



Science 14 November 2014:
Vol. 346 no. 6211 p. 791
DOI: 10.1126/science.aaa2692

Editorial

Out of sight, out of mind

By Mary Woolley, Alan I. Leshner

¹Mary Woolley is the president and chief executive officer of Research!America.

²Alan I. Leshner is the chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and executive publisher of *Science*



The 2014 mid-term elections are over, and at least 62 new members of the U.S. Congress will be taking office on 3 January 2015. Many will be accompanied by new staff, not all of them familiar with science and science policy. Compounding the ambiguity that always comes with new legislators is that the leadership of the Senate has changed from Democratic to Republican. It is as yet unknown where the new leaders and committee chairs will stand on science policy issues, but so far, science has not been declared among the priorities put forward by either party. All of this is taking place just as many of science's long-time legislative champions are retiring. Overall research and development spending has already fallen 16% in inflation-adjusted dollars from fiscal year (FY) 2010 to the FY 2015 budget request. The federal government's investment in science and technology now stands at roughly 0.78% of the economy, the lowest point in 50 years. This is the right time for scientists to introduce themselves to their new legislators, congratulate them on their election, offer their services if needed on policy matters that would benefit from science input, and emphasize the importance of science to the country.

It is imperative that scientists develop relationships with new members of Congress and their staff. There will be another Ebola, earthquake, flood, or oil spill, and a host of other science-related challenges. Newly elected members will soon be asked to vote on these kinds of issues. They will need information quickly to make knowledge-based decisions. If scientists do not act now to cultivate new, well-informed champions for science, other interests will quickly eclipse science in vying for attention and loyalty. This cultivation is particularly important now, at a time of intense scrutiny of the federal government's investment in all programs.



Thinking more strategically, the scientific community should take a page from the playbook of those who successfully run for public office. Unlike most scientists, elected officials are practiced at demonstrating accountability to the public. If elected officials do not regularly say and convey, "I work for you, and this is what I've done for you lately," they will not be back for a next term. If

a member of Congress is effectively out of sight, unconnected to their district, he or she will not be reelected.



“...if the priority of science sinks further, we will all be out of luck!”

Politicians know how to be visible and accountable to the taxpayer; scientists, not so much. Surveys commissioned by Research!America show that scientists are essentially invisible in the United States, with only 30% of Americans able to name a living scientist and 44% able to name a place where research is conducted.* It's all too easy for members of the science community to hunker down and stay out of policy-makers' view, especially given that the culture of science often discourages, rather than embraces, engagement with the nonscience public. It is also easy to be intimidated by outreach to policy-makers, not least but also not only because little or no training in dealing with science education, and little encouragement or recognition is on offer thereafter.

It is past time to change counterproductive habits, and there are resources with tactical advice on how to do so (such as the AAAS guide to working with Congress†). If the scientific community stays out of sight much longer, the issues of science will be even further out of the public's and policy-makers' minds and then, if the priority of science sinks further, we will all be out of luck!

- [↵*](http://www.researchamerica.org) *www.researchamerica.org*
- [↵†](http://www.aaas.org/news/top-ten-rules-working-congress) *www.aaas.org/news/top-ten-rules-working-congress*