

Political Interference in Scientific Research

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The politicization of science is so topical today that it appears in the comics of mainstream newspapers. Although cloning and evolution are fodder for anecdotes, disturbing allegations of political attacks on scientific research have surfaced with alarming frequency since the Bush administration took office. Reports of distorting and suppressing scientific data, applying political “litmus tests” to scientific advisory committee members, disregarding recommendations of such committees, second-guessing peer review, and applying religious beliefs to science are now common.

Science has been politicized for 50 years, but current overt government scrutiny is systematic and wide-ranging in comparison, according to Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA)¹

and recent independent reports by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS).² Albert H Teich observed that the Bush administration acts on behalf of its constituencies—“big business, . . . so-called values voters, and religious fundamentalists—all at odds with science in one way or another”.

Recent examples of scrutiny include the removal of climate-change data from an annual Environmental Protection Agency air-quality report, inaccurate HIV prevention taught to public-school children in federally funded programs, and the Food and Drug Administration’s overruling of its own advisory committee’s advice to allow over-the-counter sales of the emergency contraceptive Plan B.

Washington’s increasing scrutiny is fueled by such groups as the Traditional Values Coalition, which sought to block federally funded research on the basis of “ideology” over science. According to Angela L Sharpe, of the Coalition to Protect Research (CPR), a sexual health and behavior research educational organization, more than 150 grants on HIV/AIDS; sexual behavior; and homosexual, minority, and adolescent populations have been targeted.³ The US House of Representatives narrowly defeated Representative Pat Toomey’s (R-PA) bill blocking five sexual-health studies funded by the National Institutes of Health despite favorable peer review.

Although Republicans have a stronghold on Capitol Hill, not all agree with the constraints being imposed on science. Joshua M Sharfstein, who works for Representative Waxman on the Committee on Government Reform, noted that so far, middle-of-the-roads have been “unwilling to take on the administration on . . . basic issues of scientific integrity”.

How are scientists faring in this hostile environment? Bioethicist Jon F Merz, of the University of Pennsylvania, and colleagues⁴ interviewed academic scientists from sociologists to neuroscientists and found that most experienced direct or indirect constraints on their research and some were actively trying to avoid controversy. Constraints affected their work at all levels—from how proposals

were written to which data were presented or published. Although most scientists strongly believe that they have a responsibility to seek out and report truth regardless of ethical, legal, moral, and social implications, they were split over whether society has the right to place limitations on scientific study.

In February 2005, Representatives Waxman and Barton Jennings Gordon (D-TN) introduced a bill to Protect Scientific Integrity in Federal Research and Policymaking (HR 839), stating that government should not tamper with the conduct of federally funded scientific research, censor its findings, or direct the dissemination of scientific information known to be false or misleading. It provides whistle-blower protections and requires the White House Science Adviser to issue a scientific-integrity report.

The good news is that the scientific community has become involved; such organizations as CPR and UCS, universities, and major science journals have begun speaking out about government interference in scientific research. Sharfstein stated that “we’ve seen a tremendous response in the scientific community. The journals have [played] an incredibly important part.” He concluded that Representative Waxman believes it imperative that the scientific community stand up for science in the political arena. 🗨️

References

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