



# Secular Report Card

## The Importance of Secularism

The United States was founded as a secular country. Separation of church and state—or, more broadly, religion and government—is foundational to American society. Yet from the very beginning, America has struggled to live up to its own standards.

Especially since the 1970s and rise of the so-called Moral Majority and the Religious Right, the wall of separation has been under constant attack. The goal of secular activism is to stop the erosion of that wall and to secure the separation of church and state. It is an enormous and never ending task, and we must be diligent about securing our freedoms for ourselves and future generations.

The Secular Student Alliance would like to help you equip yourself and your members to understand the issues where you live and express your values to your elected officials. This guide is designed to help you do just that.

## From Thinking to Acting

If we want to save our secular democracy for ourselves and future generations we must do more than talk about it. We must take action. This is the central premise of democracy: citizen involvement. This guide is designed to help you and your SSA chapter do exactly that. The guide is designed in stages. You can do one part or all the parts as it fits the needs of your group.

## Four Step Process

- 1 - Learn who your elected officials are
- 2 - Decide what issues you care most about
- 3 - Grade your elected officials on those issues
- 4 - Make your voice heard

## Learn who your elected officials are

The first step to being an engaged citizen is knowing who represents you at the various levels of government: local, state, and federal. On the **Secular America Report Card Worksheet** you will find a list of the most prominent elected offices. You may wish to put this list on a white board and ask your members to see how many of them they can name without looking them up.

Once you've given it your best shot, see how well you did and fill in the ones you didn't know by going to **whoaremyrepresentatives.org** and entering your address. Start with the address of your campus since that's where you all are right now.

## **Decide what issues you care most about**

There are a number of ways to approach this.

### **A. Meet with your members and make a list of the secular issues that matter most to you.**

Perhaps there is anti-LGBTQ legislation in place in your state, or limitations on a woman's reproductive choice, and you already know a fair bit about those issues and know you want to make a difference in this area. List the secular issues that matter most to you here:

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### **B. Expand your knowledge about secular issues.**

The Secular Coalition for America organizes secular issues into Children's Rights, Civil Rights, Education, Establishment Clause Issues, Health & Safety, Religion & the IRS, Science, and more! You can read more about these issues at their website: **secular.org/key-issues**.

American Atheists released a "State of the Secular States Report" which looks at state laws and policies in four broad areas: State Constitutional Protections, youth and schools, health care and wellness, and special privileges for religion. They have also created a state-by-state report card on issues relating to atheists and other non-religious individuals and communities. Just go to **atheists.org/states** and click on your state to see what issues American Atheists have identified.

### **C. Do your own research**

Look at the website of your local newspaper and use key search terms like religion, secular, prayer, science, education, LGBT, and other key terms to bring up stories about what is happening in your local community about these issues.

On the report card you will see a range of issues SSA has identified as important secular issues. We have also provided space for you to add other issues that you and your members may identify.

## Grade your elected officials on those issues

Using our report card, give your elected official a grade on the issues. This grade is subjective, of course. You and your members must decide together what you think. Here is a basic rubric to guide your efforts.

**A** = Person supports the secular view and is a leader on this issue.

**B** = Person supports the secular view and will vote our way but doesn't take the lead.

**C** = Passive or non-committal on the issues. Tends to take the path of least resistance.

**D** = Supports faith based policies over secular ones and votes against our views.

**F** = Not only votes against secular values but is leading the charge for faith-based policies and actively undermines separation of church and state.

After you've done your research, have each member of your chapter grade the elected official in question. Tabulate the results and see how they do. **Be cautious to never specifically endorse or oppose a candidate.** As a part of a 501(c)3 federal non-profit you cannot endorse candidates but you can talk all you want about the issues. Stick to the issues!

## Make your voice heard

Is your mayor, state representative, governor and US Senator passing with flying colors? Let them know how thankful you are that they're standing up for a secular America where each person matters regardless of their faith or lack of faith.

Are they failing in some—or all—areas? It's time to write letters and or get on the phone and let them know they're not representing you!

What do you want from your elected officials? Tell them! Remember, they represent you.

## Write letters

Get your chapter together and provide paper, envelopes, pens and instructions. Hand written letters are much more effective than emails or even typed letters. SSA can provide you with postcards as well.

These tips\* will help increase the effectiveness of your letter:

1. **Keep it brief:** Letters should never be longer than one page, and should be limited to one issue. Legislative aides read many letters on many issues in a day, so your letter should be as concise as possible.

2. **State who you are and what you want up front:** In the first paragraph, tell your legislators that you are a constituent and identify the issue about which you are writing ("I am student at \_\_\_ University and believe that our government should be secular). If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, it helps to identify it by its bill number (e.g. H.R. \_\_\_ or S.B. \_\_\_\_).

3. Cover no more than three of the most important points: Choose the three strongest points that will be most effective in persuading legislators to support your position and flesh them out.

4. **Personalize your letter:** Tell your elected official why this legislation matters in their community or state. If you have one, include a personal story that shows how this issue affects you and your friends/family. A constituent's personal stories can be very persuasive as your legislator shapes their position.

5. **Personalize your relationship:** Have you ever voted for this elected official? Have you ever contributed time or money to his or her campaign? Are you familiar with her through any business or personal relationship? If so, tell your elected official or his staff person. The closer your legislator feels to you, the more powerful your argument is likely to be.

6. **You are the expert:** Remember that your legislator's job is to represent you. You should be courteous, but don't be afraid to take a firm position. Remember that often your elected official may know no more about a given issue than you do.

### **Make phone calls**

You can use your letter as the script for a phone call. Design the basics of a script and ask your members to make phone calls to the elected official you're targeting.

There's no reason you shouldn't do both: write a letter and then follow up with a phone call:

*"I'm just calling to see if Senator Garcia received my letter about my support for S.B. 123 which would provide..."*

### **Schedule a visit to your elected official's office**

If you really want to make an impact, schedule a visit to your elected official's office. Depending on the issues and the level of government you may only get to talk with their staff, but that visit is still very impactful. But choose wisely. There are sure to be lobbying efforts happening on every issue effecting your community. Find out what those are and see where there are openings for you and your members to be involved.

### **Engage local partners**

There are likely to be organizations (local, state, and national) that are also interested in whatever issues you choose to focus on. Reach out and seek to partner with them when possible. For example, if you're targeting your state's Governor on issues of LGBTQ equality, find out who else is working on that issue. Are they having letter writing or phone call campaigns or even scheduling lobbying events? Organize your members to participate in something bigger than you could do alone.