



Science should keep out of partisan politics

The Republican urge to cut funding is not necessarily anti-science, and the research community ought not to pick political sides, says **Daniel Sarewitz**.

Two weeks after US voters installed a Republican majority in the Senate and expanded the Republican majority in the House of Representatives, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) made its own political statement: it named a former Democratic member of Congress as its new chief.

Once, these events might have been unrelated. But in today's poisonous partisan atmosphere, the AAAS's choice of Rush Holt, a physicist and political centrist just finishing a 16-year stint in Congress, looks every bit as political as the election itself.

It is standard wisdom among Democrats that Republicans are 'anti-science'. This view will be reinforced when Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe, famously sceptical about climate change, takes over the Committee on Environment and Public Works in January; when House science committee chair Lamar Smith (Texas) renews his assault on social science and the peer-review process; and when research and development spending continues to stagnate under a Republican-controlled Congress.

The AAAS, which bills itself as "the world's largest general scientific society" has positioned itself to counter these developments by anointing a leader who could take up the fight. From this perspective, the choice of Holt might seem inspired. That is certainly what commentators on the Democratic side are saying. Typical is a blog post by Joe Romm of the think tank Center for American Progress in Washington DC, who looks forward to Holt continuing "his blunt defense of both science and climate action given his new high-profile platform".

But is it smart for the AAAS to link itself explicitly to the partisan fray? The generally accepted metric of how well national science is doing is the level of government funding, and by that measure Republicans have, on the whole, supported science as much Democrats have in the past 50 years. The problem today is not that Republicans particularly want to limit science spending. It is that in their obsession with fiscal restraint they are willing to cut all spending, including in areas they have historically favoured, such as military programmes — and basic science.

Continuing Democratic efforts to paint Republicans as congenitally anti-science could backfire. During the height of the Ebola scare, National Institutes of Health (NIH) director Francis Collins told *The Huffington Post* that "if we had not gone through our 10-year slide in research support, we probably would have had a vaccine in time". Republicans interpreted that as blaming them for the impact of the Ebola outbreak, an interpretation backed up by a pre-election television ad sponsored by a pro-Democratic political group that showed pictures of dead Africans and

concluded with the words: "Republican Cuts Kill." Republican politicians responded by suggesting that, with its US\$30-billion budget, the real problem for the NIH was poor priorities. "NIH did come up with the money to pay to give Swedish massages for rabbits," noted Republican Senator Tom Coburn (Oklahoma).

Actually, the idea that science policy can set priorities rather than always push for bigger budgets is sensible, especially in a time of fiscal restraint. But the US science community has never wanted to have this conversation, because it would undermine what has been a fundamental tenet of science policy since the 1950s: that more funding automatically translates into more social benefit. So the conversation has been handed over to politicians.

Smith's attacks on National Science Foundation (NSF) funding for social-science programmes take aim at the belief that the best national science policy is the one that puts the most money into science. For the past year and a half he has been picking out grants that he thought sounded frivolous — a time-honoured political ploy — and asking the NSF to provide the peer reviews that justify the funding decisions. The day after the election, he explained his efforts as a matter of setting priorities: "I support continued funding for worthy social science research projects. But funding for social science should not come at the expense of areas of science ... that are most likely to produce breakthroughs that will save lives, create jobs, and promote economic growth."

One irony here is that if Smith and other Republicans were more familiar with social science, they could use its findings to counter accusations that they are anti-science or less scientifically informed than Democrats. Decades of research have shown that people — including scientists — interpret the real-world implications of science in terms of their cultural background, personal experience and political beliefs. It is no surprise, for example, that conservatives who are distrustful of the ability of government to guide large-scale social change are distrustful of climate scientists and activists who invoke climate science to argue for such change.

The political situation surrounding US science and politics is not clear-cut. The more the AAAS, and so the science community, is seen to line up behind one party, the less claim it will have to special status in informing difficult political and social decisions. Public regard for scientists remains particularly high, and for politicians, particularly low. Blurring the boundaries between these groups is not likely to redound to the benefit of politicians, but to the detriment of scientists. ■

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