

Washington Insider

House Majority Leader Questions Federal Funding of Social Science Research

Speaking before an audience at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-VA) declared: “Funds currently spent by the government on social science—including on politics of all things—would be better spent helping find cures to diseases.”

This is not the first time Cantor has attacked federal support for social science research. In June 2009 he and then House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) wrote a letter to President Obama suggesting ways to reduce the federal deficit. They recommended:

Refocus the National Science Foundation (NSF) on Hard Sciences

The National Science Foundation intends to spend \$198 million next year on Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences (BCS) and Social and Economic Sciences (SES). Unlike NSF’s other hard science programs (such as engineering and biological sciences) these soft science programs are often more controversial and less directly related to NSF’s core mission.

Although no action on this issue happened in 2011 after the Republicans retook the House after the 2010 elections, in 2012 the House voted 218-208 to eliminate NSF’s political science program. The House also voted to eliminate the American Community Survey and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. In addition, a House appropriations subcommittee wanted to prohibit funding on economics research by the National Institutes of Health. With stalwart support from the Senate, none of these House amendments have become law in the FY 2013 appropriations so far.

Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX), Ranking Democrat on the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, responded to Cantor’s remarks. She said: “I’m starting to feel like a broken record but I’m just going to keep saying it—the social sciences are important. They help us understand what we do, why we do what we do, and how we can do things better. There is almost always a social sciences angle in the most important issues of the day like energy, national security, and health.”

Reacting to the Leader’s denigration of research on politics, Johnson noted: “The Political Science Program at NSF, funded at roughly \$11 million per year, advances knowledge and under-

standing of citizenship, government, and politics. Data from national longitudinal surveys help us understand the changing face of our own democracy and what can be done to promote civic engagement and voting among the general public. I firmly believe that it is in the interest of the American taxpayers that their leaders understand what their constituents believe and why, and attend to removing barriers to participation in our great democracy. Political science research supported by NSF also helps us understand foreign societies and governments, including the societies and governments of countries such as Iran and China. When the leaders of countries such as Iran posture about war and nuclear weapons, is it not in the interest of the American taxpayer that our own nation’s leaders understand what is motivating those foreign leaders and where we have the most leverage to negotiate or take other actions?”

Carol Geary Schneider, President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities and a former member of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) Board of Directors, writing in *Inside Higher Education* called the Majority Leader’s statement “jarring.” She expressed dismay that “a ranking national leader in a House of Representatives, initially created to reflect the political will of the people, proposes to do away with (or redirect, to be accurate) all research support for disciplines—including political science—that are patently basic to the fortunes of democracy and to Americans’ capacity for global leadership.”

Schneider asked: “How can we possibly imagine that the U.S. can continue to lead in a globally interdependent world when most Americans already know far too little about global histories, cultures, religions, values, or social and political systems—the very subjects that humanities and social sciences scholarship can help us explore?” She added: “The only thing more chilling than the actual substance of such a policy proposal is the growing frequency with which similar pronouncements now appear.”

As we move into the legislative year when the Congress may take up the reauthorization of the National Science Foundation (NSF), including its Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences directorate, and eventually the FY 2014 appropriations for NSF, once again the Consortium of Social Science Associations and its allies in the scientific and higher education community may find it necessary to mobilize a response to any threat to implement the provisions of the Majority Leader’s speech. ■