

Motion presented to Faculty Senate May 7, 2013

Binghamton University Faculty Senate Resolution
National Science Foundation funding of political science and
on the necessity of peer review at the NSF

Whereas:

On March 20, 2013, the United States Senate approved Senator Tom Coburn's (R-OK) amendment to the Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013 that limits the use of federal funds in the National Science Foundation's Political Science Program to topics related to national security and economic competitiveness. The Congress passed this bill with the amendment intact and President Obama has signed the bill into law.

Whereas:

The Faculty Senate of Binghamton University, State University of New York, believes that politicians' efforts to single out certain disciplines for elimination threaten the integrity of the rigorous scientific review process that federal agencies use to fund research that advances knowledge. This action creates a *dangerous slippery slope* that makes all scientific research vulnerable to the whims of political pressure. We maintain that political science research is essential to well-rounded and comprehensive public debate in a democratic society and that research in political science are essential to a national research agenda. The elimination of political science funding will have wide-spread and devastating consequences for basic research on fundamental questions about peace, freedom, and democracy and on public debate over critical issues facing the nation and the world.

Whereas:

In 1950, when the United States Congress established the NSF, it wisely mandated that independent experts would evaluate the merit of projects to be funded by the agency. This principle of peer review safeguards the honesty of the research process. Peer-review has served the nation well in the advancement of research in science, medicine, the social sciences, and the humanities. The NSF has been able to sponsor innovative research that is advantageous to the United States because of its independence from political and commercial influence and because of its profound engagement with an open scientific community. It has become a worldwide model for the advancement of knowledge. Peer-reviewed research offers a way to advance dispassionately and fearlessly an understanding of our civil life and our politics, for the benefit of all. Such a process is essential to the advancement of knowledge and to a democratic society

Be it Resolved That:

The Faculty Senate of Binghamton University urges the United States Congress to restore the National Science Foundation's ability to fund research in political science based solely on the peer review of research proposals.

Furthermore, we urge Congress to support and maintain a scientific, autonomous system of peer review in the NSF that is free of political restrictions.

Defending Political Science at NSF

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*None of the funds made available by this Act may be used to carry out the functions of the Political Science Program in the Division of Social and Economic Sciences of the Directorate for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences of the National Science Foundation, except for research projects that the Director of the National Science Foundation certifies as promoting national security or the economic interests of the United States. **Coburn Amendment to HR 933***

On March 26, 2013, President Obama signed into law HR 933, the Continuing Appropriations Act that funds certain government agencies till the end of the 2013 fiscal year on September 30, 2013. The act included an amendment by Senator Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) to remove funding from the Political Science Program at the National Science Foundation. The amendment only allows for funding of political science if the Director of NSF can certify the research as “promoting national security or the economic interests of the United States.” It passed on a voice vote in the Senate. The House of Representatives accepted the Senate amendments and sent HR 933 to the White House. This amendment represents a major victory for conservative forces in the U.S. Congress who seek to politically control the scientific process and silence researchers who might reveal flaws or errors in the conservative agenda. This amendment undermines the integrity of scientific research in the United States in all disciplines and those of us who support academic freedom need to take action to reestablish this integrity.

The Coburn amendment represents the culmination and the first real success of decades of attempts by conservatives to control the scientific process and its inconvenient truths whether they are about global warming, the pedagogy of teaching reading, biological evolution or the disenfranchisement of minority voters. These attacks have consistently made the argument that scientific research is frivolous and a waste of federal money. These attacks began with Senator William Proxmire’s golden fleece award (1975-1988) that used silly sounding titles to decontextualize and trivialize significant research projects. Conservative politicians including Tom Coburn, have continued to use the silly title ruse to discredit research but taken the attack further to question the validity of the social sciences. Coburn specifically targeted political science in a press release where he said:

The University of Michigan may have some interesting theories about recent elections, but Americans who have an interest in electoral politics can turn to CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, the print media, and a seemingly endless number of political commentators on the Internet.

Coburn’s amendment was not the first conservative attempt to defund the social sciences nor is it the last. During debate in the House of Representatives last year, Representative Jeff Flake of Arizona introduced an amendment to the 2012 budget bill to defund all social science at the NSF. When that amendment failed he introduced a second amendment to defund political science and it passed 218 to 208. The amendment did not survive the Senate consideration of the bill. This last march, Senator Flake, supported Coburn in first offering an unsuccessful amendment to defund all social science at the NSF and then in the successful amendment to cut political science from the budget. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a recent speech to the

American Enterprise Institute promised to call for the elimination of all social science research at the NSF in the favor of “real” physical science and medical research.

Learned societies including the American Association of University Professors, The American Political Science Association, The National Coalition for History, The Consortium of Social Science Associations, The Association of American Universities and others have generated a plethora of protests to the defunding of political science at NSF (Google “political science NSF”). Many of them point to specific studies with silly sounding titles that led to real paybacks to the American people. These critiques consistently point out that the Coburn amendment violates the NSF’s legal charge to do basic research. They contend that the Social Sciences do “real” science and that social science research has genuine benefits for the country. Many point out that the real issue is not about money. Political science research makes up approximately 0.2% of the NSF budget of approximately \$7 bn. The total NSF budget would account for less than 0.1% of the federal deficit. This action saves no real money but will seriously impact political science because the NSF provides 61% of the monies available for such research in the United States. The Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Science web site offers an “Act Now” page where you can easily send prewritten messages to your senators and congress person opposing the amendment <http://capwiz.com/fabbs/issues/alert/?alertid=62537476>.

The basic question that now faces the faculty of the State University of New York both as individuals and our Faculty Senate is how we respond to this attack on academic freedom. Many have called on academics to do a better job of communicating our research to the public both about its rigor and its benefits. This is a good thing and I hope that we all will constantly strive to be better communicators. Being better communicators will certainly aid us in the public sphere and help us to advance our research. But, I also hope that we will not be as naive as to believe that people like Coburn and Flake assail us just because they are ignorant. We need to confront the fact that Conservatives have assailed science because they do not like the results of our research.

We might ask “why has political science been singled out for attack?” If critics are looking for silly titles, my own discipline of Anthropology offers far more easily ridiculed research projects than political science! Perhaps conservatives are still annoyed that scientific opinion polling by political scientists both before and during the last elections accurately predicted the outcome they so vehemently wished to deny? Political science is the discipline that most closely examines the political process and sometimes shows that the emperor has no clothes. Elected politicians hate it when people point out they are naked. Or perhaps, as some more sarcastic commentators have pointed out, because the lion’s share of NSF funding for political science was going to blue states and not red states. We should also remember that many of these same politicians who denied the validity of opinion polling in 2012 also deny global warming, biological evolution and the efficacy of the whole language approach to teaching reading. There can be little doubt that they will move to defund research they do not approve of in natural sciences once political science and the behavioral sciences are dealt with.

When the Congress established the National Science Foundation in 1950, it wisely safeguarded the integrity of the research process by mandating that independent experts evaluate the merit of projects to be funded. This model has served the needs and interests of the United States for over 60 years and served as a model for other nations. The Coburn amendment

interjects non-scientific criteria into the consideration of research. As the American Association of University Professors has pointed out "When politicians can defund research using non-scientific criteria, all scientific research is potentially chilled." This attack on the social sciences is just the first battle in an attempt to eliminate peer review and politically control the research process in the United States.

We as individuals and through our Faculty Senate can have an impact on this issue in New York. To do this we need to enter into the political process and try to directly influence our elected representatives to understand and support the value of scientific research in all fields.

Our campuses are important economic and cultural institutions in each of the Federal Congressional districts in the state. A sizeable majority of New York representatives to the US Congress (21 out of 27) did not support HR 933 the Continuing Appropriations Act (<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/113-2013/h88>). Five New York Representatives did support the bill with the Corburn amendment (Pete King NY 2nd, Michael Grimm NY 11th, Richard Hanna NY 22nd, Tom Reed NY 23rd, and Chris Collins NY 27th). More troubling four current representatives (Pete King, Christopher Gibson, Richard Hanna and Tom Reed <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/112-2012/h236>) voted in 2012 for the Flake amendment to defund political science at NSF. I would urge us both individually and as a group to write letters praising those representatives who have stood up for scientific research and challenging those who have opposed academic freedom. We should also ask our university presidents to enter into conversations with all of these representatives about the importance of academic freedom to the state of New York and the well being of our campuses.

What has been most disappointing in this process has been the actions of our Senators, Charles Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand. They failed us! Either one of them could have demanded a roll call vote on the Coburn amendment and did not. We need to let them know that we noticed their lack of will and demand that they support the social sciences, basic research and the principle of peer-review in all federally funded scientific research.

We stand at the edge of a very slippery slope that will destroy the scientific process in the United States if we do not step back. The current NSF budget only extends to the end of September so this issue will come up again and soon. Each of us needs to take an active role in forcing that step back. The SUNY University Faculty Senate should also take action on this issue. Minimally, we should pass a resolution in support of Political Science in the NSF and send it to all New York Congress Persons and Senators. The Faculty Senate should also consider other actions such as inviting our Senators or our Congressman to a fall meeting to discuss these issues. If we do not act, we may be bemoaning the defunding of all social sciences at NSF.