**Civics 101**

**Episode 5: Calling Congress**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:24] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101 a podcast refresher course on some basics that you may have forgotten incense or slept through in school today. It's direct democracy in action. We've received questions about how our democracy works from a number of you and we're going to try and answer one that came to us on Hearken. That's a platform for citizens to ask questions of journalists.

[00:00:51] Hi my name is Arielle. I'm calling from Derry. I want to know why it is that people suggest telling your congressional representatives how you feel about the issues. Are they really required to listen? Does it make a difference? If it does, please tell me how. So I can best direct my energies. Thank you.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:08] What does happen when you contact your elected legislators. And what's the best way to do it. We produced this podcast in New Hampshire. So we picked up the phone to call our own congressional representative's office to get to the bottom of it. We reached Nick Brown, he's communications director for Annie Kuster, Congresswoman for New Hampshire's 2nd Congressional District. Nick thanks for taking my call.

**Nick Brown:** [00:01:30] Absolutely. Thanks for having me on today.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:32] When somebody makes that call to their congressional representatives office who picks up the phone?

**Nick Brown:** [00:01:37] You know it really depends. Staff assistants definitely take the lead on the phones and training interns to make sure that they're well versed in the positions of Congresswoman Kuster and or whoever their member of Congress is and also the news of the day. And the local news but you know really anyone who is near a phone when the phones are busy is going to be be available to pick up and take those calls.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:01] Really I imagine somebody coming in to work with the congressperson and you say first job, the phones.

**Nick Brown:** [00:02:07] Well it's one of the most valuable things that you know young people for an intern answering the phones. It's such a important position because you are the front lines of the office and you're going to be the main contact for a lot of people who are calling in and it's so important that you know the positions know what's happening. Know, you know what's going on in Congress and what's going on in Concord. And it also gives you really valuable experience speaking to people with lots of different perspectives and ideas and teaches you to learn and listen to folks who are calling who disagree and you know often also are calling to support something but you really get to speak to a wide variety of people and that's one of the most valuable things that I think an intern in our office can learn is how to communicate with lots of different different folks on different issues in any given day.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:58] So what happens when that constituents opinion or protest or whatever the case may be. How was it recorded there at your office?

**Nick Brown:** [00:03:08] Yeah absolutely. So the staff assistant or the person who answers the call is going to you know listen patiently and intently to the caller take detailed notes on what their concerns are or their interests are and then that will be put into a system for everyone on the staff and the congresswoman to see.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:26] How many calls a day does the office field.

**Nick Brown:** [00:03:29] Oh wow that that varies quite a bit depending on what's happening at the national or local level in the news or in Congress or in the state house. It can go from just a few calls on a slow day when there's not a lot happening to 100 calls in a day. So it really depends on what's what's happening in the news and what people are focused on at any given time.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:50] So do you think New Hampshire, you must have colleagues there right, in other congressional offices, does New Hampshire deal with fewer calls because the population of the state?

**Nick Brown:** [00:03:59] I don't think so. You know New Hampshire is a really engaged citizenry and folks who are paying attention and really interested in what's happening at the local level and in Washington. So we hear from a lot of folks. I couldn't tell you the difference between our office and an office from California for instance. But I know that people in New Hampshire care about what their elected officials are working on and wanted to have that dialogue with folks so I think we have a really engaged and active constituency.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:27] Is it better to call your congressional representative than to e-mail or to post opinions on a social media page. Do all of those opinions or thoughts count the same?

**Nick Brown:** [00:04:40] Yeah I think that any way you can contact and connect with your representative is really important. Certainly e-mail mail is a big part of how people communicate with us as well as social media. I think calling is great because you get to have that you know one on one connection with the person on the other line and I think that's something that's really important for callers often is to you know speak their mind to someone and you know really know that they're being listened to. So I think from a caller's perspective that's probably one reason why someone would opt to pick up the phone as you get to have that conversation and engage directly with someone.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:17] So when someone calls their congressional representative what are the chances that the representatives themselves will actually hear a version of the comment or the question.

**Nick Brown:** [00:05:28] Sure. Well Congresswoman Kuster is very interested in what her constituents are saying and what they're thinking. And it really helps inform her work down in Washington. So if she checks in with the folks on the phones regularly throughout the day to see what people are calling about and they'll give her you know examples of calls that are coming in and talk about what the callers are saying and because there are such detailed notes and logs taken on every call she has the opportunity to look back and see what people are saying about specific issues.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:00] I'm wondering if you have a real example of when those calls have made a difference in the congresswoman's opinion how she votes on something.

**Nick Brown:** [00:06:10] You're probably familiar with the Kinder Morgan pipeline issue that was in the southern tier of the state.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:16] Could you just briefly summarize that?

**Nick Brown:** [00:06:18] Sure it was a proposed pipeline through the southern part of New Hampshire that impacted several communities throughout. Congresswoman Kuster's district. And when this was proposed she was doing her due diligence meeting with representatives of the company with advocates and folks involved. And you know really trying to get a sense of the pros and cons of that issue. But one thing that we found was there was she was very aware of was there was a very large number of people calling the office to express their opposition to it because of the impact they would were proceeding that it would have on their lives and in their communities and from those calls she reached the conclusion that the benefits that were being outlined for her did not outweigh the very many concerns she was hearing from constituents in her district and she ultimately voiced her opposition to the pipeline. So I think that's a great example of where local people really concerned about an issue are able to you know tip the scales and make sure that their voices were heard on this.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:22] So Nick there have been a lot of reports of the hill being flooded with calls since the inauguration of the president. What is the most important metric that you use for measuring the impact would it be the number of calls the specificity of the comments. You know the volume on a given day.

**Nick Brown:** [00:07:39] Yeah I think the volume certainly weighs in on it. When you're talking about these very specific calls that we're receiving you know for instance if someone has an issue with a certain cabinet nominee we can look and say wow you know 80 people called to voice their opposition to this specific person or any number of people called to say they are concerned about this policy. So I think when you're talking on issues like died is certainly volume makes a big difference.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:08] New Hampshire is a purple state. We do have mix of Republicans Democrats a lot of independents here. But the current delegation is all democratic. How can those who disagree make sure that they are represented as well.

**Nick Brown:** [00:08:22] One thing is that Congressman Kuster represents everyone in the 2nd district regardless of whether you're a Democrat Republican or independent and we don't ever ask if you're a Republican or a Democrat or an independent when you call in we gauge everyone's opinion equally and everyone you know goes through the same process. So I think that anyone in the 2nd district can be confident that when they call in their opinion is taken very seriously.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:49] But I want to know, I guess what...to answer Ariel's question. Does it really make a difference so if you had 200 calls saying do not get rid of the assault weapons ban when you have 40 people saying get rid of the assault weapons ban and it is it is not what Annie Kuster ran on. How did those calls really weigh in?

**Nick Brown:** [00:09:12] To move to a more concrete example of something that's happened more recently. You look at an issue like that the TPP the Trans-Pacific Partnership where you head though White House and President Obama very much in support of that. And you know pushing Democrats in Congress to support the TPP and we were hearing from callers and constituents that were very concerned about the impact that that would have on their lives in New Hampshire. So ultimately Congresswoman Kuster came out against that because of the response that she heard from her constituents. I think that that's a great example of where the voices of people in New Hampshire coming together really were able to push her towards a decision that reflected what she was hearing from them. So I think you know minority voices have a tremendous amount of weight in how things happen and you'll find that when you have a Democratic president in power you probably more often are going to hear from Republicans who are concerned about some of their issues and when you have a Republican president in power as we do now we hear from a lot of Democrats who are concerned about what's happening at that level.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:23] So Nick you talked about how important it is for New Hampshire voters and how engaged we are. But does that actually make a difference. I mean you're going to hear from the people who are most vocal. That doesn't necessarily mean that you've got a real sense of how people think in the state does it.

**Nick Brown:** [00:10:42] You know I think that you do get a sense because of how engaged people in New Hampshire are. You know we hear from callers who are very politically engaged and also folks who heard something on the radio on their way in and wanted to voice their opinion. So I think you do get a large variety of people contacting to share what their thoughts are on an issue their concerns their ideas. And you know young old and in-between it's it's really great to hear how broad the variety of people who call in are foreclosing closing.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:18] Is there something you want people to know both as a citizen and as someone who works for a member of Congress about what your call does?

**Nick Brown:** [00:11:28] Yeah I think my take away message is that contacting your member of Congress is critically important whether it's through e-mail phone mail social media the more engaged folks are the better it is for Congresswoman Kuster because she can really rely on what she's hearing from folks as well as everyone to know how people are feeling about the issues that are happening here in Washington and in New Hampshire. And you know we have staff in New Hampshire and in Washington answering these calls so we really rely on hearing from people to know what is happening on the ground and what people really care about and that's critically important to informing the work of Congressman Kuster and any member of Congress.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:08] Nick thank you for speaking with us.

**Nick Brown:** [00:12:10] Absolutely. Thank you.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:11] Nick Brown communications director for and Annie McClean Kuster, congresswoman from New Hampshire's 2nd District. We also get in touch with Daniel Victor. He's a reporter for The New York Times who wrote about the merits of calling rather than emailing your legislators. Daniel welcome to Civics 101.

**Daniel Victor:** [00:12:34] Thank you.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:34] So you spoke to several former staffers and current legislators. Is it really that much better to call than to e-mail.?

**Daniel Victor:** [00:12:42] Well emailing can be effective. I think what people said over and over again is that the e-mail tends to come in big batches and it tends to come from out of town. You don't really know who the people are. Whereas when you're calling a legislator it tends to be more likely it's going to be someone who actually lives in the district that these representatives are supposed to be representing. So they do find that it tends to be a little more personal. It does demand more of the attention of the staff members. They say that an inbox that's overflowing with thousands of e-mails doesn't really bother them that much. But if the phone is ringing off the hook everyday they really can't do much else other than answer the phones.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:14] We can find scripts if you're to call for a particular issue online. So do staffers regard or give the same weight to those kind of scripted calls as those that are clearly not scripted.

**Daniel Victor:** [00:13:27] From what they told me a script is better than nothing. But they definitely do take personal stories much more seriously when you are speaking to someone on the phone. It tends to be a younger staffer if they're hearing personal stories for six to eight hours. Very emotional stuff. It's going to be hard for it's not affect them whereas when you're reading a script and you've heard that before it's going to be a little bit easier to ignore. So again it's better than nothing because you should make your voice heard. But they would prefer to hear, hear something more personal.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:55] If you're having trouble reaching someone at a national legislative office Senator or Congressperson is it worth it to call on the local level as well?

**Daniel Victor:** [00:14:06] You tend to get a little bit more attention on the local level and what we've seen recently is that because there has been such intense interest in the beginning of the Trump administration a lot of the legislators voicemails are completely full. You may not be able to get through at all. So if that's happening definitely helps to contact them at the district level at the local level and maybe even if you must write them an e-mail. But more and more Rudd's leaders we're finding are making an effort to expand their voicemail systems to add staff whatever they can do to respond as much as they can.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:14:36] How about if your own congressional contingency is for an issue. But you know that somebody from another state is not. Is it worth calling another state senator or congressman. Even if you are not one of their constituents?

**Daniel Victor:** [00:14:54] That would likely depend on the individual congressman or congresswoman. Some of them I know do give much more attention to people who do live in their district because that is of course their first priority. But I do know for example that Paul Ryan the speaker of the house is constantly getting calls from across the country so if it is somebody in a position of power it probably doesn't hurt to make your voice heard.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:14] Daniel thank you for speaking with us. You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:18] Ok class dismissed and this is one class that encourages you to share your notes with others. You can subscribe on iTunes or visit us at Civic's 101 podcast dot org.