Grassroots movements focus on a policy issue and are driven by individuals, usually volunteers. While expensive television ads and large-scale publicity campaigns can bring attention to a political issue, it’s grassroots movements—those in which like-minded individuals come together in a joint advocacy effort—that often have the greatest impact.

Grassroots efforts are one of the most effective tools to influence the policy process. Congressional leaders want to hear from constituents because their opinions are what determine elections. Members of Congress prioritize which issues they focus on based on what their constituents say is important to them. Because of this, it’s easy to see how a strong grassroots campaign could have a tremendous impact on the political landscape.

Ok, so grassroots efforts can bring about change. So what? What does that have to do with the research community? Well you don’t have to be a Nobel Laureate in economics to know that America is facing some serious economic challenges. As I am writing this article, Congress and the president are negotiating a comprehensive deal to avert the “fiscal cliff” and control federal spending. No matter the outcome of these negotiations, one thing is clear: government spending must be curtailed. Further cuts to the research and development enterprise will likely mean less funding for government agencies that support your research, like the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Less funding means fewer grants and fellowships. Budget negotiations in Washington could have a very real impact on you and your lab.

In these times of fiscal austerity, it becomes abundantly clear just how important grassroots efforts can be. We’ve all heard the expression, “the squeaky wheel gets the oil,” right? Well, it’s high time the research community starts squeaking! At the 2012 ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Annual Meetings, the science policy office launched a new grassroots campaign asking members to sign a petition urging Congress to avoid across-the-board budget cuts, known as sequestration. Sequestration could result in a loss of $12.5 billion in federally funded R&D and have devastating effects on agriculture and natural resources research. ASA, CSSA, and SSSA wanted to show Congress that there are literally thousands of students, researchers, and practicing professionals who understand the value of research and are asking Congress to protect that investment.

During the meeting, we had more than 300 individuals sign the petition. Shortly thereafter, the petition was opened up online, and members of ASA, CSSA, SSSA, the American Society of Plant Biologists, and the National Association of Plant Breeders were invited to sign. In just under two weeks, more than 1,300 signed the petition, asking Congress to protect research funding. That’s some serious squeaking!

The science policy office has been encouraged by the energy and enthusiasm displayed by ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members over the issue of sequestration. In addition to the petition signees, dozens of individuals also expressed interest in future science policy activities. The 2013 Congressional Visits Day has had more than double the number of applicants than ever before. These are all signs that our members are excited to engage with the science policy office and continue to grow our grassroots efforts. With your help, our grassroots will grow even stronger!

Member Matthew Brown (North Carolina State University) places a pin on the map after signing the sequestration initiative during the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Annual Meetings.