

INDIVISIBLE:

MISSING MEMBERS OF CONGRESS ACTION PLAN

Former congressional staff explain how to make your Members of Congress more accessible

Where on earth has your Member of Congress gone? Something strange has been happening in the last month or so: Members of Congress (MoCs) from all over the country are going missing. They're still turning up for votes on Capitol Hill, and they're still meeting with lobbyists and friendly audiences back home—but their public event schedules are mysteriously blank. Odd.

This is happening for a very simple reason: MoCs do not want to look weak or unpopular—and they know that Trump's agenda is very, very unpopular. Remember: Every MoC wakes up every morning thinking, "How can I convince my constituents that they should reelect me?" That means MoCs are enormously sensitive to their local image, and they will work very hard to avoid signs of public disapproval from constituents. Some MoCs have clearly made the calculation that they can lay low, avoid their constituents, and hope the current storm blows over. It's your job to change that calculus.

This toolkit describes how local groups can make missing MoCs more accessible. MoCs are gambling that out of sight means out of mind. It will take some work, but their constituents have power win at this game. It means getting active, standing together indivisible, and getting local press attention on your MoC's cowardly behavior. This works--and this brief describes the nuts and bolts of getting it done.

Town halls are a basic part of our democratic heritage and every Member of Congress should have them. Over the year, a MoC's schedule is split between time "in session," when they're expected to be in Washington, DC attending to legislative business, and "recess," when they go back to their districts or states. These recess periods—also known as "District Work Periods" on the [congressional calendar](#)—which stretch from several days to several weeks at a time, are the designated periods for MoCs to be home engaging with constituents. The whole reason that recess exists is to make sure that MoCs don't lose touch with constituent concerns.

Town halls are a time-honored tradition for listening to constituents. Because MoCs can't possibly meet individually with all their constituents, they normally host public events like town halls or district office hours so that they can interact with many constituents. In addition to allowing constituents to communicate their views directly to a MoC, rather than through staff, it gives MoCs the chance to take the temperature of their constituents and discuss their positions in greater detail.

Now, some MoCs find the prospect of a town hall, or even a large group meeting, pretty scary. If they handle a controversial policy question or a heartfelt personal story poorly, a whole lot of people are going to hear about it. But, once again, **that's their job**. As a constituent, you deserve opportunities to share your views and personal stories about how policy affects your lives with your representative. And you also deserve opportunities to hear directly from your MoC about where they stand on the issues you care about. An MoC who's carefully tailoring their appearances to avoid hearing from people who disagree with them is an MoC who's not doing their job.

If your MoC has been "missing," whether that means refusing to meet with your group or refusing to hold a public event, here's how to track them down and hold them accountable.

STEP 1: DO YOUR RESEARCH.

Sometimes it takes a bit of work to find out about your MoC's public events.

- » **Start by taking a look at your MoC's website and media.**
 - » Check if your MoC has a calendar of events on their website.
 - » Like your MoC's Facebook page and follow them on Twitter.
 - » If you're not seeing anything, call your MoC's office and ask for a schedule of public events.
 - » Be friendly and say something like *"Hi there, I'm a constituent of Senator Bob's, and I'd like to know when his next public event is so I can see him speak in person."* If they don't have anything for you, ask to be added to a mailing list so you'll be notified when the next event is scheduled.
- » **Check out "friendly" local distribution lists.** Some MoCs will use their own channels or other mailing lists to advertise public events so that only their supporters will know about them.
 - » **Your MoC's mailing list.** Sign up for your Member of Congress' subscriber mailing list. Every member of Congress has one—find it on their webpage. They use it to brag about their "successes" in Congress, and sometimes they advertise local events there too. If you regularly contact your MoC with criticism, consider signing up with a different email address—otherwise they may exclude you from private list invites.
 - » **Other good mailing lists.** Depending on the part of your MoCs, subscribe to your local Republican or Democratic party email list, or other local conservative/liberal area groups that you know of.
- » **Check out open-source listings.**
 - » Go to [IndivisibleGuide.com/show-up](https://www.indivisibleguide.com/show-up) to see if any local Indivisible groups have planned actions at MoC public events in your area.
 - » If no actions are planned, [The Town Hall Project](https://www.townhallproject.com/) collects information about MoCs' town hall events around the country.
- » **Connect with local media.** It's pretty easy for MoCs to ignore one or even a few dozen people. It is impossible to ignore a small group that's also getting local media coverage viewed by thousands. This is also why videos, pictures, and stories of your actions are so important—local media loves this stuff.
 - » To do this, research on [Google News](https://www.google.com/news/) what local reporters have written about your MoCs. [Set up a Google News alert](https://www.google.com/alerts/) for your Representative and two Senators' names. Find and follow those reporters on Twitter, and build relationships. Before you attend or plan a town hall, reach out and explain why your group is going, and provide them with background materials and a quote, including how many members your group has and how many times you have called your members to ask for a town hall or public event. Tell them what kind of response

you've gotten from staffers. Journalists on deadline—even those who might not agree with you—appreciate when you provide easy material for a story. For more tips on working with media, see our [Group Leader's Toolkit](#).

STEP 2: MAKE AN ASK.

Maybe your MoC doesn't have any public events yet, but just needs a little (or a lot) of prodding—hearing a strong message from a group of constituents could convince them. Here's how to make that ask:

- » **Ask a very clear question.** “When is your next town hall or public meeting?”
 - » You want to get either a definite time and place or a definite acknowledgment that one hasn't been scheduled.
 - » If the response you get is “We're working on scheduling one” or “Check back later,” they may be hoping you'll think that's good enough—it isn't. Ask when they'll know, and if you'll be notified.
 - » Be firm that you believe this a non-negotiable part of your MoC's job.
- » **Choose a day or week in which asking for a meeting or public event is the focus of your group's phone calls.** If possible, start doing this far enough in advance of a recess that you have time to work on a plan of action if your MoC's office says no.
- » **Enlist allies.** Reach out to organizations with civic missions and ask them to weigh in or invite MoCs to community forums or events. MoCs might be willing to dodge your Indivisible group but hesitate to alienate a local civic association, PTA, or church group.
- » **Collect data.** Try to find out when your MoC last held a public event. If it's been a while, this will give you additional fodder for your next step.

STEP 3: IF YOUR MOC ISN'T RESPONDING, IT'S TIME TO GO PUBLIC.

MoCs don't want a bad YouTube moment, but they also don't want to look like they're ignoring their constituents. So, your next step is to draw attention to the fact that your MoC has gone into hiding. No MoC wants to look inaccessible or out of touch—and an MoC who's decided to stop interacting with their own constituents is the definition of inaccessible.

If the drumbeat gets loud enough, they may back down. Here are some ways you can creatively press for them to come around:

- » **Gather RSVPs.** Demonstrate the demand for a town hall by collecting a list of interested constituents who want to come.
 - » You can do this via facebook, starting a petition on [MoveOn.org](#), or whatever platform is easiest for you.
 - » This will give you fuel when you talk to reporters, because you can point to the fact that hundreds of your MoC's constituents are asking for an audience.

- » **Get the attention of the press.**
 - » Call or write local political reporters and explain the situation to them. Be concise, clear, and as specific as possible.
 - » Submit an Op-ed or Letter to the Editor from a constituent, laying out the facts and expressing disappointment in your MoC's inaccessibility.
 - » Draft and distribute a statement about the lack of opportunities for constituents to engage with your MoC.
 - » Take it to Twitter and Facebook: post about your experiences trying to get a public meeting with your MoC. Tag local reporters for additional visibility.
 - » Find prominent people to amplify your message. If you know any local celebrities or prominent people, ask them to help spread the word.
- » **Publicize your MoC's absence creatively.**
 - » Post "Missing" signs around congressional offices, high traffic areas (local squares, parks, stadiums, etc), local news stations and newspaper offices.
 - » Take pictures of your signs and tweet the pictures—be sure to tag your MoC and your favorite local political reporter.
- » **Do some research to find out what else they might be doing.**
 - » If your MoC is attending a fundraiser (you can check [here](#) for a partial list), meeting with lobbyists, or being interviewed by friendly press, this can reflect poorly on them.

With any of these methods, you want to make the following points:

- » It's critical for MoCs to be accessible to their constituents—and your MoC isn't living up to that basic part of their job.
- » Asking whatever it is your MoC is doing with their time instead of meeting with the constituents they represent. Ask why your MoC isn't making constituents a priority.
- » Finding out what public meetings other MoCs are having, and highlighting that as a point of comparison.

STEP 4. HOLD A CONSTITUENTS' TOWN HALL.

There's no more effective way to illustrate that your MoC is in hiding than by holding the event that they're too scared to consider. You may be able to hold an impromptu town hall by bringing a group to your MoC's district office—but you can also try something a little more elaborate.

This requires some additional preparation, but it can be extremely effective in drawing attention to your missing MoC. Here's what you need to do to prepare:

- » **Book a venue or plan to gather outside a district office.** Explore holding your event at a local school, library, or conference or convention center where a space can be obtained for low cost. Find out if basics like chairs and audio equipment are already available at the venue.

Having a venue is great, but you can also plan your event to take place outside of one of the MoC's district office too. The message you're sending here is powerful: we came all the way to where you are to meet give you a chance to speak with us; the least you can do is come outside and talk with us.

- » **Invite your MoC.** There are a couple of ways to invite your MoC to an event:
 - » **Official invite to the office.** Submit an official meeting request through your MoC's website, call their office and ask to speak to the scheduler, or request the scheduler's email address. Be prepared to follow up if/when you don't get a speedy response. When you email the scheduler on a request like this, it doesn't hurt to include the MoC's Press Secretary, who is charged with protecting the narrative about the MoC.

You can also hand deliver an invitation to a district office. To drum up extra excitement about the event, document the process and post about it on social media with photos and video.

- » **Emphasize you're a constituent.** In all of your communications, stress that you are constituents, that you want to hear directly from them, and that you're interested in a polite, respectful exchange of ideas. Explain how many people you're expecting and let them know if you're expecting press.
 - » **Begrudgingly accept staffers instead.** It's better to have the actual MoC there. That said, if they decline to come in person, give them the option to send an emissary--specifically ask to meet with the "District Director" for Representatives or "State Director" for Senators. These are the highest-ranking staffers who don't work in D.C.
- » **Make an event "backup" plan.** Your MoC very well may not come, and they might even hide from you entirely. That's not the end of this though—you still have power. If they reject or just don't respond to the invitation, here are some things you can do during the event:
 - » **Make clear to everyone that the MoC is invited.** Publicize widely that your MoCs are keynote speakers who have been invited. If they don't show—that's makes them look bad, not you.
 - » **Think about the visuals and get creative.** For instance, be prepared with a cardboard cutout or an empty chair. This is a classic political campaign tactic for when your opponent refuses to debate. It also works well for highlighting an absentee MoC. These are just a couple options—but get creative. Plan a segment of the event where participants highlighting the fact that your MoC is acting cowardly and hiding from constituents.

- » **Plan for other speakers.** Ask for attendees to plan to come prepared to speak out on specific policies that they care about, or that have personally affected them. In addition to individuals from your own group, these speakers could include:
 - » Advocacy and community groups that work on behalf of those threatened by the Trump administration (e.g., your local immigrant rights group), and ask them to come speak.
 - » Other local public officials who are happy to speak to their constituents. If you have state senators or representatives, city council members, or other local elected officials or leaders who might be interested in speaking to a crowd of engaged constituents, invite them to attend and speak! This is a great way to start a discussion with your own local leaders about ways local action can be part of pushing back against the Trump agenda.

» **Publicize the event.**

- » **Get in touch with press ahead of time.** Issue a media advisory and send it to local reporters. Be sure to include the key points about your MoC's absence (above), in addition to details on the event. Remember too: Twitter is an excellent way to flag for local journalists that you've got something big coming up.
- » **Old-fashioned advertisement work.** Put up flyers at coffee shops, bus stops, community centers, etc. Write an op-ed for your local newspaper making clear why your group is holding this event.
- » **Social media works too.** Register the event with the Indivisible Guide Team here. We get a few million pageviews a month (!), so that's a great way to get more local advocates to your event.

Don't stop there. Spread the word on Facebook and start inviting your friends, allies, and other constituents. Tell people on Twitter, and come up with a hashtag for your event. Post the information on your neighborhood listservs.

- » **Get ready to cover the town hall live.** Have a plan for publicizing the event while it's in progress. Assign people in your group to livestream the event via Facebook Live or Periscope and to live-tweet. Remember: the more attention, the more pressure on your MoC; and the more pressure, the more impact.
- » **Always remember: be polite, be respectful, and be persistent.** If your MoC attends the event, or sends a staffer, thank them for coming and be polite to them while they're there. In all your actions, you will do best if you model the respect and thoughtfulness that you want to see from your MoCs.



EXAMPLE MEDIA ADVISORY

of [MoC's Name]'s Constituents to Hold Citizens' Town Hall to Make Their Voices Heard

After several weeks of hundreds of calls to hold a public town hall event with no response, more than ## of [MoC's Name]'s constituents will hold a citizens' town hall to voice their concerns and discuss recent developments in Congress. [MoC Name] has been invited to attend [include more information on what kind of response you've gotten].

- » **What:** [MoC Name] Constituent Town Hall
- » **Who:** Name of Your Group
 - Any notable attendees
 - Any other public speakers
- » **When:** Tuesday, February 21, 10:00 a.m.
- » **Where:** City Hall steps (rain location – City Hall Room 210)
- » **Why:** A critical part of any member of Congress' job is to hear from the constituents s/he represents face-to-face. Since January, [MoC name] has received hundreds of calls, letters, and emails requesting a public forum for constituents to ask questions and voice their concerns to no avail.

For more information, contact Jane Doe at 222-222-2222.

STEP 5: NO PUBLIC EVENTS DURING RECESS?

Then it's time to crash the party. If your MoC is too busy at a fundraiser, exclusive banquet, or closed-door event with local bigwigs to have time for constituents, make it clear that you've noticed by holding your own gathering outside. Remember: you're entitled to have access to the people who represent you, and it's in their best interest to talk to you instead of ignoring you. Don't stop holding your MoCs accountable. We will win.

The tactics for making your voice heard at these events are similar but a bit different from the public town hall events:

- » **Optimize visibility.** Unlike in town halls, you want your presence as a group to be recognizable and attention-getting at this event. It may make sense to stick together as a group, wear relatively similar clothing / message shirts, and carry signs in order to be sure that your presence is noticeable.
- » **Be prepared to interrupt and insist on your right to be heard.** Since you won't get the mic at an event like this, you have to attract attention to yourself and your message. Agree beforehand with your group on a simple message focused on a current or upcoming

issue. Coordinate with each other to chant this message outside, or during any public remarks that your MoC makes. This can be difficult and a bit uncomfortable. But it sends a powerful message to your MoC that they won't be able to get press for other events until they address your concerns.

- » **Identify, and try to speak with, reporters on the scene.** Be polite and friendly, and stick to your message. For example, “Since Congresswoman Sara won't host public events with us, we're here to remind her that her constituents are opposed to the Administration's attacks on immigrants.” You may want to research in advance which local reporters cover MoCs or relevant beats (e.g., politics), so that you know who to look for. Emphasize that all of you are constituents. Give your hometowns and emphasize your roots in the community. Members of Congress may try to dismiss demonstrators as being “paid protesters” from out of town—so make clear that that's not true.

- » **Hold organizational hosts accountable.** Often these events will be hosted by local businesses or nonpartisan organizations—groups that don't want controversy or to alienate the community. Reach out to them directly to express your concern that they are giving a platform to pro-Trump authoritarianism, sexism, racism, and corruption. If they persist, use social media to express your disappointment. This will reduce the likelihood that these organizations will host the Trump-friendly MoC in the future. MoCs depend on invitations like these to build ties and raise their visibility—so this matters to them.