

Science for a Healthier Future and Just Democracy

Election 2020

The 2020 elections are ramping up this year amidst an unprecedented public health crisis, and we must ensure that we elect legislators that will safeguard our health and safety by supporting strong scientific capacity in our government. But, to make that possible, we must use science to help spotlight the dangers of weakening voting rights and suppressing equal participation in our democracy, as well as the need for real policy reform for a better voting system. The current public health emergency also shows how health and safety concerns disproportionately impact marginalized communities. We need to hear from candidates about how they will prioritize using science to dismantle the structural racism that results in these disproportionate impacts and then advocate for more equitable public health and safety outcomes.

It is vital for candidates running to represent you to know that their constituents care about defending science's ability to better protect the public during this and future health, safety, and environmental emergencies. Using this guide and our sample candidate questions, you can make a difference by leveraging your scientific expertise or knowledge of local issues (check out more tips on how to do this at the end of this guide). Join scientists and advocates throughout the country to demand that candidates across the political spectrum articulate how they intend to protect constituents who are harmed when our federal scientific capacity is weakened, scientific integrity is threatened, and fair access to voting and election participation is limited.

In this guide, you will learn three ways to get your candidates and the public talking about science for public good and a healthier democracy:

1. Speaking Out at Town Halls and Other Virtual Events
2. Getting Your Candidates Talking on Social Media
3. Putting a Spotlight on Science and Elections in Local Media Coverage

By bringing critical issues to the public spotlight and getting candidates on the record, we can raise the political cost of pursuing an anti-science agenda for the Trump administration and Congress—and help make sure the next Congress understands their responsibility as our nation recovers from the pandemic.

Tell us about your efforts holding candidates accountable—let us know how it went at www.ucsusa.org/reportback.

Speaking Out at Town Halls and Virtual Events

Events like town hall meetings and public forums are great opportunities for you to not only bring public attention to an issue but also have direct contact with your elected officials. Many of these events are being held online or over the phone to keep communities safe, making them more easily accessible for many people. By asking a question at these events that requires a response on the spot, you can sometimes get your policymaker's position on the record. Our partners at Science Rising have a guide to [engaging with candidates](#) to help you get the most out of your interactions. And here are some of our tips for effective engagement with elected officials at public events:

- **Keep tabs on events where your candidates will appear.** Check out their webpage, follow their Facebook or Twitter pages, and sign up for their email newsletter. You can also search for events by district or zip code at the [Town Hall Project](#) website.
- **Consider planning your own event and inviting candidates.** Identify a clear purpose for the event, and then check out Science Rising's suite of resources to help you plan an online event [here](#). The fact that these events are virtual means it is easier for candidates and constituents to attend.
- **Be clear and prepare.** To make a powerful impression, draft a question or comment that hits the "three Cs": concise, concrete, and compelling. Your goal is not to share a lot of information—it's about piquing the interest of the legislator or community to further delve into the issue. In just a few sentences, do the following:
 - Introduce yourself as a constituent and comment on your relevant expertise on the issue or specific experience in the community
 - State why the issue matters and what's at stake for the local community. If you have a petition or resource to deliver to make your point, be sure to have that ready, and get the contact information of a staffer to whom you can email it.
 - Make a specific "ask"—the action or stance you want the candidate to take.
 - If your goal is focused on getting them to take a specific position, frame it as a yes or no question. e.g. "Will you commit to...".
 - If your goal is to get them saying what they will do on an issue, frame it directly as "What actions will you take to..."
- **Submit your question ahead of time.** Virtual events often have a form you can use to submit questions ahead of time. Look for these at least a day before the event.
- **Use Facebook Live or Instagram Live to get your message out to candidates and other viewers.** Some candidates will use Facebook Live or Instagram Live and look to the comments section for questions from viewers. Type your question into the comments section when prompted. Even if the candidate does not answer your question directly, other viewers will see your question, raising the profile of the importance of federal science in the public discourse.
- **Position yourself as a resource.** If possible, connect with the legislator's staff to introduce yourself as both a constituent and a technical expert or as having unique experience in the community, reiterate your request, and offer any support or resources that would help educate the staff. This is a great opportunity to build personal relationships.
- **Follow up.** Be sure to record the candidate's response as close to verbatim as you can, to include that in the follow-up. Share relevant information such as fact sheets or summaries of technical reports in a follow-up email. Or, if you were unable to ask your question at the meeting, a follow-up email with the legislator's office

or a post tagging them on Twitter and using the event’s hashtags gives you another chance to ask it. See our social media section below for more ways to engage with candidates during and after virtual events.

- **Keep it up, and invite others to join!** Getting your candidate on the record at townhalls and public appearances can take a few tries. To share the load (and the fun), invite others to join you in scouting for events, prepping sample language, submitting questions for the Q&A segment of events ahead of time, and watching the events. The more people who submit a question, the better the chance of it being addressed by the candidate.
- **Use social media to amplify your participation in virtual events.** Live-tweeting a virtual townhall or other event can help get your message out to people following along on social media. Tweet your question to the candidate, as well as any notable statements candidates make. Recruit others to do the same, as this is even more impactful, and amplify each other’s posts. You can even make a virtual party out of watching with friends online and tweeting simultaneously. Research the event ahead of time to see if they will be using any specific hashtags, and find the candidate’s Twitter handle so you can tweet at them during the event. See the section below for more tips on using Twitter to get the conversation going around science and democracy this election season.

SAMPLE COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS FOR AN EVENT

“Hi, I’m a [city/ town] community member, [“local voter” if you are], and [mention of your standing as a scientist or as having first-hand experience with an important community issue, topic, and local institution of which you’re a part, if applicable]. Now more than ever, we see the importance of listening to scientific experts in the face of a national health crisis. We see the effects of the pandemic in our community, such as [give a few-word example]. As a scientist/science advocate, I need to know how you plan to ensure that science is central to government decision-making and that we have the robust federal government scientific workforce to provide that scientific advice as we move forward as a country and start to recover from the pandemic.”

“Hi, I’m a [city/ town] community member, [“local voter” if you are], and [mention of your standing as a scientist or technical expert, if applicable, or community member, and local institution of which you’re a part, if applicable]. Now more than ever, we see the importance of listening to scientific experts in the face of a national health crisis and preserving our democracy by making voting safer and more accessible. As a scientist/science advocate, I need to know how you would help reform our elections systems to ensure that elections are safe, fair, and accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Getting Your Candidates Talking on Social Media

There is often buzz on social media leading up to elections, making it a lively space for public discussions where candidates can keep a pulse on conversations and topics that are of interest to their constituencies. Members of Congress and candidates increasingly use these platforms to monitor and interact with people, making this prime real estate for hooking onto a conversation or issue they are showing interest in and catching their attention for a response. After an event, candidates (or their staff) will often check social media to gauge the public's reaction to their appearances and statements.

Check out UCS' Social Media Coordinator Diana Vasquez's answers to frequently asked questions about how to get the attention and response of a candidate on Twitter:

1. How can I easily follow what my candidates are interested in talking about and plug into the conversation?

Create a Twitter List for your candidate and set some consistent times to check that list and see what they're tweeting about. Anywhere they are talking about a related topic—a topic where you can smoothly pivot to science and community safety—tweet at them. Check out trending topics and hashtags; consider whether you have anything to add.

TOP TIPS

- If you're not sure if a hashtag is trending, try using [hashtagify.me](https://www.hashtagify.me) as a tool to ensure you efficiently use hashtags that have the greatest visibility.
- If you want help keeping track and monitoring your lists, try using a social media monitoring tool like Hootsuite or Tweetdeck.

2. How do I get my candidates' attention?

Connect the action request or question about which you want to get them on the record with a popular local issue or a conversation they are already engaging in on Twitter.

When tweeting at them, be sure to Tag them (i.e., include a person's "handle" in your message), and encourage and tweet at others to join you in tweeting at the candidate with the same or similar question. The more people speak out about the issue, the stronger the signal is to candidates that this is an issue they cannot ignore.

If the candidate is speaking at a public event, use that event to "live tweet" at them. They are often following Twitter to gauge the public's reaction to their appearances and statements, and this is a moment where you might catch their eye.

TOP TIPS

- If you're starting a tweet with a person's handle, be sure to include a "." as the first character of the tweet (i.e. directly before the handle). This ensures this tweet isn't interpreted as a reply by Twitter.
- Try including a graphic or a link to a relevant article. Tweets with images get twice the engagement than those without.

3. How can I engage in a way that's nonpartisan?

Make your tweets to the candidate focused on the issue, how your community is impacted, and who is most impacted-- and not about them personally, their background, or their political party. Engage all the candidates for a given race (of all parties) in the same manner.

4. What advice do you have for crafting a compelling message on Twitter about science-based safeguards?

Be concise, concrete, and clear in your ask. The more transparent and personal you are in what's at stake for you, the more compelling the tweets will be. Use accessible language—try to avoid jargon.

To help build a collective voice around the issue, repost and retweet content from people you want as allies in your outreach. Where local organizations or institutions may be supportive, you can tag them to join in sharing their story and work or amplifying your tweets.

Communicate with consistency—the more you post/tweet, the more likely you will be to build a following. That means not being afraid to post about the same subject repeatedly. But change your use of words and pictures to retain the interest of people who have seen previous posts.

OTHER RESOURCES TO BE A TWITTER-SAVVY ADVOCATE:

- Watch the UCS Science Network webinar “Social Media for Scientists” for more in-depth advice at <https://youtu.be/cXQLih3uY0>.
- Read “What Makes a Good Tweet” on the Hootsuite blog at <https://blog.hootsuite.com/how-to-get-twitter-followers>

SAMPLE TWEETS FROM UCS’ SOCIAL MEDIA COORDINATOR DIANA VASQUEZ:

- **[Insert candidate handle here]**, how will you employ scientific advice to help communities recover from the impacts of #COVID19?
- **[Insert candidate handle here]**, #COVID19 has shown why we need government decisions based on scientific evidence. How will you restore science to government decision-making and ensure we have a robust federal scientific workforce to provide that advice?
- **[Insert candidate handle here]**, what should Congress do to help ensure the safety and accessibility of our elections this fall?
- **[Insert candidate handle here]**, can I count on your commitment to fulfill Congress’ responsibility of holding the Executive branch accountable for any efforts it makes to cut science out of decisions about public protections?

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Putting a Spotlight on Science and Elections Reform in Local Media Coverage during the Election

One way you can reach candidates directly while also engaging your community is through your local paper’s editorial page, one of the most-read pages in the paper. Candidates strive to track the issues of importance to their constituents and be responsive to the electorate’s concerns. That’s why candidates’ campaigns tend to keep a close eye on media coverage, including letters-to-the-editor (LTEs) , in their local papers—and why writing an LTE or an op-ed to your local or regional newspaper is a very effective means of putting a critical topic in the public eye. You can search for more information on papers in your area [here](#).

With a strong LTE or op-ed, you reach both a wide public and the candidates for elected office with the same effort. And even if your letter is not published, it is important for educating and persuading editors. Receiving letters on a given topic flags for editors that it may be worth their time covering that issue—both on the editorial page and in news articles. It clearly expresses the issue’s importance to the community. Here are our tips for writing an effective letter:

- **Respond to an article in the paper or candidates’ public statements.** Many papers require that LTEs reference an article that ran in the paper within the past few days. Some papers do occasionally print LTEs noting a lack of coverage. And during elections, writing about science-based issues, like the COVID-19 response, could be a hot-button topic. Consider: Are there any local or captivating factoids you can use to educate the public, a candidate statement to fact-check, or an important issue important to your community not adequately addressed by candidates?
- **Be nonpartisan.** Your LTE can help educate candidates and fellow constituents on nonpartisan, science-based policy solutions. It is best to avoid calling out candidates by party association. Remember, all candidates can and do learn from this public education.
- **Make it concrete with a clear question or call to action.** It is important to get a candidate on the record about her or his policy stances. Asking questions of candidates participating in an election race can encourage clearer policies. And outline the actions you want the candidates to take.
- **Keep it local.** Candidates want to know what issues their potential constituents care about most. Be specific! If you can, highlight the local impacts that a current or proposed policy would have on your community. Refer to the election race as specifically as possible. If the letter includes a candidate’s name, in almost all cases staff will give him or her the letter to read personally.
- **Keep your letter short, focused, and interesting.** In general, letters should be under 200 words; stay focused on one (or, at the most, two) main point(s); and get to the main point in the first two sentences. If possible include interesting facts, relevant personal experience, and any local connections to the issue. If your letter is longer than 200 words, it will likely be edited or not printed. Include your word count at the top of your letter.
- **Write the letter in your own words and embrace your standing as a scientist constituent or science advocate.** Editors want letters in their papers to be original and from a reader. Be sure that you take the time to write the letter in your own words, including embracing your perspective as both a local scientist or advocate and member of the community. And, if you have relevant qualifications to the topic you're addressing or are a member of a notable institution or professional community, be sure to include that in your letter. If you are a health professional writing about a health issue or an engineer writing about infrastructure —share that information up front.
- **Follow the paper’s directions.** Information on how and to whom to submit an LTE is usually found right on the letters page in your paper or on the newspaper’s website. This often includes guidelines on what the paper looks for in LTEs. Follow these guidelines to increase the likelihood that your letter will be printed. If you can’t find the information you need, simply call the paper and ask how to go about submitting a letter in response to a recently published article. This also means including your name, address, and daytime phone number; the paper will contact you before printing your letter.

TEMPLATE LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

To the editor:

I read the story, **[insert title]**, with great interest. I was **[pleased/disappointed]** to **[see/not see]** ample discussion and coverage of science in decision-making about the COVID-19 response by the candidates in **[insert election race]**.

It is important for all candidates in **[race]** to speak up about the importance of science in federal government decision-making, especially in confronting this public health crisis. This is an issue that elected officials must be ready to address, as it impacts **[insert location]** by **[insert reason]**, and **[insert reason.]**

[If asking for a specific action or commitment, include the following] Families of **[city/town]** deserve to know anyone willing to represent them will **[insert action/stance here]**. **[Insert why this matters to you as a scientist/science advocate and a member of the local community.]**

As an engaged voter, I look forward to hearing more about what the candidates have to say on how they will ensure that science is central in federal government decision-making and that we have a robust federal scientific workforce to provide us with the best scientific advice to demonstrate that they are committed to protecting science's ability to protect our community.

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

[Hometown or zip code, Professional title (if OK with your employer's policy)]

Word count: **[#]**

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EMPHASIZING THE LOCAL IMPACTS OF SIDELINING SCIENCE

The more concrete and responsive to local people or issues you can make your message about why candidates for Congress need to protect science-based decision-making, the more likely it is that you'll get their attention. We have linked to some resources below that include information that may help illustrate risks to communities in your district or highlight specific problems that demand science-based decision-making in response:

- Webpage: [Voting in the Year of COVID-19: How to Ensure a Free, Fair, and Safe 2020 Election](#)
- Blog: [Flooding & COVID-19 Set to Collide](#)
- Blog: [Extreme Heat and COVID-19](#)
- Blog: [Maps Showing Hardest Hit Communities by COVID-19](#)

Additionally, reaching out to local leaders and activists to learn about their campaigns, and amplifying their message or coordinating a message together, can be a powerful way to engage with candidates that centers the experience and knowledge of those most impacted. Connect the issues in your community, from worker safety to racial equity in public health challenges, with ways science-based policy can address them. The effects of the pandemic have been far-reaching with disproportionate impacts on communities of color, and it is important to uplift community voices to candidates running to represent you.

INFORMATIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT ATTACKS ON SCIENCE-BASED POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

The Center for Science a Democracy (CSD) at UCS has been hard at work in watchdogging the coronavirus response and demanding a science-based response from the Trump Administration and current Congress, to protect the public's health, safety, and a fair election.

Leverage the team's research for useful examples to communicate with candidates what is at stake with the Administration's onslaught of attacks on science – and why incoming elected officials need to call out and put a brake on this anti-science agenda:

- Webpage: [This Election, Be a Voice for Science and Democracy](#)
- Webpage: [UCS' Attacks on Science tracker](#)
- Webpage: [Voting in the Year of COVID-19: How to Ensure a Free, Fair, and Safe 2020 election](#)

- Report: [Protecting Public Health in the 2020 Elections](#)
- Report: [Endangering Generations: How the Trump Administration's Assault on Science is Harming Children's Health](#)
- Blog: [The Price We Will Pay for Suppressing CDC Scientists During Pandemic](#)
- Timeline: [23 Years of Attempts to Restrict Public Health Science at EPA](#)
- Blog: [Trump Administration Axes Coronavirus Research](#)

For any questions about how you can effectively engage in the elections, email sciencenetwork@ucsusa.org.

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