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

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

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-policymaker 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 milieu.

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? (Graph)

Elected (120) 
Elected (State) 
Staff elected (State) 
Agency head (State) 
Electoral official (State) 
Staff elected (Local) 
Civic staff (Local) 
Agency staff (Local) 
Agency head (Local)

Top 10 contacts:

- Email
- In-person meeting
- Phone call
- Letter
- Comment period
- Written report
- Public meeting
- Oval office
- Recessed

Mode of communication:

- Email
- In-person meeting
- Phone call
- Letter
- Comment period
- Written report
- Public meeting
- Oval office
- Recessed

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

Appropriate goal of communication

- Attention to problem
- Advocacy science
- Scientific projections
- Descriptive info
- Policy options
- Argue for policy
- Advocate employee
- Advocate employer

Actual goal of communication

- Attention to problem
- Advocacy science
- Scientific projections
- Descriptive info
- Policy options
- Argue for policy
- Advocate employee
- Advocate employer

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 agree 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

- Part of professional role
- Intrinsic / ethical motivation
- Increased likelihood research funding
- Recruitment / support from employer or scientific organization

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
- Engaging Scientists in Engineering and Policy (ESEP) Coalition
  http://science-engage.org

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