

Politics and Peer Review

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Politics and Peer Review

ROBERT E. GROPP

Scientists, nongovernmental organizations, and even politicians have warned for years that federal policy-makers are politicizing science to achieve political goals. Surveys show that many scientists in some federal agencies feel that scientific findings have been discounted in management decisions in response to political pressure. Until recently, these allegations were leveled primarily against the political leadership of environmental, natural resource management, and public health agencies. Recent events, however, suggest that the politicization of science in the United States has spread beyond regulatory agencies.

In June 2005, as the US Senate deliberated climate change legislation, Representative Joe Barton (R-TX) prepared to send letters to the National Science Foundation, the International Panel on Climate Change, and three prominent climatologists (whose analysis of tree rings, ocean sediment, and polar ice, published in *Nature* in 1998, warned of global climate change) requesting information ranging from raw data and methodologies to financial records. Barton, chairman of the powerful House Committee on Energy and Commerce—and a leading beneficiary of campaign contributions from the oil and gas sector—is among Congress's most strident opponents of climate change mitigation policy. According to some policy observers in and out of Congress, Barton's request for information was burdensome and intrusive, little more than an attempt to stall action on climate change policy by questioning the integrity of scientists and the scientific process.

Fellow Republican Sherwood Boehlert (NY), chairman of the House Science Committee, contends, "My primary concern about your [Rep. Barton's] investigation is that its purpose seems to be to intimidate scientists rather than to learn from them, and to substitute congressional political review for scientific re-

view." Alan Leshner, chief executive officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, told Barton that "your request for highly detailed information regarding not only the scientists' recent studies but also their life's work, gives the impression of a search for some basis on which to discredit these particular scientists and findings, rather than a search for understanding."

Such heated exchanges about the integrity of the scientific process deservedly draw public scrutiny, but concern over congressional interference with peer-reviewed research goes beyond how research findings are used to formulate policy: some in the scientific community, and in Congress, worry about the future health of the US research enterprise if Congress begins to manage peer-reviewed grant programs via amendment. In each of the last three years, members of the House of Representatives have considered amendments that would bar the National Institutes of Health (NIH) from awarding funds to specific grantees. The justification? The grants support so-called low-priority research.

In the last two years, Representative Randy Neugebauer (R-TX) has successfully attached provisions banning the NIH's National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) from funding grants that he argues fall "outside the mission set by NIMH." Neugebauer asserts that his amendments focus "funding toward serious mental health research."

In 2004, Neugebauer—who represents Lubbock, home of Texas Tech University—secured enough votes to block funding for specific NIMH grants. His amendment failed, however, when the Senate refused to agree to the provision. Showing his resolve, and with the support of conservative organizations such as Concerned Women for America, Neugebauer again took to the House floor in 2005. During consideration of the fiscal year 2006 spending measure for NIH, the

congressman again argued that NIMH is funding low-priority basic research rather than clinical research addressing important mental health issues.

Angela Sharpe, who heads the Washington, DC-based Coalition to Protect Research, hopes the Senate will again strip Neugebauer's amendment from the final legislation. Sharpe argues that "Neugebauer's effort to disregard the NIH's peer-review process, based on a narrow view of an institute's mission, has enormous potential to undermine the core principles of the research enterprise."

Setting aside the question of what constitutes the proper balance between fundamental and clinical research, Representative Jim Leach (R-IA), whose district includes the University of Iowa, recipient of one of the grants Neugebauer's amendment would end, says that Neugebauer's approach to managing competitive, peer-reviewed grant programs from the floor of Congress is risky. Leach opposed the amendment, at least in part because of its potential to establish a "precedent of political 'seers' overriding scientific peers."

Some policy analysts in Washington, DC, are not surprised by congressional forays into the management of peer-reviewed grant programs. Indeed, some beltway insiders are surprised that Congress has demonstrated as much restraint as it has, given the increasing frequency with which research programs are being earmarked in appropriations legislation (see www.aibs.org/washington-watch/washington_watch_2004_07.html). Moreover, as an agency's budget swells, the number of stakeholders paying attention to its programs grows. Sharpe warns, "As these types of political attacks on science continue, defending peer review and scientific integrity becomes even more critical."

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