

U.S. BUDGET

Congress Limits NSF Funding for Political Science

“How often can you trust the government to do what is right?”

That question appears on the American National Election Studies survey, which has probed the attitudes of U.S. voters on a range of topical issues just before and immediately after every presidential election since the 1950s. U.S. scientists are starting to ask themselves the same question after Congress inserted language into the final 2013 spending bill (see next page) last week that jeopardizes the future of the election survey and other political science research funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF).

The language, the handiwork of Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK), prohibits NSF from spending any money on political science “except for research projects that the [NSF director] certifies as promoting national security or the economic interests of the United States.” Passed by voice vote in the last hours of a week-long debate on the spending bill, the amendment is the first time such an attack on the discipline has cleared both houses of Congress. On 26 March, it became the law of the land.

“Political science is a subject that doesn’t merit the same investment from taxpayers as the hard sciences that will further the nation’s competitiveness and economic development,” says Aaron Fobes, a spokesman for Coburn.

“Studying the Senate filibuster [a reference to a previously funded NSF award] does nothing to help a veteran who has lost a limb or to find ways to protect the nation’s computer networks.” Fobes says that any certifications, to be posted on NSF’s Web site, will allow the public to hear NSF’s rationale for funding any particular proposal.

The language puts NSF, which provides 95% of the government’s overall support for academic political science, in a difficult position. Should it continue with business as usual for the \$11 million program and risk antagonizing an influential legislator? Or should it fund only those projects that clearly meet the criteria Coburn laid down, on the assumption that Coburn is hoping NSF will shut down the program?

It’s a pressing issue: One of two yearly review panels is scheduled to meet in May to pass judgment on roughly 100 research proposals, with awards to be made over the summer. (Success rates are typically 15% to 20%.) The next deadline for submissions is mid-August, after which the review process begins anew. Coburn’s amendment would seem to support only a narrow swathe of subjects that researchers want to study, although some political scientists say that nearly everything they do ultimately enhances the nation’s economic well-being and its national security.



Persistent. Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK), shown at a 2009 hearing, has long questioned the value of federally funded political science research.

NSF is just beginning to address these questions, says Myron Gutmann, head of the social, behavioral, and economic sciences directorate, the parent unit for the political science program. “The NSF director has asked us and the Office of [the] General Counsel to examine the legislation and provide options about how we might better manage our programs under the terms of this legislation,” Gutmann says. “But we haven’t done that yet.”

Gutmann notes that “NSF’s charter is to fund basic research across all disciplines. And my starting point is to honor that charter with respect to how we manage our programs.” Asked for a timetable for the review, Gutmann says, “We’re going to do it right. . . . We will have an answer in time to make good

decisions on the proposals that are pending.”

Many scientists believe that Coburn’s amendment could undermine the entire U.S. research enterprise if it enshrines the idea that Congress can do a better job of selecting the most deserving research proposals than a panel of experts in a particular field. “The American research enterprise has flourished precisely because of this Nation’s commitment to independent peer-review of grant proposals, without political interference,” says John Holdren, the president’s science adviser, in a statement to *Science*. “Legislatively imposed restrictions on an entire class of research do not serve the national interest.”

Former NSF Director Neal Lane, a Democrat, calls the amendment “an assault on all science” and urges the agency “not to give an inch.” Lane, a physicist who served as President Bill Clinton’s science adviser after 5 years as NSF director, asserts that “many Republicans want to kill any science they can get their hands on because it produces results that they don’t want to hear.”

Criticism of Coburn’s amendment crosses party lines. “The idea of labeling hard and soft sciences doesn’t make any sense to me,” says Arden Bement, appointed by Republican President George W. Bush first to lead the

National Institute of Standards and Technology and then NSF. “Some of the hardest science is done by the so-called soft sciences,” says Bement, a materials scientist whose career spans academia, industry, and government. “The real issue is complexity, and human beings are the most complex systems in the world.”

Bement also throws in Coburn’s face the frequent criticism from conservative legislators that Democratic administrations are trying to “pick winners and losers” and that the free market should determine which research is worthy of support. “It strikes me as a huge dichotomy that the same members of Congress who are so adamant against picking winners and losers have done exactly that in this case,” says Bement, who left NSF in

2010 to become director of the Global Policy Research Institute at Purdue University.

The American National Election Studies (electionstudies.org) runs one of two large ongoing studies funded by NSF's political science program. (The General Social Survey, run by the University of Chicago, is the other.) The election survey was first fielded in 1952 and has been copied by dozens of nations since then, says Vincent Hutchings of the University of Michigan. He's a principal investigator for the survey, done jointly with Stanford University and currently funded by a 5-year, \$10 million NSF grant that runs through 2014. "It's become the gold standard for understanding how your democracy works," Hutchings says.

The survey's most valuable element, he notes, is its long time series. "That stability allows us to ask the same question to a national representative sample—like voters' trust in government—and understand whether it has gone up or down over decades."

The hourlong survey, conducted mostly in person, has helped scientists understand basic concepts such as party identification and its relationship to voter turnout. And while Hutchings says the survey's scientific rigor has been the litmus test for ongoing NSF support (he's awaiting a call for proposals this spring to support work on the 2016 elections), he also believes that it could meet Coburn's narrow definition. "How a country thinks about its political system is certainly a component of national security," he says.

The amendment technically applies only to NSF grants made during the rest of the 2013 fiscal year, which ends on 30 September. But unless Congress passes NSF's 2014 spending bill on time, a vanishingly rare occurrence these days, the guidelines would extend into the new fiscal year. (After that, Congress would have to renew it annually.)

Jim Granato, who co-managed NSF's political science program in the early 2000s and is now director of the Hobby Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston in Texas, thinks that Coburn may achieve his goal in the short run. "I think people will be risk-averse," says Granato, who has a proposal pending before the spring panel. "Writing a proposal takes a lot of time, and NSF already has two criteria that proposals must meet—intellectual merit and broader impacts. I expect what they'll do is call up NSF and ask [program officer] Brian [Humes] what they should do."

"I feel sorry for Brian," Granato adds. "It's going to be total chaos."

—JEFFREY MERVIS



A little help ... Senator Mikulski, seen here visiting a NASA facility in her state, provided some relief for the agency.

U.S. BUDGET

U.S. Science Agencies Finally Have (Reduced) Budgets for This Year

U.S. research agencies finally know their budgets for the rest of the fiscal year after Congress completed work last week on a bill to fund the government through 30 September. Although the Senate managed to reduce the pain for some programs, only one has more to spend than in 2012.

Agency heads are now in the process of finalizing 2013 spending plans, which must then be approved by Congress. A few agencies, notably the National Science Foundation (NSF) and NASA, received more money—and were given more flexibility—than they would have had under the spending bill approved by the House of Representatives. (The bill is known as a continuing resolution [CR] because it basically freezes agency budgets at 2012 levels.)

However, no agency has been spared the \$85 billion, across-the-board reduction known as sequestration that went into effect on 1 March. So every civilian agency, even the "winners," must subtract 5% from whatever Congress has now given them, a cut that is effectively 9% because the reduction must be absorbed with only 7 months left in the fiscal year.

Confused? You're not alone. Sequestration, the first year of a decadelong process to slice \$1.2 trillion from the federal budget, wasn't supposed to happen because both parties agreed that its mandatory provisions were "stupid," if not "devastating." But the Republican-led House inserted it into its version of the \$984 billion CR and passed it on 6 March. The Senate, despite its Democratic majority, accepted the House approach and instead made some tweaks at the margins before passing its bill on 20 March. Less than 24 hours later, the House signed off on the Senate version and then recessed for a 2-week Easter break.

The Senate pulled NSF, NASA, and six Cabinet departments out of the CR and gave them a regular appropriations bill, thanks to an agreement between the chair of the appropriations committee, Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), and its ranking member, Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL). That agreement, for example, allowed Mikulski to increase the appropriation for several NSF programs beyond what they would have received under the CR and offset more than half of the \$356 million sequester, bringing NSF's overall 2013 budget to \$6.88 billion. Unfortunately, that's still \$150 million below its 2012 level.

Similarly, NASA received \$45 million more for planetary sciences than it would have gotten under the CR. That's a boon for further Mars exploration and for planning a possible visit to Jupiter's moon Europa. In the one exception, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) will get a boost of about \$300 million, with funding from a Superstorm Sandy relief bill approved earlier this year offsetting the impact of the sequester. The final legislation also gives NOAA greater budget flexibility in building new weather satellites and upgrading research aircraft.

In contrast, the National Institutes of Health remains under the continuing resolution. Legislators tossed it a \$67 million crumb, but that's hardly enough to ease the pain of the \$1.5 billion sequester for researchers whose work is dependent on the \$31 billion agency.

More details from the final 2013 spending bill are available at <http://scim.ag/CR-2013>. And there's no rest for the budget-weary: The Obama administration's wish list for science will be included in the president's 2014 budget submission to Congress, due out the week of 8 April.

—JEFFREY MERVIS