those not eligible to vote can participate in the election campaigns of candidates running for office.

ACTIVITY: Choosing the Best Approach

Below are additional approaches that are used to influence the political process and to make sure your voice is heard. They are drawn from Constitutional Rights Foundation's [Educating about Immigration](#) website. As you review each of the following approaches consider its benefits and costs and then discuss the questions that follow.

Click on any of the suggested actions below to get started making your voice heard!

- [Letters to the Editor](#)
- [Letters to Officials](#)
- [Letter-Writing Campaigns](#)
- [Petitioning](#)
- [Email, Social Networking, and Phone Campaigns](#)
- [Lobbying](#)
- [Meeting with a Lawmaker](#)
- [Testifying](#)

Questions for discussion:

- What is the **purpose** of this approach?
- What are some of its potential **benefits**?
- What are some of its potential **costs**?
- Under what **circumstances**, would this approach be appropriate and get the best results?

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