

# A word in the right place

Lobbyists give an impetus to causes that can offer a significant advantage on Capitol Hill. But how do they go about getting their way? **David Goldston** examines their role in securing science funding.

On 9 February I had breakfast in Washington DC with four scientists who played a leading role in the recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, to give them advice about testifying before Congress. The invitation came from the lobbying firm that represents the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), a privately run, largely government-funded institution in Colorado with which some of the researchers were affiliated. In the room, the number of lobbyists nearly matched the number of scientists. As well as a lobbyist from the private firm that represents NCAR, the institution's own government-relations person was present, as was someone from the government-affairs arm of the US Department of Commerce, for whom some of the scientists work and which provides some of NCAR's funding.

The scene captured the central role played by lobbyists in Washington — of particular relevance as the annual battle for the federal budget gets under way. Given the need to scramble for every available cent in a tight budget, the mind-boggling range and complexity of competing federal activities, and the byzantine nature of the appropriations process, lobbying is an unavoidable aspect of relying on funding from Washington.

Lobbyists concerned with funding for the physical sciences, for example, were in high gear last month while Congress was working out how much money to provide for the rest of the current fiscal year. For a while, it seemed as though funding for agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the Department of Energy's Office of Science would be frozen at last year's levels. But the resolution that emerged in late January from the House of Representatives, and that seems likely to be passed by the Senate, granted increases to those agencies (see *Nature* 445, 572–573; 2007).

How did that happen? For a start, groups representing disciplinary societies and research universities began a letter-writing and meeting campaign directed at key players on spending bills including Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (Democrat, California) and Senate majority leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada). A critical feature was



## PARTY OF ONE

that the letters came not just from university presidents, who would be expected to seek funding, but also from business leaders who have not always been willing to make federal research funding a top priority. A few chief executives of leading companies may also have put in calls to Pelosi, which is the ultimate lobbying step and one rarely carried out when it comes to science funding.

The point of this activity was not to set out new arguments for spending more money on science. The case for funding basic research — that it leads to technological innovation and hence to economic prosperity — has changed little since 1945. Moreover, novelty of argument is rarely an advantage when pressing leaders to make quick decisions. The historian Carl Becker once remarked that Thomas Jefferson omitted original ideas from the Declaration of Independence because nothing would have been more foolhardy than trying to galvanize world opinion using ideas no one had ever heard of before.

Rather, the point of the lobbying was to make political leaders such as Pelosi feel that business leaders — people with political and economic clout outside Washington — cared about the funding. Given that the Democratic leadership already backed the idea of increased research support, as did the president, the additional pressure was enough to push congressional leaders into finding some additional money.

Targeting just a few officials was sufficient. Most congressional actions occur because a handful of well-positioned representatives or senators champion them, and no one else (at least of significance) feels strongly opposed.

So getting Pelosi and a few key appropriators to push for higher funding was enough to carry the day.

That's not to say that a lobbyist for basic research can neglect the rank-and-file membership of Congress. Broad, even if shallow, support is needed to ensure continued funding. But there's no substitute for having a few ardent champions in the right places. That's how the ball got rolling on doubling funding for the National Institutes of Health in the late 1990s, with Senate supporters such as Arlen Specter (Republican, Pennsylvania) and Tom Harkin (Democrat, Iowa).

Like it or not, lobbying is now a necessity. Congress expects to hear from those who rely on government funding and is prone to interpret silence as lack of concern. Politicians can cut programmes — even those they view as beneficial — because they didn't hear from the proponents at a time when other interest groups were pressing their case.

That's one reason that interest groups waste no time in putting out press statements on the president's budget proposal as soon as it is released. Indeed, coalitions of industry and universities have been meeting for weeks to plot a strategy to push for funding increases for 'competitiveness' research in fiscal year 2008. The Washington representatives of schools and firms are supplementing their own work by hiring lobbying firms either for their strategic acumen or for their connections to key politicians. They envision a campaign through this budget cycle that is likely to involve not only calls and meetings 'inside the Beltway', but also advertisements and other ways to make competitiveness a compelling issue to voters nationwide.

Science advocacy groups are wise to try to avail themselves of every political tool. Competition for fiscal 2008 funding is likely to be intense even though congressional Democrats are generally more sympathetic than Republicans to domestic spending. Given the congressional Democrats' pledge to reduce the deficit, the overall budget 'pie' is not likely to be much larger than it was under the Republicans, but far more interest groups will be lobbying for a piece of it. ■

**David Goldston is a visiting lecturer at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.**