Science Societies

Playing the long game: Reflections from Capitol Hill

By Aaron Lee M. Daigh

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From l to r: Aaron Daigh, Kenneth Carroll, and Russell Lutter in front of the U.S. Capitol during Congressional Visits Day in February 2026.

This month, SSSA President Aaron Daigh reflects on his experience at Congressional Visits Day (CVD) in Washington, DC last month and, more broadly, on the relationship between how scientists and legislators think and why that gives him hope in the long run.

In last month's column, I wrote about our board of directors' kickoff, our award nominations, and the energy building across our Society's grassroots efforts. I also previewed what was shaping up to be a busy month on Capitol Hill. Well … the month delivered. This column is a reflection on what happened during Congressional Visits Day (CVD) and, more broadly, on something I have been thinking about for a while now—the relationship between how scientists and legislators think as well as how that relationship gives me hope in the long run.

Back from the Hill

On February 24–25, SSSA joined our sister Societies, ASA and CSSA, in Washington, DC for our annual CVD. Over 50 of our members, including students, early career scientists, certified professionals, seasoned researchers, and advocacy experts, walked the halls of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, visiting congressional offices across 27 states to advocate for agricultural research funding.

As in past years, the heart of our message centered on two competitive discretionary funding programs and one multiplier program. The first is the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), which is the USDA's primary competitive grants program for extramural research and a cornerstone for agricultural and environmental science across the nation. For its entire history, AFRI has been funded well below the $700 million that it is currently authorized at and recently received a cut down to $435 million in the fiscal year 2026 appropriations bill. The second is the Agricultural Advanced Research and Development Authority (AgARDA)—modeled after the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to fund high-risk, high-reward research. Because AgARDA is still funded at such a low fraction of what Congress originally authorized in the 2018 farm bill, it has yet to support a single research proposal. The third is the multiplier program, the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR), established by Congress in the 2014 farm bill, where every federal dollar is matched with at least one dollar from private or non-federal sources.

Our visits were strategically timed to align with the congressional budget and appropriations cycle, and we were not alone. Complementary advocacy groups, including the Council for Agricultural Research, Extension, and Teaching (CARET), part of the Association of Public Land Grant Universities (APLU), also converged on Washington, DC that same week to advocate for capacity funds (i.e., formula funding), which are non-competitive funds appropriated directly to land grant institutions based on statutory formulas (e.g., programs like Smith-Lever for extension and Hatch Act for research). Together, we made the case that investing in agricultural and natural resource research delivers extraordinary returns. As I noted in my February column, every dollar invested in this research generates approximately $17 or more in economic value for the public (Daigh et al., 2025), a figure consistent with peer-reviewed meta-analyses reporting benefit-cost ratios ranging from 10:1 to over 30:1

depending on methodology (Alston et al., 2011; Hurley et al., 2014).

Our conversations on the Hill were not just about dollars and returns. We also came to share the kinds of ideas emerging from agricultural and environmental research that can revolutionize how we grow food, safeguard our civilization against the most dire of circumstances, and address the real needs and fears we hear from producers and stakeholders across the country. The numbers make the economic case, but it is the stories behind those numbers, the science itself and the people it serves, that make the human one.

In addition to the office visits, we held our inaugural House Soils Caucus reception for the 119th Congress, which brought together congressional elected members, their staff, and our CVD participants for some great conversations and educational demonstrations highlighting the vast and vital world of soil science. A special thanks to Luther Smith, Caroline Sowinski, Julie McClure, Dr. Clay Robinson, and everyone who helped to bring this event to life. The energy was encouraging, and I believe these kinds of face-to-face interactions make a lasting impression both for the scientists and those working on the Hill.



The inaugural House Soils Caucus reception for the 119th Congress took place during Congressional Visits Day in February 2026. ***Top:*** *SSSA President Aaron Daigh welcomes attendees.* ***Bottom:*** *SSSA member Clay Robinson gives educational soil demonstrations.*

One thing that stands out from this year's visits, and from past years as well, is that investment in agricultural research is not a politically controversial topic. Support for capacity and discretionary funding in this space crosses both sides of the aisle and both chambers of Congress. This position is encouraging but also presents a unique challenge. Because agricultural research funding is not controversial, support risks falling to the

wayside among the louder, more politically charged debates that dominate headlines and consume the mental bandwidth of elected members and their staffers. One of our central goals during CVD is to make sure we do not get left behind. We want to keep this quiet area of bipartisan, bicameral agreement visible and moving forward, even when the noise around it grows louder.

Skeptics in common

Being on Capitol Hill always sparks reflection. There is a narrative out there, sometimes spoken and sometimes just felt, that scientists and politicians are fundamentally at odds. That scientists push a specific agenda. That politicians are more skeptical of what may or may not be true. That neither side trusts the other. I have been thinking about this a lot, and I want to offer a different perspective.

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Let us start with what it means to be a scientist. Science is the systematic study of evidence, and for a scientist, caution and consistency are our most vital commodities. A good scientist is usually the one who is most skeptical of it all … and I mean

everything. This includes our own data, our own questions, the history of how concepts have come to be, and the underlying assumptions carried forward with that historical context. The sociologist, Robert Merton, called this concept “organized skepticism” and identified it as one of the defining norms of science as an institution. We revisit ideas over and over, not because we doubt everything for the sake of doubt, but because there is always more context to uncover, always more to learn, and there is always some level of doubt that we know exists.

Now, no individual scientist is perfectly objective. We can become attached to our own theories, and the history of science includes examples where researchers resisted new evidence that challenged long-held ideas. Yet what makes science remarkable is that the enterprise, through peer review, replication, and open debate, enforces a collective skepticism that no one person can sustain alone. The best among us lean into that process and find genuine satisfaction when a concept they once held as true turns out to be incomplete or just fundamentally wrong because that means we just got closer to the real truth.

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Now consider the role of a legislator. Members of Congress, at their best, are constantly weighing competing interests, questioning the reliability of claims brought before them, and trying to discern what is in the best long-term interest of their constituents. In that sense, they too are professional skeptics. They are asked to scrutinize proposals, challenge assumptions, and exercise caution before committing public resources. That sounds a lot like what we do every day in a lab or in the field. Partisan dynamics can complicate this picture, and political scrutiny does not always serve the same purposes as scientific scrutiny. However, the institutional design of the legislative branch, with its requirements for deliberation, broad input, and compromise, reflects many of the same epistemic instincts that govern good science.

It is interesting, then, to think of situations where politicians and scientists find themselves at odds on some kind of policy narrative. Social scientists have studied this dynamic for decades. Nathan Caplan described the relationship in 1979 as the "two communities" problem where scientists and policymakers operate in separate worlds with different languages and standards of evidence even when they share the same goals (Caplan, 1979). Recent data from the Pew Research Center indicate that these divides persist. In a 2024 survey of nearly 10,000 U.S. adults, 76% expressed confidence in scientists to act in the public's interest, but a sharp partisan gap has become noticeable: 88% of Democrats compared with 66% of Republicans.

> Perhaps most relevant to advocacy, only 45% of Americans consider scientists to be good communicators, a nine-point drop in five years (Tyson & Kennedy, 2024). If we cannot convey the 'why' behind our work in ways that resonate across audiences, the skepticism we encounter should not come as a surprise. Yet there is also reason for optimism. Democrats substantially underestimate Republican trust in science, and

more broadly, partisans overestimate ‘outgroup’ hostility by roughly a factor of two (Druckman & Schulman, 2024; Moore-Berg et al., 2020). Correcting these misperceptions experimentally have been shown to increase the likelihood of bipartisan agreement (Druckman & Schulman, 2024). We may be more aligned than we realize, but the perception of a divide can itself become an obstacle.

What I have observed during these fly-in efforts is consistent with that insight. The situation on the ground is far more nuanced. When you sit across from a congressional staffer or a representative and share the story of your research—where it started, what it means for a farmer in their district, or how it protects a watershed their constituents depend on—the walls tend to come down. In those conversations, we are not adversaries. We are neighbors comparing notes on the same big questions.



Scott Hutchins, USDA Under Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education, and Economics, speaks during a training during Congressional Visits Day, February 2026.

The long game

Here is where I think the parallel between science and Congress becomes most striking and reveals another parallel between industry and the executive branch. In

business, industry, and corporations, the pace can often tend to run at a breakneck speed. In politics, the executive branch can operate in a similar fashion, implementing executive orders at a pace that parallels that of a start-up company. Competition thrives in this environment and gets attention, but it also carries great risk: only a few win, and the majority lose. It is a subsystem that aims to make room and provoke innovation through disruption to existing establishments, and it is not designed for patience.

Science, on the other hand, plays the long game. We exercise consistency and caution with the idea of discovering fundamental laws that are thought to be timeless. We find ways of using knowledge and materials grounded in those underlying principles in a way that sustains humanity and all that is of nature, far into the foreseeable future. Agricultural research, in particular, has been described by economists as “slow magic” because its benefits compound over lag periods that can span decades before their full impact is realized (Alston et al., 2023). Every good experiment is an act of patience, and every well-tested conclusion is a small brick in a structure meant to endure.

The legislative branch, when working well, shares this quality. Congress writes laws intended to go forth further than any single elected term, any one set of fads or hot topics, any passing wave of headlines. The appropriations process, the farm bill, the authorization of programs like AFRI and AgARDA are frameworks designed to endure across changing political landscapes. They are, by design, cautious and deliberate. They require broad input, competing perspectives, and compromise; not unlike the peer review process that governs our own scientific publications.

However, the temporal logics of science and legislation are not identical. Congress operates on shorter election cycles and builds policy incrementally while science's timescale can span generations. However, the aspiration toward durability is shared, and it gives me hope. When scientists and legislators sit across from each other during events like CVD, they are engaging in a shared tradition of careful deliberation about how American dollars are invested into the future of humanity and the world that we know as our only home.

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Of course, science and the legislative branch are not the only players at the table. The executive branch plays a central and powerful role in shaping the direction of research funding and policy, and its relationship to the long game is more variable. Research in political science has documented significant swings in federal science policy across administrations with executive orders that can rapidly enable or constrain entire fields

of research only to be reversed by a successor (Thrower, 2017). Some administrations lean into the deliberate, sustained investments that mirror the scientific process while others operate more like that start-up company, moving fast, prioritizing rapid change, and accepting the risks that come with that speed. Neither approach is inherently wrong, but the variability means that as scientists, we need to find ways to communicate key information effectively with the executive branch regardless of which mode is in operation.

When the executive branch is playing the long game alongside us, we should reinforce this partnership. When the executive branch is moving at breakneck speed, we need to adapt and be ready to make our case clearly and quickly. Meeting the quickened pace with concise, compelling evidence for why sustained investment in agricultural and natural resource science is a necessity, not a luxury. The ability to adapt our message without compromising our principles is, I think, one of the most important skills our community can develop.



Participants at Congressional Visits Day 2026 pose for a group photo.

Talking with each other, not past each other

I do not want to come across as naïve, nor look past pressing disputes in society. There are real tensions, and the current political and fiscal landscape presents genuine challenges for science funding. I should also highlight something else: there are likely always some players in these conversations who are not honest or acting in good faith. In any policy arena, there are voices that can suddenly overtake a narrative by being pushy, running with alternative agendas, or leveraging the complexity of an issue to steer outcomes toward narrow interests rather than the broad public good. Historians of science have documented this pattern extensively, from manufactured doubt campaigns around the health effects of tobacco to recent efforts aimed to obscure climate science through well-funded networks that deploy specific strategies to undermine scientific consensus (Oreskes & Conway, 2010; Supran et al., 2023). Deceit happens in science, too, when results are cherry-picked or when conclusions are overstated. No community is immune to corruption, and pretending otherwise would undermine the very credibility we are trying to build.

I think the deeper tension, the one that affects most of us who are acting in good faith, comes from a conundrum in how we express trust. Scientists express trust by questioning … by pushing back on claims until the evidence holds up. Politicians, in their own way, do the same. They question proposals, challenge spending justifications, and demand accountability. Both sides are, in a very real sense, exercising the same instinct of deep caution about committing to something that has not been fully tested. The risk is that these two forms of skepticism collide instead of complementing each other. We talk past one another when we mistake each other's caution for opposition. A scientist might walk away from a meeting feeling that a legislator did not trust the research. A legislator might walk away feeling that the scientist was pushing a pre-

defined conclusion. Yet, if we can reframe that dynamic and see that both parties are doing exactly what their roles demand, then we open a door to real partnership.

Whether we are talking about scientific evidence, public perception, or what is in the best interest for every person and every environment among our constituents and our neighbors' constituents, the goal appears to be the same. Even though we may disagree on absolute priorities, our general tactic of caution, consistency, and longevity is strongly shared.

We are neighbors

Ultimately, what I keep coming back to is that scientists and legislators are neighbors. We may not always agree on priorities, and we will likely never see every issue through the same lens. However, out shared instincts for caution, commitment to asking hard questions, and investment in the long-term wellbeing of our communities are bonds that matter. They are bonds that strengthen every time we show up on Capitol Hill, pick up the phone, or write a letter to our representatives. Neighbors may not always agree, but they certainly should be there for each other in times of need. Right now, at a time when agricultural and environmental research funding faces real headwinds and public trust in science is evolving in complicated ways, being there for each other matters more than ever.

I want to thank every SSSA member who participated in CVD this year, whether you walked the halls of Congress, contacted your representatives from home, or simply told a colleague about the value of what we do. Every act of engagement counts and puts weight behind our message. And if you have not yet been part of a CVD effort, I encourage you to consider it. Applications for the Future Leaders in Science Award and the Excellence in Advocacy Award open each fall, and the experience is one that

stays with you.

As we move further into the year and closer to CANVAS 2026 in Portland, I look forward to continuing this conversation about what our science means, who it serves, and how we can best advocate for our discipline's future. We are a community that plays the long game, and that is exactly the kind of community the world needs.

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