

PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY
Legislative Update

From Nowhere to the Oval Office: A Call for Action

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The Communiqué was first published during President Clinton's first term. The United States was involved in the Persian Gulf War. The Democratic Party controlled the House of Representatives and the Senate. Ten years later, President Bush is in the White House. The US is preparing for war with Iraq. The Republican Party controls the House and the Senate.

The bad news is that issues like affirmative action, immigration, disproportionate poverty, and health disparities are still with us. The good news is that APA's Public Policy Office (PPO) staff is still lobbying on these issues and has made some progress. However, as a grassroots presence, ***Congress has not been hearing from APA psychologists of color on these important issues.***

As a result of the 2002 elections, we anticipate that there will be very few legislative victories on our issues over the next two years. However, we are not giving up. We need to focus on what we are going to do to face the challenges before us. On your behalf, PPO staff will fight on Tuesday, lose on Wednesday, and fight another battle on Thursday. However, now more than ever we need the support of our APA membership. Washington, DC-based organizations are only as good as their ability to mobilize their membership. As the Congress debates critical social issues, it is essential that they hear from the ethnic minority psychologists among their constituents.

One former lawmaker, **U. S. Representative Lee Hamilton** of Indiana, described the process by which members of Congress decide how to cast their votes on legislation as follows:

Constituents are the most important influence on a member's voting record. Whether members are agents of their constituents' wishes or free to exercise their own judgement is a classic question in a representative democracy. But all members ask themselves on each vote where their constituents stand on the issue. On those issues where the constituency expresses strong preferences, the member is almost certain to favor them.

In 2000, PPO staff were able to successfully engage the Georgia, Massachusetts, California, and Oklahoma state psychological associations to promote enactment of the *Minority Health and Health Disparities Research and Education Act*. As you may know, the legislation was introduced as a biomedical bill by members of Congress from Georgia and Massachusetts. Although PPO staff lobbied those members' staff to include social and behavioral science in the bill, it was not until PPO staff contacted those state psychological associations (and provided them with a one-pager of background, talking points, and contact information) did the staff relent and make the necessary changes to the bill.

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For example, Georgia State Psychological Association member **Nadine Kaslow, PhD** was in Washington, DC, when she received the PPO Action Alert. She made an appointment with her member of Congress and went over the bill line by line with him. He added “and behavioral” every place that “biomedical” appeared. The bill eventually passed the Senate, but it was held up on the House floor by two members from California and Oklahoma, who alleged the bill was a “quota bill.” Staff from those congressional offices would not take the calls of PPO staff. PPO staff contacted those state psychological associations and was told when following up “to stop the calls, the Congressman supports the bill.” Former APA President **Raymond Fowler, PhD**, was proud to be present in the Oval Office when President Clinton signed the bill into law.

As a result of the election, we are redefining what constitutes a victory. It might be a member of Congress’ town hall meeting in which an APA member is spotlighted. It might be a congressional briefing in which APA members are panelists. It might be establishing a relationship with a member of Congress who had not previously considered psychology as a resource on these issues. A victory might be 20 calls from APA member constituents to a member of Congress expressing their appreciation or disappointment for a particular vote. Remember Washington, DC-based lobbying will not be as important as grassroots lobbying over the next two years. PPO staff is not asking you to learn all the subtleties of public policy or to make public policy advocacy your full-time job. Rather, we are asking you to make an occasional phone call when we need backup in your district and/or state. The stakes are high, and our challenges are great.

We can best respond to them by holding members of Congress accountable for their votes, providing our friends in the Congress with our research as they advocate for us, and seeking common ground with our opponents when we can. PPO is ready to fight on behalf of public interest concerns. Are you ready to join us?