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## Forget tweets: Letters still deliver

By: [Andie Collier](#)

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With a battery of big issues on the table these days, Washington is hauling out the heavy stock.

Stationery, that is.

In an age of instant communication, old-fashioned letter writing may seem like a hopeless anachronism. But in the nation's capital, letters aren't just a way to keep in touch: They are part public record, part position paper, part press release — and all politics.

On health care, for example, the letterhead has been flying both in and out of the White House, with stuffy, starchy language hiding political power games in plain sight.

“Dear Mr. President,” begins a May 13 letter from House GOP members, “We write to you today to express our sincere desire to work with you and find common ground on the issue of health care reform.”

The House Republicans go on to request, in the spirit of bipartisanship, a meeting with the president to discuss areas of potential “common ground” on health care reform, as identified by House Republicans.

On June 2 — with the GOP-ers tetchily awaiting their reply — the president penned a letter to Sens. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Max Baucus (D-Mont.), outlining his priorities for health care reform. It closes thusly: “I remain hopeful that many Republicans will join us in enacting this historic legislation.”

(That would be the Republicans doing the joining.)

If the message weren't clear enough, the White House sent out Obama's response to the House Republican members the following week:

“Dear Representatives Boehner, Cantor, Pence, Blunt, Carter, Sessions, McCarthy, Dreier and McMorris Rodgers:

“Thank you for your letter and for letting me know that you share my view that we should enact legislation this year that reforms and improves our nation's health care system.”

In other words, thanks for the letter. And about that meeting? Thanks for playing.

Indeed, the exchange of letters between Congress and the president is, in many ways, very much a game. As one former Democratic Hill staffer (who didn't want to burn his former boss) confides: “You generally do not send a letter into the White House or from the White House into Congress without knowing what the answer is in advance.”

So why do it then? There are a whole host of reasons members send letters to the White House, the former staffer says. “Some use them to show their constituents that they are thinking about or working on an issue actively, either working with the president or challenging the president, whatever the case may be. Some are memorializing a particular

conversation for use later on. Some are looking for a quick press hit.”

Another reason is that they work. One senior Republican staffer says that when it comes to communicating with the White House, letters are “a valuable tool” bested only by a direct phone call or meeting.

“Beyond staff-to-staff connections, or between [White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel] and your principal, letters are probably the clearest statement of policy and position,” the Republican staffer says. “Otherwise, you’ve got to send your guy on ‘Hannity’ to talk to the White House and things are going to get lost in translation.”

Direct contact with the president can be particularly difficult to come by when you’re in the minority, the Republican staffer notes, “so part of it is a matter of necessity.”

On health care, however letters have been flying all over town, penned not only by Republicans but also by New Democrats, old Democrats and practically everyone else who has an interest in the outcome of the debate.

The most common type is the Urgent Appeal.

The Congressional Black Caucus’s June 5 letter on health care priorities is a model of this type, complete with introductory laurels (“we thank you for taking the bold step to tackle comprehensive health care reform”); a brief recap of things the recipient already knows but that the deadline media might appreciate having in front of them (“The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world that does not provide universal health care”) and then a section in which the senders “urge” something — in this case, that the president address the country’s racial and ethnic health disparities in health policy reform. This type of epistle is not to be confused with the FYI (perhaps more properly termed the CYA), in which the sender lays out what he or she intends to do in advance. Just so the president knows. And everyone knows he knows. In advance.

Nor should it be conflated with the Sternly (or Strongly) Worded Letter, a variety that has become something of an Internet in-joke, with bloggers and commenters using the phrase to mock what they perceive as a toothless response to a perceived outrage.

As chairman of the Judiciary Committee during the late years of the Bush administration, Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) authored many such letters, including one dated Nov. 5, 2007, to White House Counsel Fred Fielding, regarding the 2006 firings of nine U.S. attorneys, in which Conyers noted: “Unfortunately, I have received no response to my July 25 letter to you, which again sought to resolve this issue. In fact, I have written to you on eight previous occasions attempting to reach agreement on this matter. As we submit the committee’s contempt report to the full House, I am writing one more time to seek to resolve this issue on a cooperative basis.”

(When Karl Rove failed to appear before the House Judiciary Committee in February to testify about the U.S. attorney firings, one TPMuckraker poster expressed his or her frustration this way: “Ohh Noooooess! Time for Conyers to send another strongly worded letter! Ha! Take that Rove! Ignore the US Congress at your peril! \*sobs\*”)

Letters from legislators don’t have to be impotent, of course — just ask Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), who is renowned for striking fear in the hearts of the recipients of his missives.

As head of the oversight and investigations subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee (he was also the full committee’s chairman at the time), he launched countless inquiries, which were abetted by thousands of what came to be known

as “Dingellgrams” — letters containing detailed demands for information and accountability from various agencies under the committee’s purview.

So what makes a letter effective? “It depends on how right you are,” Dingell says. “The more right you are, the more likely you are to have success in your letter-writing. Of course, it requires good style, and it should be courteous,” he adds.

In composing letters, he says, he follows a few basic rules: “We try to be succinct — we try to be very, very much to the point. We try to see to it that the questions are relevant to our concerns, and we try to be very, very persistent in getting answers.”

“The words ‘who,’ ‘what,’ ‘when,’ ‘why’ and ‘how’ are all important components of the English language,” he says. “‘Where’ is a very useful word, too.”

Even when Dingell’s letters don’t demand reams of information, they are more apt to be scathing than merely stern.

For example, in 2004, Dingell wrote to Gregory Mankiw, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, suggesting that if the administration really thought it was appropriate to reclassify fast-food jobs such as “hamburger garnishing, French/freedom fry cooking and milkshake mixing” as manufacturing jobs, Dingell might be able to recommend “a public official who would be perfect for the job” of assistant secretary of manufacturing:

“He has over 30 years of administrative and media experience, has a remarkable record of working with diverse constituencies and is extraordinarily well-qualified to understand this emerging manufacturing sector: the Hon. Mayor McCheese.”