



Making Congress Work for You

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My year on Capitol Hill has mostly consisted of meetings, lots of meetings. I've met with constituents eager to get members of Congress to cosponsor legislation or address new issues at the national level, with fellow staffers trying to move bills or plan for hearings, with agency personnel sent to the Hill to laud their programs and request appropriations, and with scientific and policy experts brought to the Hill to brief legislative staff on the state of knowledge of hot issues. Although these meetings bring new meaning to the bumper sticker "Meetings: the practical alternative to work," they provide a proactive approach to bringing issues to the forefront that elevates these issues above the steady stream of information that flows into congressional offices. Constituents need to be reminded of the importance of meeting with their Congress members; i.e., of lobbying.

The "L" Word

The term "lobbyist" was coined in the early 1800s, when members of Congress traveled twice a year from their home states to the nation's Capitol and would often stay at the Hotel Washington, across the street from the White House. With their time on the Hill being so short, tenant farmers and others who wished to discuss their issues would come to the hotel lobby and hang around until they could corner their representatives and discuss their particular issue. Not much has changed, although now the "tenant farmers" do the cornering and talking in the members' offices, and some can now afford to pay others to come and do the talking for them. The importance for citizens to discuss and emphasize issues is just as great as it was then.

The Role of the Lobbyist

In one of the more infamous moments in Michael Moore's film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Congressman John Conyers is asked how Congress could vote and pass the USA Patriot Act without reading the bill first, to which he responds "Sit down my son. We [members] don't actually read most of the bills we vote on." Though he was attempting to be facetious, the comment is not so far-fetched in reality. Quite often legislation does not become available for members to read until within 24 hours of a vote. Appropriation bills in particular are affected as the appropriations committees continue the horse-trading of funding levels for federal programs until the very last minute. When the legislation does become available, congressional staff sift through the often lengthy legislation. A heads-up from the citizen lobbyist is critical as their input can often provide the deciding factor toward a Representative's vote.

The Citizen Scientist

Congress needs your expertise. Representatives are rarely elected based on their understanding of the sciences, yet science is often an important factor in policy decisions. While policymakers have been singing the praises of "sound science" in decision-making of late, the electorate is often unfamiliar with both the sciences and the scientific process in general. For example, only two members of Congress hold doctorates in the sciences, both in physics: Rep. Vern Ehlers of Michigan (chair of the House Science Committee, Subcommittee on Environment, Technology and Standards), and Rep. Rush Holt of New Jersey (leader of the congressional Science Coalition and former Congressional Science Fellow). Sadly, the House Science Committee and the Senate Subcommittee on Science,

Technology, and Space are not considered high profile committees and many of the members assigned to these committees have little expertise in the broad array of scientific issues that come before them, yet they are being asked to determine the direction and funding of federal science. The same is true of the natural resource committees, which have primary jurisdiction over the federal agencies dealing with earth sciences, and which deal with much of the legislation that utilize the earth sciences in decision-making. Most of the current internal scientific expertise on the Hill comes from the 33 congressional science fellows supported by GSA, AGI, AGU, and others, as well as detailees from the federal scientific agencies and former fellows who chose to remain in Congress following their fellowship year (about 3 to 4 per class). Dispersed through the Senate and House, they need your help in keeping track of the latest issues and breakthroughs in the sciences, in educating the members on issues, and in working on legislation in support of upcoming programs in the earth sciences.

Timing, Timing, Timing

In the legislative process, timing is everything. By keeping abreast of legislative issues coming to the House or Senate floor or to committees in Congress, you can prepare a quickly timed letter, call, or even better, visit your representative while the legislation is being discussed and drafted, which will help to bring scientific expertise to the debate. If you are interested in an issue that is not currently up for debate in the committees or on the floor, a quick check to see if there are bills introduced that you could get your representative to cosponsor (or to schedule for a hearing if you happen to be talking to committee members) will help make your topic relevant. Current legislation, as well as legislation introduced in prior Congresses, can easily be accessed at www.congress.gov. If you are interested in seeing specific federal programs or agencies funded, the time to talk to your representa-

tives should be in January to March, as appropriations requests are delivered by each member to the appropriations committee in April. These requests should be followed up in the late spring to early summer when the appropriations committees are meeting to consider all the requests.

Zen and the Art of the Congressional Office

Understandably, most lobbyists coming to Capitol Hill wish to speak with their elected official directly. Given the demand on a Congress member's schedule, this is not always possible. Talking to the congressional staff is therefore as important as talking to the members themselves, and often more constructive, for the staff act as the information and issue filters for the members and will do the drafting of letters and legislation on behalf of the member. Most citizen lobbyists who request a meeting or write or call their representatives will end up talking to a legislative assistant (LA) or legislative counsel (an LA in possession of a law degree). There are typically four to five LAs in each congressional office, both in the House and Senate. These LAs run the gamut from recent college graduates to seasoned lawyers with 20 years experience on the Hill. Between the four or five LAs in each office, they tackle every issue under the sun that may come up in Congress, and, understandably, may not have much chance to delve into issues of the earth sciences or of science in general. They have become accustomed to a tidal wave of information thrown at them on a daily basis. In order to make your info stick, and hence have your issue addressed, specific communication tactics are required.

Contacting Congress

The first step is to contact the relevant LA. The legislative staff and the specific issues each staff member covers are often listed on a member's Web site, or on committee Web sites, available at www.house.gov. If you are unable to reach the LA or if the information is not available, contact the member's scheduler (a.k.a. executive assistant). When contacting the office, give a background for the

meeting in two or three sentences and set up a meeting in Washington, D.C., or in the district office. Most meetings last 10–15 minutes; if you can convince the LA that your issue is important enough, he or she may extend the meeting to 30 minutes or arrange for a stop-by visit with the Congress member. When meeting with or making a phone call to the member or LA, be succinct. Explain both the issue and what you would like to see the member do, whether it is to write a letter to an agency head, draft legislation, or request an appropriation. The best means to get the ball rolling is to bring one to two pages of talking points as well as any supporting documentation to any meeting (it is rare that the supporting documentation will get read in its entirety, if at all). Subsequent to the meeting, follow up with a draft of the letter or bill you spoke about as a reminder to the staff of your meeting and to help move your issue forward.

Of prime importance in whether your issue will get any face time is if the issue is germane to the members' constituency, district, state, or committee jurisdiction. Many issues are prioritized in terms of how they affect the member's constituency or state, and members have little interest in devoting significant effort to address issues affecting citizens in another state, unless the issue at hand has repercussions for their own state or comes under the purview of their assigned congressional committee. If you are not a constituent of the district of the member to whom you wish to speak (e.g. you are interested in funding for the Earth Resources Observation Systems Data Center, but are not from South Dakota), consider speaking with your professional societies and contacting other society members within the district or state who would be willing to contact the appropriate Congress member with you.

If you would like to see a piece of legislation moved forward, make an effort to contact your representatives in both the House and Senate. The legislative process is not known for its expediency, and the process moves fastest if legislation is introduced in both chambers at the same time. This

tactic will also help put pressure on one chamber or committee if the legislation has passed on the floor of the other chamber and is hung up due to tight legislative timelines or due to the personal political agendas of specific committee chairs. This is very important when requesting appropriations, for there is strength in having matching requests in the House and Senate appropriations bills as they go into conference. There is also support in numbers if several members are requesting the funding, particularly if some members of your state delegation happen to sit on the right appropriations committee.

But Why Make the Effort?

Too often I have heard geologists express distaste at the political process, preferring to leave policymaking to the policymakers and to go about their own business of concentrating on the bigger picture of Earth, the longer timeframe of the geologic record. Why meddle in policy? We often forget the role the federal government plays in the support of the sciences, through funding grants, programs, academic institutions, and agencies such as the U.S. Geological Survey and the National Science Foundation. The topics being discussed in the last presidential election cycle, including the influence of politics on scientific panels and on the advancement of scientific endeavors such as stem cell research, highlight the importance of making sure science is understood and used to benefit society at large. Going straight to the policymakers is one small step to ensuring the future of our collective profession.

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