

## Constituent contacts can influence how legislators vote.

*Does calling your legislator actually lead to results for those who are passionately for or against certain legislation? In new research, using a randomized field experiment, [Daniel Bergan](#) finds that it does. Those legislators who received at least one phone call from a constituent asking them to support a certain bill were 11-12 percent more likely to support the legislation, an effect independent of the legislators' party, gender or the competitiveness of their district.*



When constituents contact their legislator, do these contacts actually influence policy? In recent [research](#) with Rick Cole of Michigan State University, we explored this question with a randomized field experiment. Recent work in political science has leveraged field experiments to explore a variety of effects in [election campaigns](#), from the influence of door to door get-out-the-vote drives to the influence of television and radio election advertisements. The influence of advocacy campaigns, and in particular, constituent contacts, on policymaker behavior has for the most part been unexplored. Although not as prevalent as voting, constituent contacts are potentially powerful as they demonstrate a constituent's level of commitment to a specific issue. Citizen contacts are often a part of larger strategy to influence public policy, as groups attempt to mobilize people to contact their legislator to demonstrate public support for a policy. Through our experiment, we find that lawmakers' voting behavior can be influenced by contacts from constituents on policies.

In 2011, the [School-Community Health Alliance of Michigan](#) and partners in the state were campaigning for a statewide anti-bullying bill. The bill, named "Matt's Safe School Law" after Matt Epling, a Michigan teen who committed suicide after being bullied intensely in 2002, would require Michigan public schools to develop an anti-bullying policy. One element of the coalition's strategy was to mobilize citizen supporters of the bill. We collaborated with the School-Community Health Alliance to embed a randomized experiment within the campaign in order to estimate the effect of constituent contacts on state legislator voting on the proposed legislation.

We randomly assigned legislators to receive a target of 22, 33 or 65 calls from their constituents (although the actual number of calls differed lightly from these amounts) while legislators in the control group would receive no calls. The phone calls were from actual constituents who agreed to talk to their state legislator about the issue. A political consulting firm placed calls to the constituents of legislators randomly assigned to receive calls. These constituents were read a brief description of the anti-bullying legislation, and asked if they would be willing to tell their legislator to support the bill. If the constituent agreed, they were immediately patched through to their legislators' phone line.



Credit: [Pieter Ouwerkerk](#), (Flickr, [CC-BY-NC-2.0](#))

The outcome variable in the study is the final vote on the anti-bullying bill. Comparing legislators who were assigned to receive at least one call to those in the control group, we estimate that the targeted legislators were 11-12 percentage points more likely to support the legislation. The results are encouraging: policymakers pay attention to their constituents.

Two other results are worth noting. First, the number of calls did not matter beyond the effect of simply being contacted at all. This may be due to the fact that state legislators, outside of some highly salient issues, are not frequently contacted by constituents, and even a small handful of calls may be sufficient to influence legislative voting. Second, the influence of constituent calls does not appear to differ for different legislators. There was no detectable difference in the magnitude of the effects on legislators based on legislator party affiliation or gender, the competitiveness of the legislators' district, or a number of other characteristics.

Finally, some caveats are in order. Because there are few experimental studies of advocacy, the results should be interpreted with caution. The most important caveat is that the generalizability of the results may be limited by the specifics of the experiment. Anti-bullying is a relatively low salience issue, not extensively covered in the media. In addition, the party positions on this relatively novel issue are not clearly delineated. The effects of constituent contacts would presumably be smaller for more highly publicized and polarizing issues.

The influence of a variety of election campaign efforts are, after more than a decade of intensive field experimental research, well understood. Current knowledge about election campaigns is sufficient for campaigners to make judgments about the relative cost effectiveness of a large number of methods of influencing vote choice and choice turnout. Relatively little is known about advocacy campaigns. Citizen groups and researchers should use experimentation to add to our understanding of advocacy and policymaking.

*This article is based on the paper, [‘Call Your Legislator: A Field Experimental Study of the Impact of a Constituency Mobilization Campaign on Legislative Voting’](#), in *Political Behavior*.*

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