

NSF Cedes Little Ground on Political Science Reviews

Ordered by Congress to curb its funding for political science research, the National Science Foundation (NSF) has decided to hew as closely as possible to business as usual.

In March, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) won passage of an amendment to a government-wide spending bill for 2013 that ordered NSF to fund only those research projects in political science that promote national security or economic development. Many scientists feared that NSF, in response, would decide to scrap its entire \$10 million political science portfolio because of the difficulty of separating out proposals that fit Coburn's narrow language.

Instead, [today NSF announced](#) that it would simply add Coburn's two criteria to the two long-standing metrics, intellectual merit and broader impacts, that NSF has used to judge the quality of any grant. Reviewers would start with the traditional criteria and "provide input on whether proposals meet one or both of the additional criteria" allowed as exceptions under the spending bill.

As in the past, the announcement explains, those comments will be used by program officers to decide which research proposals to fund. The current round of proposals up for review were submitted on 15 January, 2 months before the Coburn language was adopted, so none of the proposals specifically take into account the questions that it raises.

NSF may create additional review panels to address the new criteria, explains Myron Gutmann, head of the social, behavioral, and economic sciences directorate that includes political science. "It might be sequential," Gutmann says. "One panel may consider the traditional criteria, while another addresses the Coburn criteria. Our goal is to do merit review as well as possible. We want to take the time to do it right."

The new policy reflects the fact that "we take the congressional language very seriously," Gutmann adds. "We've thought long and hard about the new language, and we want to make sure that reviewers do the same."

Greg Koger, a political scientist at the University of Miami in Florida, has followed the debate and welcomes NSF's decision to push ahead with its normal review process. "While it is outrageous and disturbing that political science has been singled

out for extra scrutiny and scorn," he writes in an e-mail to *ScienceInsider*, "the language of the amendment seems to allow a broad interpretation of national security and economic interests, as long as [NSF] is willing to explain and certify the merits of projects along these lines."

In addition to training reviewers to apply the new criteria, NSF is making one other concession to the Coburn language. "[D]ue to the provisions stipulated by [the spending bill]," the announcement states, "funding decisions for Political Science proposals may be delayed." Those decisions would normally be made this month, Gutmann says, with the money awarded before the 2013 fiscal year ends on 30 September. But he says that NSF has the flexibility to push the award announcements into FY 2014 if necessary.

The next round of political science research proposals is due on 15 August, and Gutmann says that NSF hopes to let researchers know about any changes to the review criteria before that deadline. The Coburn language applies only to 2013 spending, but Congress could extend it into 2014 as part of a temporary spending bill that preserves current guidelines for federal agencies.