SPSSI on the Hill: Engaging the Public in Climate Change Action

In May, 2015, SPSSI continued its congressional seminar series as Janet Swim of Pennsylvania State University spoke to policy-makers about how to effectively communicate about one of the most pressing issues of our time: climate change. In an event sponsored by Senator Bernie Sanders, Dr. Swim addressed three critical issues: knowledge, motivation, and physical and social context.

While many Americans understand that climate change is occurring, they have only a vague sense of what is happening and what can be done about it. They don’t really know what is driving the change and therefore how it can be addressed; nor do they appreciate climate change as an integrated system. Dr. Swim argued that increasing knowledge—disseminated through organizations like the National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation—is important in creating and sustaining a more confident public, willing to discuss climate change, and to support climate change-related policies.

Knowledge, however, is not enough. If not framed correctly, knowledge can have little, or even negative, effects on public opinion. For example, both politicians and journalists are prone to use “crisis framings,” such as Time Magazine’s 2006 cover article, “Be Worried. Be Very Worried,” which can make individuals feel powerless and insignificant. Or they frame it in economic terms, stressing potential financial gains or losses from climate change, which can decrease altruistic behaviors. Dr. Swim presented research, much of it conducted by the Frameworks Institute, showing that an emphasis on responsibility and stewardship of natural resources is most helpful in affecting climate change attitudes and behaviors. For example, local-level interventions, such as bike-share programs, are seen as manageable and actionable, and often encourage people to take larger action to combat climate change.

Finally, Dr. Swim showed how we can encourage climate-friendly behaviors by altering our physical and social contexts, for example, by creating bike lanes or by installing solar panels on buildings. These kinds of “nudges” can be helpful in making it easier for people to make pro-environment decisions.

Swim also took the opportunity to meet with the offices of Senator Whitehouse and Representative Van Hollen, co-chairs of the Bicameral Task Force on Climate Change. She discussed the importance of framing their messaging correctly, so as to maximize the effectiveness of their speeches and other advocacy efforts.

To learn more about this event, or about SPSSI’s policy-related activities, please contact policy director Gabe Twose at gtwose@spssi.org.