

Incentives, Opportunities, and Success? AAAS Members' Experiences Communicating with Policymakers

Elizabeth Suhay, American University (Corresponding author, suhay@american.edu) and
Emily Therese Cloyd, American Association for the Advancement of Science (Presenting author, ecloyd@aaas.org)

PA11F-0833

Abstract

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest among scientists in engaging with policymakers. To accommodate and encourage this interest, various organizations have stepped in to offer training and assist scientists in spanning the academic-policy divide. While these trends are encouraging, there is, unfortunately, a dearth of systematic data describing scientists' efforts and experiences communicating with policymakers.

In this poster, we discuss data from an original survey conducted with AAAS members (N = approx. 700) regarding their communications with U.S. policymakers. We asked them about their experiences (or lack thereof) communicating with policymakers, including: their perceptions of what practices "worked" and what didn't; their knowledge of, and access to, training opportunities; and, finally, what incentives and disincentives to communicate with policymakers they perceived in their professional milieus.

Synthesizing these data with those from a parallel study of policymakers, we offer recommendations to individual scientists and scientific organizations (broadly understood) regarding how to increase the occurrence and productivity of scientific communication with policymakers.

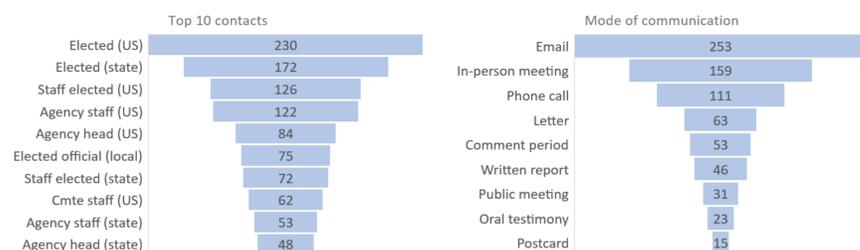
How are scientists engaging policy makers?

Of the **640** respondents to the survey, approx. **55%** indicated that they had communicated with a policymaker about a scientific topic during the previous two years. **89%** of these individuals plan to continue their engagement.

Women respondents were slightly more likely than men to report engagement (**60%** vs. **53%**); however, there were fewer women in the sample (**33%**).

Respondents in hospitals/health care and non-profits were most likely to engage (**73%**, **65%**). Those in private industry and at universities least likely (**51%**, **56%**).

What types of policy makers have scientists engaged with, and how?



What were scientists' goals when communicating with policy makers?

We asked scientists what their own goals were when communicating with policy makers and about the goals that they think are appropriate for scientists acting in their professional capacity.



Note: Our interviews with members of Congress and Congressional staff indicated that they were interested in ALL types of input!

What makes communications with policymakers effective?

We asked respondents to reflect on what made their communications with policy makers effective or successful, that is, that their communication appeared to be heard, understood, and considered by the policy makers.

Main category of effectiveness #1

Regarding the form or style of the communication, respondents most often said they had success with communication that was **clear and well-organized, concise, and personalized** (as opposed to, e.g., a form letter).

Main category of effectiveness #2

With regard to the substance of the communication, respondents emphasized providing **well-researched, empirical information** that connected with **policymaker interests**, from subject expertise to constituent priorities.

Main category of effectiveness #3

A common theme also emerged around frequency of contact, with respondents indicating they were likely more effective as a part of a **coordinated effort with others**—large or small—and/or via **repeated interactions** with policymakers.

We then asked respondents to reflect on what made their communications with policymakers **ineffective**.

Main category of ineffectiveness #1

Respondents identified the main barrier to success as policymakers' characteristics and behaviors. Respondents expressed frustration over perceived **ideological or partisan bias, lack of interest, and lack of expertise or knowledge**.

Main category of ineffectiveness #2

Respondents also identified the broader **politically polarized context** as getting in the way of their communication with policymakers.

Main category of ineffectiveness #3

Finally, despite email being the most common mode of communication, **email was also the mode of communication most often cited as ineffective**.

Policymakers' perspectives

We also interviewed 42 Congressional policymakers (22 Members and 20 staff, personal and committee). 27 were Democrats and 15 were Republicans.

Policymakers often agreed with scientists...

- Keep communication **concise, concrete, and easy to understand**
- Focus on **connecting with policymaker interests!**

Policymakers provided additional advice...

- If you are a **constituent**, the office will likely meet with you; if you are not, another connection (personal or topical) is likely required.
- Build relationships** and connect on a personal level. Relationships build trust, increase mutual understanding, and keep you on policymakers' radar screens.
- Communication should be **well-timed**, considering both policymaker (is Congress in session?) and legislative (is there a "policy window"?) schedules
- While initial communication should be concise, make **detailed reports** available (additional documentation or web link).

Incentives for scientists to engage with policymakers

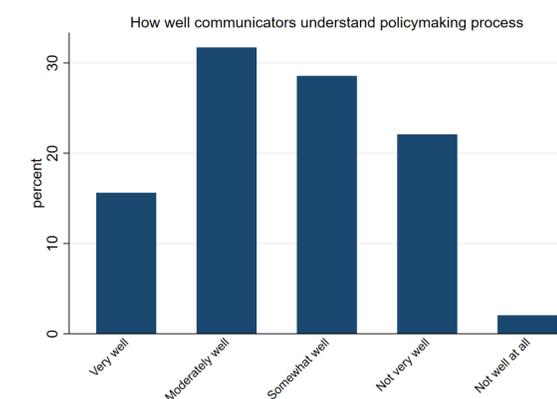
We asked respondents about the professional incentives (or disincentives) that encourage (or discourage) them to engage with policymakers about scientific areas in which they specialize.

Overall, respondents emphasized disincentives more than incentives.



Knowledge & resources

Despite the proliferation of science communication training and resources in recent years, **fewer than twenty communicator respondents** mentioned that they were assisted by formal science communication training and **a majority of all respondents** were unfamiliar with communication toolkits or other resources provided by AAAS and other scientific societies. **Sixty-eight percent** of communicator respondents said they had never before worked with a scientific boundary organization (an organization that aims to facilitate communication between scientists and policymakers). Respondents indicated that they had varying levels of understanding of the policymaking process (see below).



Opportunities for scientists to work with scientific societies

Scientists can learn more about the policy process and get more experience in communicating with policymakers through various scientific societies. E.g., the American Association for the Advancement of Science offers several programs:

- Communicating Science Workshop: Engaging Policy Makers** <https://www.aaas.org/programs/communicating-science>
- Catalyzing Advocacy and Science and Engineering Workshop** <https://www.aaas.org/programs/catalyzing-advocacy-in-science-and-engineering>
- Engaging Scientists in Engineering and Policy (ESEP) Coalition** <http://science-engage.org>