

Political Shifts Affect Science Funding

Although the U.S. election of 2000 provided no clear mandate for revising public policy, ensuing changes in the balance of partisan power profoundly altered the political landscape with especially unfortunate consequences for research funding. The nature, timing, and scope of the power shift have affected the allocation of federal R&D budgets and are influencing the research community's adaptation to a new political ecosystem.

The 107th Congress is the most evenly divided since the 83rd Congress in 1953–1955, the first half of Dwight D. Eisenhower's first term and the last time the Republicans controlled the White House and both sides of Capitol Hill. Closely divided congresses typically enact legislation on the basis of issue-based majorities, such as environmentalists or health advocates whose members cross party lines. This situation forces members to be even more deliberative than usual—dealing with big issues in small bites based on narrowly constructed coalitions. The 107th Congress appears likely to follow the same pattern.

Strong partisan reaction to President Bush's proposed tax bill is instructive in this regard. The president had promised a single, comprehensive tax bill. But, sensing an absence of early consensus on tax issues among Senate Republicans, the Democrats forced the administration to proceed piecemeal with its tax initiative by passing only one piece of the package—changes in tax rates—before addressing the thorny challenges of campaign-finance reform. However, the reluctance of the Republican majority in the House to hold public hearings or await release of the president's budget before approving tax-rate reform affirms the leadership's view that it has the votes and the party discipline needed to pass legislation without a bipartisan consensus on fiscal policy.

This pattern of division suggests we will not see prompt passage of large encompassing bills in other areas, including education, energy, or entitlement policy, such as Medicare reform. It also reflects the extent

to which tax legislation will set the pace and limits of budget allocations.

Tax cuts vs R&D

Passage of the sizeable tax cut will reduce the amount of discretionary spending available over the long term, an important objective in the president's efforts to reduce the size of the federal government. Almost two-thirds of the president's proposed \$1.96 trillion budget goes to pay interest on the national debt and to fund mandated entitlement programs, such as Social Security and Medicare. R&D must compete with defense spending, education, housing, highway funding, and other discretionary programs for its share of the uncommitted budget. How much Congress will reduce discretionary spending depends on the size of the tax cut and whether the economy can continue to generate surpluses.

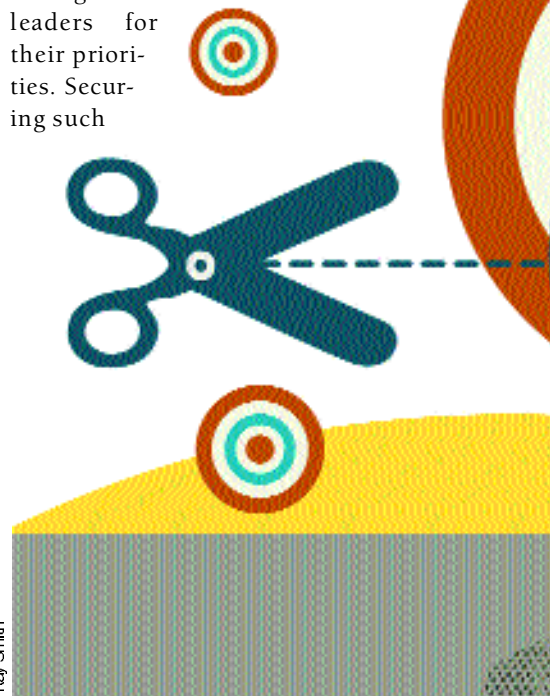
Because Republicans now control both the White House and Congress, the veto threat that President Clinton dangled over the legislative process is gone. In addition, the "Republican Revolutionaries" who seized control of Congress almost a decade ago now have a leadership more experienced, disciplined, and determined to govern.

The White House and the Republican-controlled House are united in their objectives to return surplus revenues to taxpayers and reduce the size of government. As a result, the House will likely make few, if any, significant changes in the budget proposed by the Bush administration. Even Republican leaders who advocate increased domestic or defense R&D, or both, have endorsed the administration's proposals to freeze or reduce those budgets in FY 2002, which begins on Oct. 1, 2001.

The timing of changes in the balance of power have made it difficult for the research community to influence the science and technology (S&T) policy agenda. The delay in confirming President Bush's election held up the administration's appointment of key S&T policy advisors, as well as its development of a new budget. Congress did not see a "bare bones" budget until late

February, and did not receive the final, detailed draft until April 9, three days after its members began a two-week recess. Delays in S&T appointments meant that few participants in the budget-preparation process had expertise or a vested interest in its effects on R&D.

As a result, critical decisions about R&D spending were made without significant input from the research community, which reduced prospects for effective appeal at the end. This absence of familiar and reliable S&T contacts in the Bush administration makes it especially urgent that research advocates secure support from a majority of congressional leaders for their priorities. Securing such

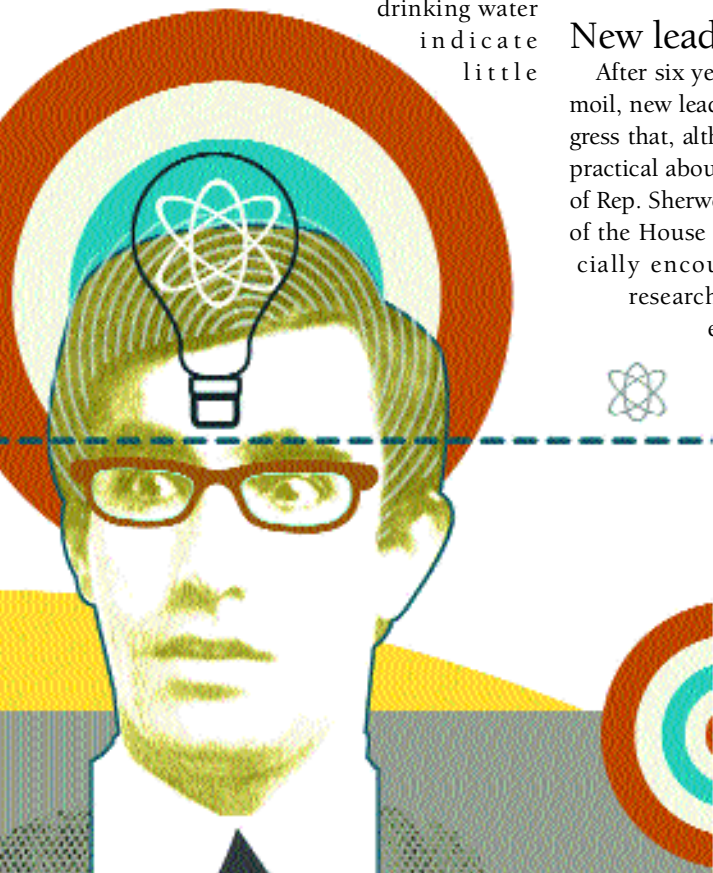


majorities requires a community-wide consensus around a narrow range of shared and indivisible concerns.

Although it is good news that the administration takes governing seriously—it moved quickly to recruit senior, experienced professionals to manage the cabinet agencies—it is bad news that the White House has been slow to make important appointments in S&T policy. The failure to appoint the president's science advisor before completion of the budget ensures

that, for at least the first year of the Bush administration, the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy will have little or no influence on federal R&D allocations.

In addition, initial negative signals on stem-cell research, the president's disavowal of the global warming treaty, and the administration's reversal of standards for arsenic levels in drinking water indicate little



interest in maintaining continuity of S&T policy established by the previous Congress and the Clinton administration.

Executives from Austin-based high-tech companies insist President Bush understands the value of R&D to our knowledge-based economy. Yet his prompt appointments of prominent free-market advocates to head the Federal Communications Commission and the Department of Justice Office on Antitrust suggest he views informed federal investment as less impor-

tant than deregulation to the productivity of the economy. Combined with massive tax cuts, the administration's agenda is also more likely to lure the high-tech community back into the Republican camp where the president believes business belongs.

President Bush often sounds like his father when it comes to public policy, and he acts more like Ronald Reagan when it comes to specific decisions.

New leadership

After six years of partisanship and turmoil, new leadership has emerged in Congress that, although less visionary, is more practical about governing. The emergence of Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY) as chair of the House Science Committee is especially encouraging. He provides the

research community with a knowledgeable leader who is experienced at creating bipartisan coalitions and who promises to build his committee into a significant force within Congress. Similarly, the movement of Sen. Pete Domenici (R-NM) to the Veterans Affairs–Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Subcommittee brings his considerable expertise and leadership on the Senate Budget Committee to critical R&D issues facing the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National

Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

However, just as the delayed election results affected the White House, they made the 107th Congress one of the slowest to organize. It didn't complete committee assignments until early March. This delayed the hiring of staff member and the orientation of new members. As one senior majority congressional staff member complained, "for more than two months after the election, there wasn't anyone in the federal

research agencies, or the congressional committees evaluating their budgets, to consult."

Not only does this make it difficult to determine who will do what on S&T funding initiatives, it also makes it nearly impossible for the research community to respond. Once the appropriate officials are in place and briefed, these timing delays limit opportunities to inform the administration's R&D agenda. Although Congress began its spending deliberations later than usual, its procedural time constraints mandate a quick conclusion because the new budget is supposed to be in place before Oct. 1. In short, initial decisions about research spending are being made with less deliberation, later in the budget process, and with slimmer prospects for appeal.

The administration has already indicated that some R&D budget cuts will be needed to contain overall growth in government spending and accommodate President Bush's tax plan. Fortunately for research supporters, critical differences exist between the House and Senate in their leaderships' power over appropriations and how the parties within these bodies share power. The differences open the potential for the research community to have some influence on the FY 2002 R&D budget.

Senate appeals

Because Republican leaders in the House exercise unusual power over the budget and appropriations processes through their unique rules and role in selecting appropriations subcommittee chairs, the chances of affecting the budget process there are slight. The Senate, however, cherishes the independence of its most senior members—those who, not coincidentally, oversee the expenditure of federal funds.

Senate appropriators are among the most independently powerful elected officials in Washington, and more likely to listen to research advocates. The 50–50 split between the parties in the Senate will make it difficult for either party, or the administration, to have its way on matters of taxes

or spending. With no majority on any committee, the Senate becomes the court of last resort for the S&T community to appeal proposals advanced by the president and approved by the House of Representatives.

For the S&T community, this means that party-line defeats in the House on proposals to double R&D support across the board can be reversed in the Senate with a carefully constructed coalition capable of delivering an issue-based majority. Resolving the different versions of legislation would then fall to a House–Senate conference committee. Securing such majorities requires community-wide consensus. For the S&T community, this means that doubling the research budget and expanding science and engineering education must be parts of an integrated campaign.


Moreover, it means that the coalition promoting R&D spending must have broad-based and visible support from both the corporate and nonprofit communities. Without strong support from a wide range of interest

groups, it will be difficult to avoid having research advocates divided and conquered.

The previous Republican-controlled Congress endorsed doubling the budget of the NSF as well as that of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Support for that campaign came from the biomedical and the corporate communities, and reflected bipartisan understanding that advances in physical sciences and engineering are critical to breakthroughs in biotechnology. Failure to form a unified campaign may not endanger support for doubling the NIH budget over five years. Achieving that goal at the expense of other research agencies, however, will jeopardize the balance of America’s research portfolio, harmony on our campuses, and unquestioned support for NIH once it achieves its milestone.

Restating this message does not conflict with the new administration’s efforts to reduce the size of government. Indeed, in light of the diminished capability of Nasdaq companies to finance an aggressive and balanced research portfolio, it is the responsi-

bility of the federal government to increase its long-term investments in the creation of new knowledge. It is not clear, however, that either the new administration or a majority of Congress views federally funded R&D as the source of innovation fueling the economy of the future. This premise will be sorely tested now that privately funded R&D exceeds federal totals and business and consumers see the prospect of imminent, significant tax cuts for the first time in 20 years.

It is the duty of the S&T community to join forces and present its case in a coherent, timely, and strategic manner. The axiom is true: If we don’t hang together, we will each hang separately. 

B I O G R A P H Y

Edward Furtek is associate vice chancellor for science and technology policy and projects at the University of California, San Diego (efurtek@ucsd.edu). He previously served as chief of staff to former Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio).