

Coburn Amendment 2631 – Prohibits the National Science Foundation from wasting federal research funding on political science projects.

When Americans think of the National Science Foundation, they think of cross-cutting science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Most would be surprised to hear that the agency spent \$91.3 million over the last 10 years on political “science” and \$325 million last year alone on social studies and economics.

This amendment ensures more federal resources are directed towards supporting practical science by prohibiting the National Science Foundation (NSF) from spending research funds on political science projects.

The National Science Foundation’s Political Program Siphons Resources Away From Research That Promises Greater Scientific Discoveries With Real World Benefits,

The purpose of this amendment is not to restrict science, but rather to better focus scarce basic research dollars on the important scientific endeavors that can expand our knowledge of true science and yield breakthroughs and discoveries that can improve the human condition.

NSF spent \$91.3 million over the last 10 years on political “science.” This amount could have been directed towards the study of biology, chemistry, geology, and physics. These are real fields of science in which new discoveries can yield real improvements in the lives of everyone.

So then, what is being advanced by NSF’s political science studies?

According to NSF, its Political Science Program supports research on “citizenship, government, and politics,” including:

- bargaining processes;
- campaigns and elections;
- electoral choice and electoral systems;
- citizen support in emerging and established democracies;
- democratization, political change, and regime transitions;

- domestic and international conflict;
- international political economy;
- party activism; and
- political psychology and political tolerance.

This research, while interesting to some, stands in stark contrast to other NSF research that has yielded transformative results in a number of important areas, including:

- NSF researchers developed new, promising solutions to use **robotics to help individuals with severe disabilities**; ¹
- NSF-supported engineers **created a bone that blends into tendons**, which mimics the ability of natural bone, and provides better integration with the body and can handle weight more successfully; ²
- NSF-supported researchers used synthetic biology technology to **engineer the next generation of biofuels**; ³
- NSF-supported researchers **developed a powerful new microchip-sized fan** for use as a silent, ultra-thin, low-power and low-maintenance cooling system for laptop computers and other electronic devices; ⁴ and
- NSF-supported researchers at the University of Michigan **designed a new type of fiber-reinforced concrete that bends without cracking**—300-500 times more resistant to cracking and 40 percent lighter in weight. ⁵

The Political Projects Funded By The National Science Foundation Have Little To Do With Science.

The National Science Foundation has misspent tens of millions of dollars examining political science issues which in reality have little, if anything, to do with science.

The largest award over the last 10 years under the political science program has been \$5.4 million for the University of Michigan for the “American National Election Studies” grant. The grant is to “inform explanations of election outcomes.” 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 who pour over this data and provide a myriad of viewpoints to answer the same questions. There is no shortage of data or analysis in this field that would require the government to provide funding for additional analysis.

Some other examples of recent studies funded by the National Science Foundation:

- \$188,206 to ask the question, “**Why do political candidates make vague statements, and what are the consequences?**” “In addition to advancing our understanding of politics, the project will have several broader impacts,” according to NSF, including “practical lessons for candidates, advisors, and citizens who are involved in political campaigns;”⁶
- \$152,253 to examine “**Political Discussion in the Workplace**” to examine “practical insights into how the workplace might be utilized better as a context for promoting the goals of both broader and deeper public discourse;”⁷
- \$11,825 to study “**Prime Time Politics: Television News and the Visual Framing of War;**”⁸
- \$91,601 to conduct a survey to determine why people **are for or against American military conflicts;**⁹
- \$130,525 to conduct a survey on the **impact of Medicare reform on senior citizens’ political views and participation.** This research examines whether or not changes to the program enacted by the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 is influencing seniors’ “orientations toward government, vote choice, and regard for the two political parties.” According to NSF, “this project not only presents a significant advance for the scholarly literature on policy feedback effects, but it will also contribute

to future debates on one of the largest public programs in the United States. By examining how senior citizens have fared under this highly consequential reform of Medicare, this study will help lawmakers and other policy actors as they continue to reform the program and address the needs of this vulnerable population."¹⁰

- \$143,254 to evaluate **“whip counts”** by party leaders in the United States Congress to determine the impact of party leaders in the legislative process and how successful party leaders are at mobilizing support for party programs;¹¹
- \$50,000 to hold a conference on **the effect of [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) on the 2008 election**;¹²
- \$8,992 to study **campaign finance reform**, with the stated intent of providing “a basis for assessing future proposed changes to campaign finance regulations;¹³
- \$70,731 to examine **the “costs” of voting**, such as the time associated with locating the voting place, waiting in line to vote, traveling to and from a polling place and “learning enough about the ballot choices to make one's vote minimally informed;”¹⁴ and
- \$958 for a **direct mail survey of the residents of Celebration, Florida regarding their feelings of living in privately operated city.**¹⁵
Celebration is an unincorporated master-planned community near Walt Disney World Resort with 9,000 residents¹⁶ that was founded in 1994 by the Walt Disney Company.

NSF has also provided federal financial support for:

- The **“Human Rights Data Project”** which concluded that the United States has been “increasingly willing to torture ‘enemy combatants’ and imprison suspected terrorists,” leading to a worldwide increase in “human rights violations” as others followed-suit;¹⁷
- **Research conducted by several universities to determine why white working-class voters voted Republican in recent national elections.** The study is an attempt to explain what the authors describe as the

“puzzling behavior” of white working-class voters who vote for Republican candidates that support economic priorities that “seem to favor the wealthy at the expense of redistributive policies that would provide immediate benefits to larger segments of the population;”¹⁸

- A UC Berkeley study to test **the impact of terrorism threats on the presidential race** (the study found that it would not be a smart move for John McCain in the last election to play up imminent terrorist threats);¹⁹
- Production of “**The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer,**” in order to provide “Complete, live, prime-time, gavel-to-gavel coverage of 2008 Democratic and GOP national conventions;”²⁰ and
- **Research conducted by Paul Krugman**, which the NSF website touts as “one of the country’s foremost liberal commentators on economic, political, and policy issues.”²¹

Diverting Federal Funds To Political Science Will Not Accomplish The Goals Of Improving America’s Standing In The Fields Of Math And Science And Improving The Nation’s Health And Well-Being

Increasing funding for the National Science Foundation funding has been promoted as a way to bolster to our economy, preserve our national security, protect the environment, and educate our youth and, as a result, the agency has enjoyed strong bipartisan support and ever increasing budgets.

Making the case for doubling the NSF budget, Senators Kit Bond and Barbara Mikulski wrote to their Senate Colleagues stating, “it is our strong belief that the success of NIH’s efforts to cure deadly diseases such as cancer depends heavily on the underpinning research supported by NSF. The NSF supports fundamental research that contributes to the nation’s health and well-being.”²²

This may be true, but it is difficult, even for the most creative scientist, to link NSF’s political science findings to the advancement of cures to cancer or any other disease. In fact, it may indicate that NSF either does not know how to properly spend the significant amounts of taxpayer dollars it has been entrusted with.

H.R. 2847, the Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, provides NSF \$6.9 billion—an increase of \$426.3 million from FY 2009. This does not include the additional \$3 billion for NSF contained within the stimulus bill passed earlier this year. Overall, NSF received \$9.5 billion last year.

In the report accompanying the bill, “The Committee recommends funding for research that will create new products and processes that support job creation.” Whatever jobs and products are created as a result of NSF spending would best serve the taxpayer if they were within the field of practical rather than political science, which really is not science at all.

The justification for these historic levels of scientific research funding is to prevent America from falling behind the rest of the world in math and science. Last Congress, Congress overwhelmingly passed the America Competes Act, which authorized a doubling of NSF funding over a seven-year period. Political science research does nothing to further this goal of improving our nation’s standing in math or science or our children’s comprehension of either of these fields.

In 2007, NSF issued a directive to emphasize the transformative nature of NSF’s research. This directive requires every proposal to explain how it will provide transformative concepts. Again, it is a stretch to claim that the any of the political science research being funded by NSF qualifies as transformative.

During this time of economic challenges, few taxpayers, in fact, would believe that the NSF’s political science program is contributing to our nation’s ability to meet future challenges in science, engineering, or innovation.

If taxpayers are going to get their money’s worth from the significant funding increases being entrusted to the National Science Foundation, the agency should be held accountable for how those funds are being spent. The political science program which does not withstand scrutiny should be eliminated immediately. Theories on political behavior are best left to CNN, pollsters, pundits, historians, candidates, political parties, and the voters, rather than being funded out of taxpayers’ wallets, especially when our nation has much more urgent needs and priorities.

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- ¹ “Discoveries,” National Science Foundation, <http://nsf.gov/discoveries/>.
- ² “Discovery: 2008 Year in Review,” http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=111293
- ³ “Discoveries,” National Science Foundation, <http://nsf.gov/discoveries/>.
- ⁴ “Discovery: 2008 Year in Review,” http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=111293
- ⁵ “Discovery: 2008 Year in Review,” http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=111293
- ⁶ Award #0921283 http://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0921283&WT.z_pims_id=5418
- ⁷ Award #9818216
- ⁸ Award #0921720 http://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0921720&WT.z_pims_id=5418
- ⁹ Award #0819038 <http://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0819038>
- ¹⁰ Award #0647857 <http://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0647857>
- ¹¹ Award #417759 <http://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0417759>
- ¹² Award #0903886 <http://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0903886>
- ¹³ Award #071243 <http://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0714243>
- ¹⁴ Award # 0637220 <http://nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward.do?AwardNumber=0637220>
- ¹⁵ Award #9818536 (link not available)
- ¹⁶ <http://www.celebration.fl.us/towninfo.html>
- ¹⁷ “New Report Details Role of United States in Increased Human Rights Violations,” Newswise, December 12, 2008
<http://www.newswise.com/articles/view/547302/>
- ¹⁸ “Democrats Seen as the “Undeserving Rich” Face Rejection by Party Voters “Moral values” are why so many in the white working classes vote Republican,” University of Buffalo News Center, September 11, 2009,
<http://www.buffalo.edu/news/10433>
- ¹⁹ “UC-Berkeley Study Tests Impact of Terror Warnings on Presidential Race,” National Science Foundation,
http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=112424&org=NSF&from=news
- ²⁰ PBS Press Release, July 10, 2008,
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/aboutus/press_releases/2008/convention_20080710.htm
- ²¹ “National Science Foundation Congratulates 2008 Nobel Laureates in Physics, Chemistry and Economics,” National Science Foundation, http://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=112451&org=NSF&from=news
- ²² http://www.agiweb.org/gap/legis107/bond_alert0401.html