

Mind the Gap, Part II: Effective Stakeholders are Relationship Builders

GSA Speaking of Geoscience

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In a previous *Speaking of Geoscience*™ blog post (“Mind the Gap, Part I: There’s No Effective Engagement without Effective Stakeholders”), I discussed the importance of bridging from presenting facts to finding shared values to influencing attitudes in your science policy engagement. In this blog, I will take you a step further. Let’s say you have decided you want to make your own “ask” and maximize your stakeholder influence with Congress on an issue that is near and dear to your science or your heart. How do you prepare and craft your own approach and ask so you will be well-received and effective?

Policy Literacy 2.0

If you are committed to being a policy influencer, you will need to know a bit more about how Congress works at the daily operational level, strategize on and analyze your elected officials’ level of influence and interests, and develop the skills and abilities to construct and communicate issues in the way Congress frames them. Wherever a Member of Congress is in their leadership trajectory, to be effective you will need to build trust with their office, which you do through relationship-building. A strong professional relationship then sets the stage for your ask and regardless of immediate outcome, your long-term influence with them.

An Action Plan for Building Trust and Maximizing Your Influence with Congress

Here is a strategy and a few concrete steps I recommend for actively pursuing science policy advocacy with your members of Congress on Capitol Hill and “in the District” (in your home state or Congressional District).

Step 1. Unearth the Basics of Day-to-Day Congressional Operations – and Align Your Plans Accordingly

You have big plans to arrive on the doorstep of Congress. When do you go? How do you plan your visit? Timing is everything (as is talking to the right person), so it is crucial to know and operate within Congress’ calendar, be cognizant of other scheduling constraints and funding drivers, and understand how Congressional offices are staffed.

Image credit: Monica Gowan

In Washington, D.C., if you want to meet with the member you want to meet when Congress is in session. You can find Congressional calendars here, which also reflect House and Senate hearings (typically held Tuesday-Thursday). For maximum availability, request a Member meeting on these midweek days in coordination with the Congressional committee calendars. If you are planning to engage with a Member in their state or congressional district office, you will want to know recess dates so you can schedule your meeting when they are back home for state and district work periods. Congress generally recesses for multiple weeks in August and schedules a one-week recess around holidays in most other months. Staff, though busy, will generally meet any day of the week, whether in the D.C., state, or district offices.

Also be aware that although the Congressional session runs January-December, the fiscal year runs October 1 through September 30. The process begins with the release of the President’s budget in February. Congress then takes over the spending process through appropriations bills, which must be signed into law by September 30. If not, a continuing resolution (“CR”) can be signed into law to continue funding for a set amount of time.

With this knowledge, you can tailor your engagement to both the budget cycle and to the status of legislation under consideration by committees throughout the year. You will come across as more informed and you will be in a better position to request a timely meeting with staff as well.

Step 2. Prepare to Meet your Member of Congress and Their Staff – And Meet Them Where They Are

Find your Members of Congress here and go to their website. Look for a section on “Issues” or “Priorities” to learn what issues are front and center for them. Examine how they frame the issues and determine under which of their priorities your issue of concern best falls. Next, submit a scheduling request online or via email, or simply call the DC or district office location and ask to set up a meeting with staff. Let them know where you’re from, what your priority or issue is that you’d like to discuss, and when you’d

like to meet.

Depending on circumstances, if you are requesting a meeting in D.C. you will most likely meet with a Legislative Aide or possibly a Science & Technology Policy Fellow. Most aides and fellows have a specific **portfolio** assigned to them, i.e., issues on which they advise the member of Congress. Portfolios are often named after the member's priorities (e.g., "Agriculture" or "Environment and Energy"), and you can ask to meet with the staffer who works on the portfolio of interest to you. Back home in the state or district, staff tend to be assigned to providing assistance on "constituent issues," typically casework for veterans' benefits, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, taxes and the IRS, and immigration and visas. Some offices, however, will have staff assigned to science issues and every office will have someone available to meet with you.

Once your meeting is scheduled you can dive into your background research on the policy aspects of the issue, craft your talking points or key message, and develop your ask. An excellent resource to guide you on communicating with Congress is the AAAS publication, *Working with Congress: A Scientist's Guide to Policy*. For specific tips on tailoring your ask, see *Congressional Visits and the Power of a Good "Ask"* on page 52 in the July 2019 issue of *GSA Today*.

Step 3. Mind the Language Gap – Get the Lingo!

Your fluency with Capitol Hill nomenclature can also enhance your stakeholder effectiveness. When you couch your talking points and your ask in legislative vernacular, you can seem more relatable which can strengthen your professional relationship and help build trust. For example, perhaps you are a field geophysicist who collects magnetotelluric (M-T) measurement data and you have concerns about the vulnerability of electric power grids to solar storms based on bedrock geology. While this is exciting, attention-worthy stuff, you might receive only a polite nod from a non-scientist staffer if you start a meeting with that jargon-laden message.

Thankfully, Congress has resources you can use to uncover ways to contextualize your knowledge and show how relevant it is for Congress. When a bill is introduced in the House or Senate, legislative analysts from the Congressional Research Service (CRS) closely examine the content of each bill and resolution to assign **Policy Area** and **Legislative Subject** terms (Table 1). This is a valuable key to how Congress constructs an issue from a policy standpoint. Every bill falls under one Policy Area, and I highly recommend reviewing the Policy Area descriptions here (there are only 32) to get a sense of the focus or predominant subject matter of each.

TABLE 1

Legislative Vocabulary

Source: <https://www.congress.gov/help/faq/find-bills-by-subject>

Vocabulary	Number of Terms	Number of Terms per Bill	Coverage Dates
Policy Area	32	1	1979-present
Legislative Subjects	1,004	varies	2009-present
Legislative Indexing Vocabulary (LIV)	5,500	varies	1973-2008

Applying this vocabulary scheme to the M-T example above, S.881, the Space Weather Research and Forecasting Act, was introduced on 26 March 2019 in the U.S. Senate and referred to the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee. CRS assigned the bill to the **Policy Area** of Science, Technology, Communications, and to the **Legislative Subject** of Atmospheric Science and Weather.

Now you have a tangible and pertinent starting point for your legislative research and initiating a meaningful, cogent discussion about your concerns. You can browse the legislative vocabulary, use the search terms to discover intriguing bill titles, read the full text of a bill, review the history of legislative development, and see the latest actions on the bill. From the Committee website you can find out who chairs and serves on the committee, navigate to the member websites, find out their priority issues, call a targeted member's office to request a meeting with the staffer who handles the relevant portfolio, and in the example above, say you want to discuss space weather, electric utilities, and communications as they pertain to S.881. Suddenly, you might sound very useful! And, you have demonstrated that you know how to find and communicate a match – between your science expertise and a piece of legislation under development or consideration for a vote – in the lingo of Congress.

You can also easily track and monitor bill history and activity. Using policy and legislative subject search terms, you can keep yourself up-to-date on any bill, related legislation, and remarks and activity entered in the Congressional Record Index. Staying on top of what's happening is also easy with RSS and Email Alerts from [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov). Subscribe to a variety of alerts here or updates on Congressional activity and legislation.

Step 4. Remember Your Meeting Goals – Meaningful Engagement and Relationship Building

Keep an open mind. Approaching your meeting as a two-way conversation between individuals with potentially varying viewpoints can help you navigate the conversation toward speaking to shared values. Remember it is expected that you are going in with your "ask" – either a request for action (policy needed; suggested policy options; encouraged policy alternatives; specific policy action recommended) or an offer (of information; other proposal) or both. Even if your viewpoints align, going in with an

expressed appreciation that the staffer's role is advisory – and they might have numerous constraints on taking action (e.g. being in the minority party; issue “ripeness” or timing) – will go a long way toward facilitating a substantive discussion.

Not getting the result or outcome you want to achieve doesn't mean your time and effort is wasted. You can help Congressional staff fulfill their role by offering a tangible solution. Clarify the problem that you both think needs attention. Is it similar?

Different? Ask what the prevailing attitude is on the Hill toward this issue. Show how or where your concern matches up with Congress' view. Share your science information, break down the research findings, share your interpretations, and underscore why it matters. Ask for or set targets on how you might help the member's office address the issue (e.g., a briefing? Town Hall back in the district? A field trip or other site visit?). Ask how, when, and where you can be of greatest help. Thank them for their time and interest.

Step 5. There is Power in Numbers – Build Meaningful Engagement and Partnerships with the Like-Minded

In addition to team contributions on behalf of GSA and individual science advocacy experiences with Congress, you can leverage your efforts with interdisciplinary colleagues as well. Congress likes to hear when many voices converge with the same message on an issue. Thinking ahead to GSA's scheduled update of the Climate Change position statement in 2020, during my D.C. visit I sought out partnerships with organizations concerned about the public health impacts of climate change to learn what they are doing and explore opportunities for collaboration. In addition to meeting with our sister society, AGU, to discuss the Thriving Earth Exchange and GeoHealth programs, I met with leadership from the National Environmental Health Association and HealthCareReady; both are national organizations that work on climate change, emergency preparedness, and community resilience to disaster, and have an active presence on Capitol Hill. Building your science policy networks with like-minded stakeholders can strengthen, amplify, and deepen the impact of your message. Who are some of the stakeholders with whom you might engage on your issues of interest?

There is a world of opportunity out there to make a difference on the issues that matter today and will matter for generations to come. I wish you great luck and fulfillment in all your science policy endeavors.

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