

Attacks on US federal funding of the social sciences date back to the 1940s and will continue to intensify

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In the wake of the restrictions placed on US political science funding, [Jeanne Zaino](#) examines the extent to which social scientists should be concerned on future eligibility of funding. More recent events in Congress suggest the attacks on funding will not only continue but will intensify. It is also worth remembering that these attacks are just the latest in a long standing effort by conservatives to eliminate funding for social science dating back to at least the mid-1940s.



The American Political Science Association ([APSA](#)) recently hired lobbyists to advocate in favor of lifting restrictions on the National Science Foundation's (NSF) funding of political science research. This is just one of the many tactics the organization has taken in response to the [Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013](#) which was signed into law in March and included an amendment limiting funding for political research.

One of the questions that arose in the wake of the bill's passage is whether there is any real reason to be alarmed? Perhaps APSA and others who have argued for swift and decisive action are overreacting? After all, the amendment as originally proposed by Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) would have eliminated all funding for political science research. After some discussion, however, Coburn introduced a modified amendment which instead of eliminating all appropriations merely restricted support to projects which promote the national security or economic interests of the United States.



Senator Coburn. Image credit: Senate Democrats (CC-BY)

To some, this watered-down version of the amendment seemed like a victory. After all, it includes an exception that is broad and, at least on its face, should be fairly easy to meet. In order to be eligible for funding, all scholars have to do is make the case that their work is in the nations' security or economic interests. As [Steve Saideman from Carleton University notes](#), "[m]y first take on this is that this will simply add one page to an NSF application...I don't think it would take much work for an articulate grant-writer to suggest how climate change is an issue that affects the economy or that democratic representation might have national security implications."

Saideman has a point. If this is the best Coburn can do there may not be much to worry about. If this exception is interpreted broadly, most scholars should be able to maneuver through it quite easily and the impact on funding should be minimal. The problem with this reasoning, however, is that it is based on a number of 'ifs' and 'should be's'; suppositions that are unfortunately challenged by both the historical record and recent events.

When it comes to the exception itself, Saideman is right that we don't have much to worry about if it is interpreted broadly. If, however, the exception is interpreted narrowly, it may be harder for many political scientists to make the case for funding. During a June 2011 House Subcommittee hearing, for instance, Peter Wood argued in favor of targeted cuts to the social, behavioral, and economic sciences. Among the projects and programs Wood named were any "infected by post-modern ideologies" including those "designed to advance women and minorities in the social sciences" and "sustainability-education programs."

If the exception is defined narrowly scholars working in these areas would likely have a difficult time securing funding. And they are not alone. Assuming optimistically however, the amendment is broadly defined, that may not

be good news for researchers either. In fact, it may create a backlash. As Howard Silver, Executive Director of Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) points out, if this occurs who is to say that congress won't decide that the agency is ignoring their intent? In fact, it may give conservatives exactly the type of ammunition they need to argue for additional cuts, restrictions or oversight.

While a few months ago it may have seemed a bit alarmist to suggest members of congress would insert themselves into the workings of the NSF in this way that is no longer the case. This became very clear a few weeks ago when Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX), Chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology, sent a letter to Cora Marrett, acting director of the NSF. In the letter, Smith expressed "concerns regarding some grants and approved by the Foundation and how closely they adhere to the NSF's 'intellectual merits' guideline." As a result, Smith requested "detailed information" including reviewers' comments, on five approved social science projects. Two weeks later, Marrett rejected Smith's request, instead offering to brief committee members on how grant proposals are reviewed and how the agency makes funding decisions. This latest episode suggests that there is reason to be concerned about the extent to which members of congress are willing to insert themselves into the NSF's activities and proposal review process.

If the security/economic interest exception is broadly defined members who see this as an affront and a deliberate attempt to thwart congressional intent are unlikely to sit idly by. Finally, it is worth remembering that Smith and Coburn are not alone. They are just the latest in a long line of conservatives going back decades who have spoken out in favor of restricting or eliminating funding. The list includes, but is not limited to: Rep. Robert Walker (R-PA), Sen. Kay Bailey-Hutchison, (R-TX), Rep. Adrian Smith (R-Neb.), Rep. Mo Brooks (R-AL), Rep. Dennis Rehberg (R-MT) Sen. Jeff Flake (R-AZ), and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA), among others.

It is also worth remembering that these attacks are just the latest in a long-standing effort by conservatives which dates back to at least the mid-1940's. At that time, Vannevar Bush, Director of the U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development under Franklin Roosevelt published *Science, the Endless Frontier* (1945). In that text he provided an important justification for public funding of scientific research but elected not to include the social sciences in definition of 'science' on the grounds that this type of research does not contribute to the nation's social and economic progress. Following Bush's lead, the newly formed NSF – created by congress as an independent agency in 1950 – did not support political science research for more than a decade. It wasn't until 1965 that the political science program was formally created. After a brief fifteen year respite, political science funding came under attack once again during the early years of the Reagan administration. This has not only continued, but intensified, in recent years.

What differentiates the vote in March from earlier efforts is that it was successful. And while there is an exception in place, history and more recent events suggest the attacks will not only continue but intensify. For these reasons, it is dangerous for scientists who support federal funding to assume otherwise.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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