Write a Letter to your Congressional Representative

An often-misunderstood fact is that, as a constituent, you can affect how your Congressional representative views space science policy. As was described by Casey Drier, our guest lecturer from the beginning of the semester, Planetary Science is a sub-field where letters, phone calls, and in-person visits are an especially effective means of communication with your Congressman (they read and are interested in letters on this topic). Congressional staffers will read your letters (or take your phone calls) and then forward them to your Congressman as appropriate.

You assignment is to write a letter to your Congressional Representative reflecting your opinion on a topic that we have covered in class. Your topic could be broad, such as the overall budget of the planetary exploration program, or focused, such as the issue of providing extended mission funding to MER or Cassini. The objective of this exercise is to help you craft a focused correspondence that explains a complex issue in a clear and concise manner. As was described in the syllabus, your initial draft will be graded and returned to you with comments from both Ryan and myself. You will then have the chance to submit revised version of the letter as your fourth long paper assignment. While it is not required, you are encouraged to mail the final draft to your Congressman.
When writing your letter, please remember to:

- Be concise (high signal-to-noise, no chatter)
- Be exceptionally clear
- Effectively use shortcuts to focus their attention (bullet points, bold text, short paragraphs, no run-on sentences, etc.)
- Use formal English syntax (see Strunk and White)

If you don’t already know, the first part of your assignment should be to determine who your representative is (i.e., where you vote). This includes researching which committees he sits on. For international students, email Dam Maffei. Representative Maffei is a Democrat from Syracuse who recently visited Cornell and is very interested in spacecraft exploration.

Example topics include, but are certainly not restricted to:

- NASA’s declining budget for spacecraft exploration (1.2 vs 1.5 billion)
- Extending missions that are currently operations
  - Cassini vs. MSL
  - MER
- Why NASA should target a particular body for exploration (Europa, Titan, ...)
- Whether NASA is or is not following the Decadal Survey
- Your opinions regarding the stated Decadal Survey priorities
  - Your feelings regarding Mars Sample Return and the other missions on the flagship priority list.
  - Your feeling on the New Frontiers target list.
  - Your feelings regarding NASA budget allocation (e.g., declining Research and Analysis funds)
  - Your feelings regarding Titan’s position in the Decadal Survey

For the purposes of this assignment, a collection of handouts and background material (including a sample letter) has been posted on the website.

Good luck!

As always, please feel free to come to either Ryan or myself with questions.