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From Lab to Legislation: Communicating Science to Congress

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After finishing my physics PhD in 2003, I spent a year as a science policy advisor to U.S. Representative Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts. My duties included summarizing developments and giving advice to Rep. Markey on issues ranging from nuclear proliferation to space exploration to radiological materials security. I worked with him and his staff on writing legislation, speeches, press releases, and opinion columns, and met a variety of scientists, diplomats, military officers, and government officials along the way. In this talk I will discuss some of the lessons learned by myself and the 30 other scientists sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to spend a year working in Congress. As quickly became clear, it was less our specific scientific knowledge that was valuable to the legislators we worked for, but rather our ability to communicate with both scientists and politicians, and to help make each group a little less inscrutable to the other. Although many scientists would like to ignore it, the impact of Washington policymakers on American science is enormous, and programs like the Congressional Science Fellows are vital in helping to make that impact as positive as possible.