

Advocating for science gains urgency

In response to the US government's attacks on science, professional societies intensify efforts to prep scientists to lobby effectively.

Funding delays and grants not being renewed have forced Phillip Anderson to lay off several engineers this year from the W. B. Hanson Center for Space Sciences at the University of Texas at Dallas. If the budget isn't restored, he says, "it will be catastrophic."

So, when Representative Keith Self (R-TX) visited the university in August, Anderson jumped at the opportunity to show him around the space sciences center. In line with the representative's interests, one of the issues Anderson emphasized was the impact of space weather on national defense.

In advocating for science, says Abigail Viereg, an astrophysicist at the University of Chicago, "you have to find the right angle and find staffers that care about science." In June, she contacted Representative Jake Ellzey's office to urge him to support NASA's Columbia Scientific Balloon Facility in Palestine, Texas, which is in the Republican's district—and which, per President Trump's proposed budget, would be shuttered. Viereg, whose team was in Palestine for 10 weeks this spring and summer to prepare a balloon mission for launch from Antarctica in December, emphasized to Ellzey's staffers that the facility is NASA's main pathway to qualify technology for flying to space and to train people. She also noted its importance for the local economy.

Scientists and scientific societies are more engaged than ever in advocating for science, says Joel Parriott, the American Astronomical Society's director of public policy. "We've had around 3000 individuals contact congresspeople this year," he says. "It's not enough, but it's a dramatic increase."

The scientists are writing letters, making phone calls, publishing op-eds, and visiting and hosting lawmakers. A main focus of their activities is convincing Congress to pass a budget for fiscal year 2026 that supports science. "If the cuts to



RESEARCHERS ARE KNOCKING ON LAWMAKERS' DOORS to make the case for funding science. These five scientists, part of a larger group organized by the grassroots Heliophysics Coalition, visited the offices of 12 congressional members from Arizona and Texas one day in June. From left are Gregory Szyzko (PhD student, Rice University), Robert Ebert, Sophie Phillips (PhD student, Arizona State University), Kristopher Klein (professor, Lunar and Planetary Laboratory, University of Arizona), and Phillip Anderson (director, W. B. Hanson Center for Space Sciences, University of Texas at Dallas). (Photo by Jasper Thomson.)

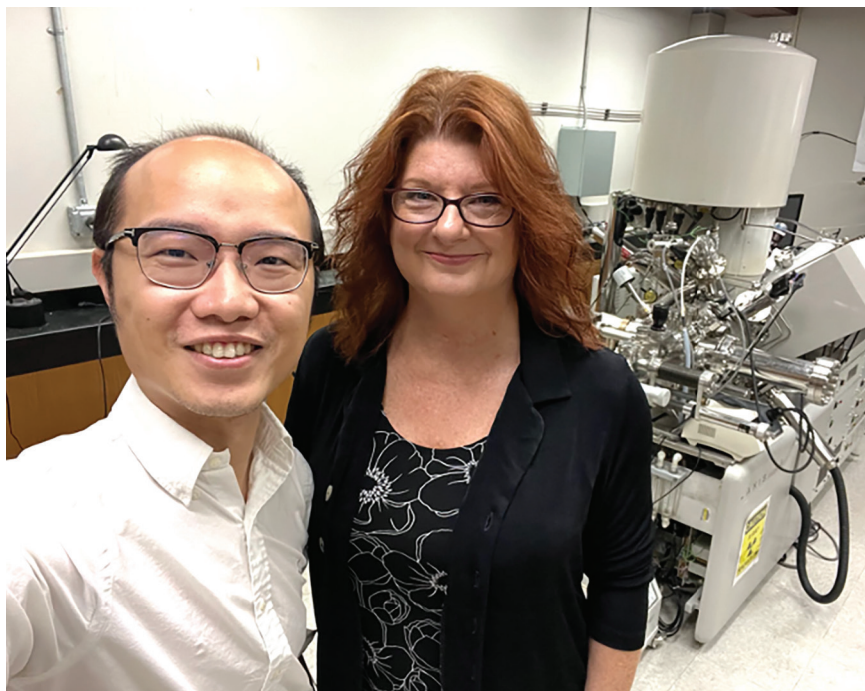
the science budget are anywhere close to as deep as President Trump proposes," says Jonathan Bagger, CEO of the American Physical Society (APS), "there is not much reason to discuss other issues."

APS created 50 customized letter templates to make it easy for members from every state to write their representatives and show what budget cuts would mean locally. So far, says Charlotte Selton, who manages the society's advocacy programs, members have sent more than 10 000 letters to Congress. APS also helps members craft op-eds; as of press time, members had published six.

Gay Stewart is a physicist and direc-

tor of West Virginia University's Center for Excellence in STEM Education. In writing the op-ed "Gay Stewart: STEM funding crucial—and at risk," which appeared in the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* on 31 July, she followed APS's guidance to promote science generally and to give specific personal examples. "Investments in science have pushed the country forward. That includes welcoming scientists from around the world to be a part of our ecosystem," says Stewart. "My mind boggles that we have to do this advocacy."

APS is focusing on 11 Republican senators who are in 9 red or purple states



YI LIN (left), a tenure-track condensed-matter physicist at the University of Alabama, and Kelli Wolfe, a field officer for Alabama Senator Katie Britt, when she toured his lab in 2024. The two met again this summer as part of the American Physical Society's focus on senators from red and purple states. Lin is a leading volunteer in APS's advocacy activities. (Photo courtesy of Yi Lin.)

and have a strong interest in science, says Selton. Those states are Alabama, Alaska, Indiana, Kansas, Maine, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, and West Virginia. APS, sometimes jointly with other professional societies, has trained teams of scientists to meet in person with senators and their staffers. Strategically, she says, meetings are the most effective means of advocacy.

It's impossible to measure the success of the science community's advocacy efforts, Selton says. But Senate bill 2354—the Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2026—was marked up with better numbers than the president's budget, she says, and of the senators targeted by APS, “seven were on the committee and supported the bill. That's a positive sign.”

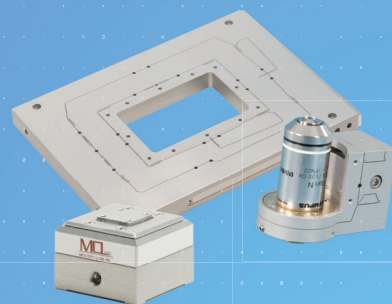
Some scientists are making their voices heard independently. Stanford University physicist Giorgio Gratta says he has long been “obsessed” with conveying the importance of science to the public. “Ultimately, Congress reacts to the interests of their constituents,” he says. To anyone who will look, he's showing slides he's made that pair images of applications with images related

to the basic research those applications grew out of: Albert Einstein working on general relativity, juxtaposed with GPS; Isaac Newton bending light with glass, shown beside optical fibers; and the like. Gratta would like to see the images installed on highway billboards. The goal, he says, is to make “powerful connections that people remember.” Increased public appreciation of science, he adds, “is required to maintain the robust government support that has served the US so well over the years.”

In June, Anderson spent a packed day on Capitol Hill as part of a group of 55 space scientists from 30 institutions. The day was organized by the Heliophysics Coalition, a grassroots advocacy group in which the American Astronomical Society is involved. The scientists met with staffers from the offices of Republican Senators Ted Cruz and John Cornyn of Texas, among others. “Those that had familiarity were supportive. And those that didn't were surprised at just how bad the president's budget request was and how it would hurt science,” says Anderson. “I came away from the meeting thinking, ‘Our hope is the Senate.’”

Toni Feder

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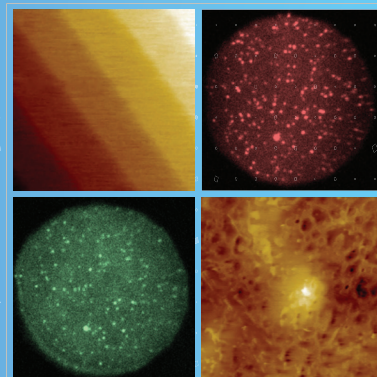


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