

Top 10 Rules for Working with Congress

1 Know Your Goal.

Every visit, call, or letter should have a purpose, even if the purpose is as general as asking your representative to support scientific research or to simply establish a relationship with a member of Congress or a staffer. You may wish to ask for additional funding for a specific program or discipline, or offer your expertise in an area of science that ties into one or more of the large concerns facing Congress at any given time — for example, national security, health care, or the state of the economy. Determine what you hope to accomplish and plan accordingly.

As part of this process, know the capacity in which you are acting. Are you a science arbiter providing technical information to policymakers? Or an issue advocate, pressing for a policy position? Or attempting the role of an honest broker that examines the scope of choices available to the decisionmaker? Be clear to yourself — and your contact in the congressional office — whether you are simply presenting scientific information or advocating for a position.^{viii}

Researcher Ken Caldeira, who has briefed many members of Congress, summed up this distinction and his preferred role: “I think that, as scientists, we have the ability and the right, if not the obligation, to speak as concerned and informed citizens. But it is useful to keep those roles separate. We have no particular priestly role where we have greater weight than anyone else” when it comes to policy-making.^{ix}

One important goal to keep in mind is to forge a relationship with members of Congress and staff. Over time, each develops a network of individuals on whom he or she comes to rely for advice, information, suggestions for prospective witnesses, evaluations of reports, assessment of people, and so forth. You can become a valued source for these types of queries based on your performance, reliability, and credibility. Building such a relationship can eventually result in your serving as an informal advisor by providing information, opinions, and perhaps more formal studies on matters of importance to the member. Because the average tenure for congressional staff is less than two years, building relationships is an on-going process.

2 Understand How Congress Works and Makes Decisions.

Members and staff don't expect you to be an expert on Congress, but they do appreciate (and have more respect for) those who display an awareness and understanding of what is going on — both in the legislative process and especially the conditions they face. Among other things, these conditions include severe time constraints, competing demands for legislative and budget priorities, and the imperatives of re-election. Chapters 1 and 2 of this book provide additional information about how Congress works.

Members and staff say that one of the most difficult things to get scientists and engineers to understand is the tough reality faced by members of Congress in balancing competing interests, building working alliances, and achieving acceptable compromises. One staffer pointed out that there is “a frequent misperception that a member will vote against one of his or her constituencies if only you will give them the correct facts.” Unlike science, politics can't be reduced to empirical facts and figures; many factors come into play. Former Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) explained some of these competing factors, “In most cases, science has to inform policy making, but it isn't determinative. Pretending that science is going to settle a dispute that is really about values or money or anything else just leads to muddled thinking and distorted debates that are damaging to both science and policy in the long run.”^x

Indeed, it is rare that an initiative is not substantially modified through compromises and trade-offs before a final policy decision is made or a law is enacted. This means that you may lose, even if you have a good case. It also means that you should not take it personally and should keep trying. “Be pleasantly persistent,” advised a staff member. Rep. Peter Visclosky, Chairman of the Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee, articulated this concept to Department of Energy Office of Science Director Raymond Orbach in a March 2008 hearing, stating, “I am very mindful of the importance of federal funding for research and development in the area of physical sciences. If you don't receive your full request for science research, it's not because of lack of support for your Office, but the necessity of balancing competing needs that have nothing to do with science that is at issue.”^{xi}



3 Conduct Detailed Background Research.

Before each communication, it is vital to know as much as possible about the issue and the member's background on the issue, including voting record, committee assignments and other previous actions. As one staffer exclaimed, "Can you believe this person didn't even know which party my boss belongs to?"

Your university and professional society government relations offices can be very helpful with this stage. Government relations professionals can often provide the background information necessary for a successful visit as well as provide introductions to key staff and possibly accompany you to meetings.

Begin by learning where a member of Congress stands politically on various issues and how the member fits into the congressional power structure. Try to learn if the member already has a view on your issue or has supported relevant legislation. One senior staff person advised, "Know what is on the member's mind in terms of recent concerns. Check recent hearings and floor debates."

You should be prepared to explain why the member should share your position (if he/she does not already) and to answer questions that may be posed in response to your statements. As much as you can, offer concrete suggestions on your issue. Be prepared to support your statements with specific arguments and relevant facts.

If you are talking about specific legislation, you should know the bill's number, title and status. It is also useful to understand the legislative background of the issue. Has similar legislation been proposed before? What happened? For what reasons was it unsuccessful? Has anything changed since that time?

Much of this information is online. All congressional personal and committee offices have websites, and many members of Congress are using web tools such as Twitter and Facebook to communicate with constituents. The Library of Congress <http://thomas.loc.gov> and congressional committee and personal websites (available from www.house.gov and www.senate.gov) are good starting places for this research. Additional resources are listed on the AAAS website www.aaas.org.

4 Use Your Knowledge of the Legislative Process to Determine the Timing of Your Course of Action.

Timing is vital to the success of your efforts. Weighing in too late with your opinion can mean the legislative train has left the station. As one committee staff director put it, "It was a good set of suggestions, but we'd already reported the bill out of committee two days ago. They thought we

could fix it on the floor. Well, maybe — sometimes. But they should have come three months ago when it was still in subcommittee.” On the other hand, coming too early can be just as bad. A good effort can be wasted “if it is too early and other matters are dominating the legislative agenda. We only handle so many things at a time,” according to a senior staff person.

Your background research, combined with monitoring issues through your professional society, congressional websites or news media, will help determine your timing and course of action. If you are asking for cosponsorship or support of a bill, it is often best to communicate early in the process via meetings or correspondence, depending on the complexity of the issue. When you are advocating for a specific vote or action, it is most effective to e-mail or call about a week before the scheduled vote. If time is very short, calls are most effective. For issues that do not yet have legislation or a particular timeline, providing technical information earlier rather than later may be more helpful. A long-term relationship may begin and be maintained at any time with meetings and letters, although each interaction should have a purpose.

Also, keep the congressional calendar in mind. While activity in the congressional environment seldom comes to a complete halt, it does vary over the course of the year. A member observed, “There is a much better chance of having an in-depth discussion with me during a recess period, whether in person or on the telephone.” This advice applies to meetings with staff as well. In general, congressional recesses (also known as district work periods) last one to two weeks and correspond with holidays. A longer recess usually takes place in late August. The congressional schedule is available on the House and Senate websites. In addition, the House and Senate are generally in session Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, making Mondays and Fridays better days to reach congressional contacts.



5 Be clear and succinct.

The majority of members of Congress and staff are not scientists. Even at the risk of some oversimplification, be concise. Keep messages simple, don't be too detailed, and don't overwhelm your listeners with technical jargon. Remember the time constraints faced by members and staff and use their time wisely. One staffer recommended adopting the BLUF format commonly used by the military — Bottom Line Up Front.

6 Understand Congressional Staff and Their Influence.

While it is important to remember that members of Congress are elected and their staff are not, staff play influential roles in the congressional setting. Do not make the mistake of looking down on congressional staff or underestimating their ability to help or hinder you, even if the person happens to be very junior, which is very common. Chapter 1 contains additional information on the role and background of staffers, whom some have called “unelected lawmakers.”

7 Provide Concrete Suggestions.

A recurring theme from staff is that too many people bring problems to Congress and “look to us to devise a solution instead of presenting a plan for us to consider, modify and perhaps adopt,” said one staffer. State your problem or issue clearly and suggest what action is needed. Work carefully at honing your request or advice or information so there is no doubt about your issue, your position, or what you are asking for. Do this by working out a proposed answer to your request or by presenting a plan of action to accomplish what you desire. Members and staff appreciate proposals for action that are clear and articulate and show that they have been thought through before presentation.

8 Present Support of Science as a Means to Meet National and Local Goals, Not an Entitlement.

Members and staff react negatively when they are presented with arguments in support of science that they see as being cast in “entitlement terms.” In their words, scientists and engineers should not “convey an attitude of being inherently deserving in contrast to other seekers of the public largesse,” and support for science should be “presented in terms of helping to meet national needs, or to achieve societal goals, not as an entitlement owed to scientists.”

Members are most interested in learning how a given issue affects their home district. For example, how will the research funding that you are supporting translate into jobs or student scholarships within the district? In addition, explain the importance of your issue from a national perspective. For instance, how will it affect U.S. economic competitiveness, national security or quality of life? What will be the effect on your profession, industry, or community?

Senator Scott Brown (R-MA) cited the local impact as his reason for supporting the America COMPETES Act, a bill that authorized funding increases for several research agencies: “I have heard

from a broad coalition of universities, businesses, and educators in my home state of Massachusetts about the positive impact of the COMPETES Act on our economy. I have listened closely to my constituents' concerns and have concluded that reauthorization of this legislation is absolutely necessary to the long-term economic health of Massachusetts and the United States as a whole."

9 **Be Willing to Say "I Don't Know".**

If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, and offer to find out the answer. Follow up promptly. Your credibility can sometimes be enhanced by saying "I don't know" if you don't. If pressed, you might speculate and label your response appropriately. Enough people violate this rule to cause members and staff to underscore how strongly they feel about trusting what a person says.

A related point suggested by a number of congressional staff is "Don't oversell your case." Work hard at building your credibility; it is a tremendous asset, even if your issue is weak or unpopular. To further enhance your credibility, acknowledge as accurately as you can those who disagree with you or are opposed to what you are suggesting, and tell the member or staff person as best you can why this is so. Don't make them research this information or be surprised by your opponents.



10 **Follow Up Appropriately.**

Seldom will a single interaction be all that is necessary to achieve your objective. Possibilities range from a simple follow-up telephone conversation or two to an extended period of working with staff. Conceivably, other members of Congress might become involved. Take this into account and be certain that follow-up commitments can be met before you offer them. Before you leave any meeting with a member, try to have clearly identified the name and contact information of the staff person who will be your principal follow-up point of contact. Finally, it is useful and appropriate to ask if there is any additional staff you should contact about the issue.

Aim toward building long-term relationships with members of Congress and staff. Remember your allies, and thank them often. These are more than simple courtesies; they are also the hallmarks of polished professionals. Keep track of your advocates, and look for ways to express your appreciation. Private thanks are sometimes appropriate, but also look for public ways to thank them for their contributions, such as letters to the editor.