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Capitol Connection

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Some thoughts on politicians and science

June 28, 2013 | Author: Summer Allen, Graduate and Postdoc, Brown University



In [one of my recent posts](#) I wrote about Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, who presents weekly addresses about climate change to the Senate. That post and comments on the post got me thinking about the interplay between scientists and politicians.

One commenter suggested that getting educated about science from politicians probably isn't the best idea. We all know examples of politicians who claim to be relying on solid scientific evidence

but are—in fact—completely making up “facts” or using junk science (U.S. Representative Todd Akin's [comments](#) about the female body's ability to prevent pregnancy after rape comes to mind). But shouldn't we give some credit to the politicians who are trying their best to convey well supported science to their colleagues?

I get the sense that many scientists are at least somewhat uncomfortable when politicians talk about scientific issues. I understand this because there are many ways that a scientific message can get lost when it is translated into political speak. In their own work, scientists are bathed in nuance. (And we know not to cherry pick data and work to avoid incorrect statistics.) But when science is translated into political speech, much of this nuance is sacrificed (as it is when scientists work to communicate their own research to lay people) for the sake of a digestible message.

Ideally a politician will have a team of advisers who understand science (and how science is done) and these advisers will consult with multiple practicing scientists about a given issue before creating a policy recommendation. I have no idea how often this actually happens but based some of the C-Span clips I've watched, it's not often enough. Which leads me to another idea: would politicians be better off if they spent more time hearing science straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak – from scientists talking to them on the Senate and House floors? Would Whitehouse's remarks get more traction if they were made by a different scientist each week instead of the Senator?

However, there are a few possible issues with this idea. First, being an excellent scientist doesn't necessarily mean one is well equipped to translate science to non-scientists. Second, the politicians hearing the message might either lack the scientific literacy to understand the messenger or simply fail to trust him or her. (Actually, increasing science literacy may not change much about how people think about [climate change](#) – perhaps trust is the bigger issue?). Even members of the Supreme Court can get [some science wrong](#) despite having months to get the details down pat, as in the recent Myriad breast cancer gene patent case

Perhaps the answer is simpler—we just need more scientists in politics! How many scientists are there in the U.S. Congress? According to [this data](#), there are “2 physicists, 6 engineers, and 1 microbiologist (all in the House, with the exception of 1 Senator who is an engineer)” as well as one astronaut in the Senate and 33 members of Congress from a healthcare field. This is in contrast to the “169 Members of the House (38% of the House) and 57 Senators (57% of the Senate)” who are lawyers. Another potentially surprising fact: “21 Members of the House and 1 Senator have no educational degree beyond a high school diploma.”

Obviously, it's good to have a mix of backgrounds and expertise in Congress, but perhaps if politicians had more colleagues that could explain to them how science is done and how to interpret scientific studies, we'd have more enlightened science policy. Now why aren't there more scientists in politics? That's a question for another day!

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