

Support the Sciences:

Communicating with your Congressional Representatives and their staff

Traditionally scientists have been reluctant supplicants for federal support of the sciences, preferring to have their deeds and results be their surrogates, or let a small subset of their colleagues raise the issue with Congress. This strategy has been quite ineffective since the peak in the mid 1960's of the post-Sputnik boost in non-defense federal investments in science R&D. It was not until the turn into the XXI century that federal R&D allocations surpassed that peak, yet the increases responsible for this uptick were primarily due to sustained increases in health-related research funding that started in the 1980's. If scaled as a percent of the national GDP, all federally supported R&D, including defense, has declined to this day (source AAAS: www.aaas.org/page/historical-trends-federal-rd).

The prognosis for sustained federal R&D support beyond the present fiscal year is not very promising, as other federal programs competing for the limited non-discretionary budget allocations will have a higher political priority with Congress and the White House (the Dpt. of Defense budget, which includes defense related R&D, is part of the non-discretionary budget and is slated for possibly substantial increases). And as they say, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. It thus behooves us scientists to come out of our cocoon or comfort zone and share with our Congressional delegates our grave concerns of not only potential cuts in an already inadequate federal R&D funding program, but also of attempts to restrict the free exchange of scientific information and data. Such actions would negatively affect our economy, national security, health and world leadership in science and technology.

Efforts to raise S&T awareness, appreciation and support, including education, should be directed at your Congressional delegates, your senators and representatives of your home and place of employment districts, if they are different. As a rule, the delegates and their staff pay only attention to residents of their district, their potential voters. There are different levels of engagement with your representative and senators, from an occasional simple letter or email expressing your concern or view on a specific topic, such as pending legislation on funding, regulations affecting your job or environment, including science-based advice or critique. A further level involves attending open houses arranged by the delegates in their district or even an actual visit, by appointment, to meet the congressperson and/or staff, or ultimately visiting the delegates at their Washington offices. The most effective level of engagement is to establish through multiple contacts and meetings a rapport with the delegate of such an extent that he/she or their staff counts you as a resource on topics of congressional responsibilities related to your expertise. Here we will only present some guidelines on how to achieve an effective engagement at the lower two levels. Means to attain the status of a resource to your delegate are described in the first link in Tools and Resources at the end of this document.

Getting Started

You must have an idea of what to convey to your congressperson, which may have come from reading the news, from conversations with colleagues, prompts from an association or society you belong to, or your own research. An excellent resource of science issues presently discussed or planned, including legislation, can be found in the AIP free-subscription service “FYI”, which has been expanded to several products related to policy, budgeting and news. FYI can be subscribed to for electronic delivery or read on the website <https://www.aip.org/fyi>, which also has additional tools that you may be interested in, such as agency specific budget and leadership trackers.

After being motivated to write or email your congresspersons, you can, using your zip code, find the contact information for your representatives at <http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/> or for senators, at https://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm?OrderBy=state&Sort=ASC.

Emails are generally requested to be submitted from the congressperson’s website, individual or direct email addresses are not given. The websites also direct you to additional information on their home offices, committee assignments, legislative agenda, etc.

Your letter or email should be concise, but easily understandable to non-technical people if it addresses a science topic, and it should be factual and polite. Your letter will most likely not be seen by the congressperson, but rather by a staff person, who will acknowledge its receipt, and very occasionally ask you for additional information. An important aspect of your communication is that it should represent your view and in no way, be perceived as representing the view of or endorsement by AVS. You may also ask for the name of the representative’s staff who is assigned to science/education/technical matters, and use that reference in future communications. Don’t be disappointed by not getting through to the representative/senator, who generally rely on their staff for input and advice, and thus are a better conduit to get STEM issues to the attention of their boss. Hopefully, by staying in contact with the office will eventually lead to you being considered a resource in STEM-related areas. The prospects of such quest will be enhanced by your efforts to physically engage with the representative and his/her staff, which leads to the next engagement level.

Building relationships with your representative and staff

Strive to physically engage with your representative and/or staff through visits to his/her offices and public functions where he/she is scheduled to appear. The dates for such events may be requested from staff; they are also announced in your local newspaper and town websites. Don’t just drop in at their offices, but schedule an appointment. Don’t be disillusioned if the first attempts do not lead to a face-to-face meeting. A surer way to have success is to invite the representative to your institution, lab, business or local meeting/convention; they do this regularly and many of them have a link for this purpose on their website. Be assured, just about all politicians love to see high-tech advances and federal tax dollars working in their district and state; it’s also a good photo-op for them. Another means is to participate with your colleagues in visits to their Washington offices. AVS is regularly participating in the annual Congressional Visits Day organized by the Science, Engineering and Technology Working Group (SETWG), of which AVS is a member. We are always looking for AVS member volunteers to participate and would encourage you to apply by sending an inquiry to governance@avs.org.

Visit Protocol

There are number of do's and don'ts that need to be observed in visiting congressional offices:

- Make an appointment well in advance, be on time, and don't be a no-show- cancel if necessary
- After introductions, clearly define the purpose of your visit and stick with your message- staff will have limited time for you and will not favorably respond to rambling and long complicated deliveries.
- Thank the senator/representative for his/her past STEM and STEM education support.
- Make your message as personal as you can, people respond to suitable anecdotes and will likely remember them. Personal impact by enacted legislation and regulations or pending legislation will resonate with your listener and puts a face with the issues.
- Point out the value of federal STEM funding on the congressperson's state or district, using, for example, the State-specific sheets published by ASTRA (see tools below) to point out the economic and societal benefits.
- You are there to convey a message, not to impress. Don't preach, but make it a two-way conversation. Allow for a lack of technical knowledge by most staffers – learn, if necessary, how to speak to the general public; a good primer on this topic is the AAAS link below under tools.
- Be truthful and don't snow your listeners with technicalities- admit a lack of knowledge, should it arise, and offer to get the right answer.
- Avoid even the slightest negativism about politicians, nor in any way be condescending or implying that STEM and R&D funding is or should be an entitlement.
- If suitable, relate the impact science had in developing things they know of, like touch screens and smart phones, GPS, MRI, genesplicing, etc., all of major economic consequences and incubated through federally sponsored research.
- Sell the long view: social and economic benefits of science research are often not realized for years or even decades and require sustained and predictable long-term funding levels.
- For messages related to STEM education, emphasize the impact of the status-quo, pending legislation or policy directives on schools and universities in the district/state. Highlight personal consequences you experience, if appropriate.
- Solicit their view on issues, it is surprising how often common concerns are identified and enliven the interaction.
- Leave behind material relevant to your message, such as a succinct summary of your message, statistical research results, like the State-specific STEM funding and jobs sheet, AVS promotional material, and personal contact information.
- Send a thank you note to your congressional host with an offer to be a resource for them in the future.

Tools and resources

For a concise summary of the federal legislative process, etiquette for group visits, and procedures for enhancing congressional interactions beyond those indicated in this primer the reader should link to the CVD Briefing package issued by SETWG:

http://www.setcvd.org/sites/default/files/pdf_2016/CVD2016-STEM-on-Hill-Briefing-Doc.pdf

The ASTRA state-specific funding and job data, revised annually, can be accessed and down loaded at:

<https://www.usinnovation.org/state-innovation-vital-signs>

A AAAS developed primer on how to convey effectively a science or technical message to the general public can be found at: <https://www.aaas.org/page/communicating-engage>