

STEPS Talks About Communicating With Your Representatives

The graduate student organization Science, Technology, and Engineering Policy Society (STEPS) recently hosted a lunch with STEPS President and PhD candidate, Nicholas Warren. Nicholas shared effective avenues and strategies for communicating with political representatives to a packed room. Directly contacting politicians or government agencies is the second-best way to influence the actions of your government as a private citizen; voting is the most effective. As scientists, we spend a lot of our time thinking about things that many other Americans do not. Perhaps there is a problem facing our society that you know very well. You have the power to make the government better informed about that issue, so they can develop policies to address it! If you were unable to attend the seminar, this article should get you started in the right direction!

1. Be well informed!

If you are interested in advocating for something as a private citizen, the first thing that you should do is become better informed about it. Communication is not a one-way street, people may ask you questions to clarify your statement; being informed enough to answer them is incredibly helpful and increases your credibility.

2. Where you get your information matters a lot.

Discerning between high and low quality news sources has become increasingly difficult in the internet age. The “Mainstream Media” (Associate Press, NY Times, NBC, CNN, etc) holds their reporting to high journalistic standards, but may not give as much depth as niche sources. Science-focused news sources delve more deeply into an issue and sometimes propose policy prescriptions for issues facing our society. [Nature News](#) and [Science Magazine](#) are the two most popular science-focused news sources and report on a wide range of topics. Advocacy websites are also a great source of information, **but it is important to recognize that the information is likely biased towards their goals**. The websites for the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) (AAAS) and the [Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology](#) (FASEB) have *many* resources to help you become an effective advocate for science.

3. Identify the person or group that has the ability to do something about it.

This could be a member of Congress, a State Representative, a government agency, or even your local City Council. It is important not to look over local government; they represent fewer people and are often ignored, so your voice carries more weight and your individual effort may go farther in producing change. One example of a local science-related issue is the development of a [natural gas distribution system](#) in the Upper Valley, which is influenced by the NH State Public Utilities Commission as well as the City of Lebanon. As scientists, we are often concerned about the state of federal investment in basic research. Federal science funding is an issue that your members of Congress can directly impact during the annual federal budget negotiation process. The contact information for most politicians and agencies

can be found with a simple google search, but for a quick reference, [House.gov](https://www.house.gov) and [Senate.gov](https://www.senate.gov) list the contact info for every member of Congress.

4. Figure out the most effective way to reach the person you want to talk to.

The most effective, but time consuming, method is to meet in-person with a representative or their staff. This method is time consuming because you should research and prepare far more for an in-person meeting than for other forms of communication. You should know what your “Ask” is and ~3 supportive talking points tailored to the person you are speaking with. But, the bigger goal of an in-person meeting is to open a channel of dialogue. Make sure you send a follow-up email to continue the discussion and re-thank them for their time. Additionally, many politicians and local governments host Town Halls or other types of open meetings to get input in a group setting. These events and meetings should be listed on their website. The most common and lowest effort methods are sending emails and making phone calls. Phone calls to Congress are particularly effective *en masse*, because an office will be brought to a standstill if enough people call about an issue. That leaves a significant impression on the representative and makes them pay attention. When making a phone call or email it is best to succinctly “Ask” the representative to do something specific and only include one “Ask” for each time you contact them. Phone calls can be as simple as stating your name, where you are from, and what bill or issue you support/oppose. Physical mail tends to be the least effective, especially in relation to Congress; all mail to Congress is screened for 2 weeks for harmful biological and chemical agents. But most importantly, thank the person you are contacting for their time and support!