

► employer, “firmly denies these allegations and plans to vigorously defend this matter”, it said in a statement to *Nature*.

The legal challenge comes as the 53-year-old observatory battles to survive. Its single-dish radio telescope, one of the world’s biggest, is still in high demand. But the US National Science Foundation (NSF), which provides roughly two-thirds of the observatory’s \$12 million funding, is facing a budget crunch. The agency is now conducting an environmental review of major changes to the site, a possible prelude to mothballing or even demolishing the facility. Its decision on Arecibo’s fate is expected in 2017.

Some Arecibo supporters worry that the lawsuit could nudge the observatory closer to the edge. “With all those budget difficulties they’re having now, getting bad press is not going to be good for them,” says Alan Harris of the planetary-science consulting firm MoreData! in La Cañada, California.

LEADERSHIP CHANGES

USRA hired Richardson in 2014 as a scientist with Arecibo’s planetary radar group, which observes potentially dangerous asteroids and other Solar System bodies. He did not follow the typical academic path: according to Richardson’s website, he worked as a nuclear engineer before being blinded in a chemical accident and retraining as a planetary scientist. Sternke, a sociologist, began working at Arecibo on a short-term contract in 2015.

According to EEOC determinations issued in June, Sternke and Richardson’s work initially drew no complaints from management. After Richardson’s boss, the head of planetary radar, announced his resignation in early 2015, Richardson sought the job.

Several months later, Schmelz came to

Arecibo. From the start, the lawsuit says, she “ignored and/or chose to avoid all contact” with Richardson, assigned duties to younger colleagues rather than to him, and “marginalized and ostracized” Richardson and Sternke.

The EEOC report also says that USRA altered the description of the job Richardson wanted “to make it more suitable for another internal candidate to qualify”. USRA subsequently promoted an Arecibo staffer in his 30s.

Sternke submitted her resignation in November. She later told USRA that she planned to file a complaint with the EEOC, the agency’s report says, and her employment was terminated on 4 December, eight days before her scheduled last day.

The lawsuit alleges that in December 2015, officials from the USRA human-resources department accused Richardson of “angry behavior, bullying, and prejudices”. His employment was terminated in April 2016, after USRA determined that he failed to meet the terms of its “Performance Improvement Plan”. (Richardson disagrees with that assessment.)

In its report on Richardson’s case, the EEOC said that Schmelz “made direct discriminatory age based comments”, writing in her own performance evaluation that she had recruited “a set of effective young leaders”.

The EEOC also found that Richardson was “disciplined and terminated from his employment” on the basis of his age and disability, and in retaliation for his association with Sternke and for filing an EEOC charge. In a separate report, the agency found that USRA terminated Sternke’s employment “due to her age (over 50) and in retaliation for complaining about illegal discrimination”.

The EEOC suggested that USRA pay Richardson \$400,000 in damages, plus back pay, and give Sternke \$200,000. But settlement talks with the EEOC failed, and in late July the agency notified Richardson and Sternke that they had 90 days to file suit.

SADNESS AND SURPRISE

Richardson’s former colleagues say that he is not a bully. “I never heard him raise his voice, let alone get angry,” says Phillip Nicholson, an astronomer at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where Richardson did research.

Richardson’s postdoctoral supervisor at Cornell, astronomer Joseph Veverka, describes him as courteous and kind, if demanding. “If anyone asked Jim to do something which he did not consider completely scientifically proper, he would strongly object.”

Former Arecibo director Robert Kerr says that his USRA colleagues — including Schmelz — displayed “the utmost professionalism”. “Joan was no different from the rest,” he adds.

Meg Urry, an astrophysicist at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, notes that Schmelz is a tireless advocate for the right of female astronomers to work without harassment. “She’s devoted a lot of time to justice,” says Urry, the past president of the American Astronomical Society. In one notable case, Schmelz helped to bring harassment complaints against astronomer Geoff Marcy; after the University of California, Berkeley, found that Marcy had violated its policies on harassment, he retired in late 2015.

The district court in Puerto Rico has not yet scheduled a hearing on the Arecibo lawsuit. In the meantime, Nicholson is struggling to make sense of the situation, given what he knows of the parties. “Nothing seems to ring true to the character of the people,” he says. ■

US ELECTION

Scientists who back Trump

Science policy fades into background for many who support the Republican candidate.

BY SARA REARDON

Kaylee, a structural biologist at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, stays quiet when her colleagues talk about politics and religion. As a Catholic with conservative tendencies, she feels that her beliefs are unwelcome in academic institutions, where liberal views often prevail. The strain is particularly acute this year: Kaylee favours Donald Trump for US president.

Trump, a Republican, has a run a brash, often divisive, campaign that has prompted

some leading members of his own party to disavow him. He has drawn criticism for his treatment of women, his pledge to block Muslim immigration to the United States, and his plan to build a wall along the US–Mexico border. Still, Kaylee says, “I am 100% certain I will not vote for Hillary Clinton,” Trump’s Democratic opponent, despite her fears that supporting Trump could harm her job prospects. (For this reason, Kaylee — a postdoc — asked *Nature* to refer to her by a pseudonym.)

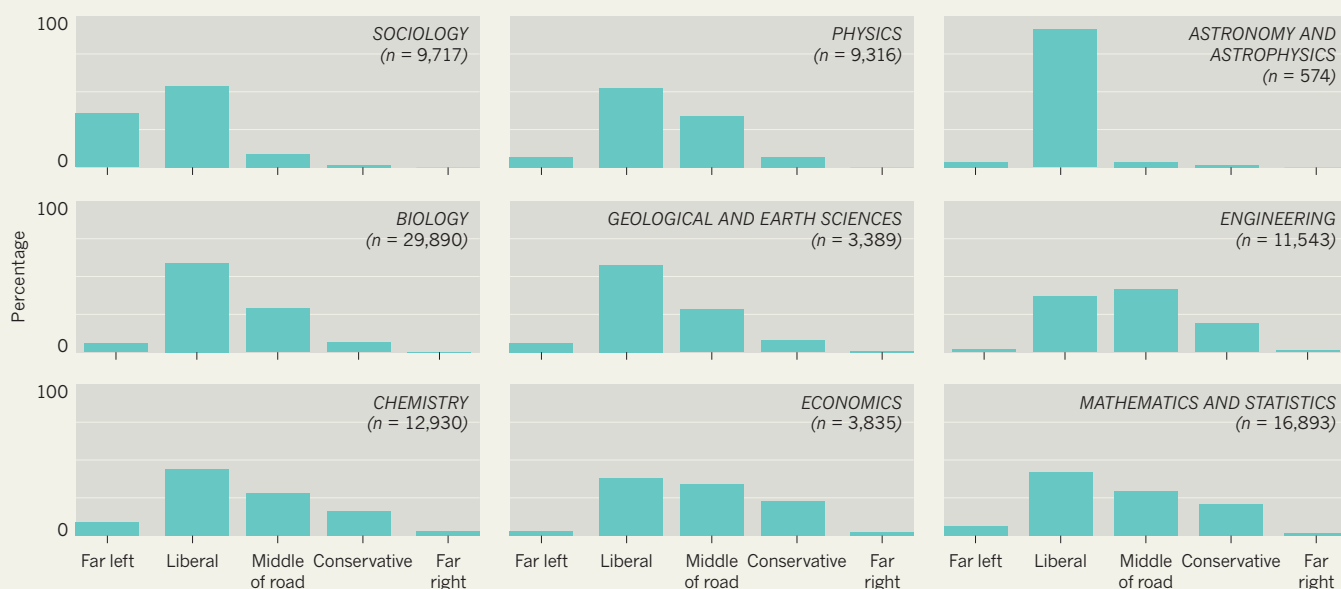
Her fears do not surprise Neil Gross, a sociologist at Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

Surveys have shown that conservative faculty members are a minority in US universities, although the proportion varies by field (see ‘Field reports’). “My sense is that the candidacy of Donald Trump has really intensified disputes that were there already in academic life,” Gross says. “If Republicans in academia and science felt uncomfortable before, I think the candidacy of Mr Trump has made them all the more uncomfortable.”

Many of the researchers interviewed for this article say that Trump and Clinton’s positions on science have not influenced their

FIELD REPORTS

US academics tend towards liberal political views, but dipping into data from a 2013–14 survey of university faculty members reveals differences between individual disciplines.



vote — in part because the candidates have largely ignored these issues on the campaign trail. “We’re living in a two-dimensional world: how much do you like each candidate, and how much do you hate each candidate?” says Stanley Young, assistant director for bioinformatics at the National Institute of Statistical Sciences in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, who backs Trump. “The popular impression I get is Clinton would go forward with business as usual and Trump is likely to upset things a bit. There’s a lot that could be improved in science.”

David Deming, a geophysicist at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, doesn’t think it matters whether Trump and Clinton have much personal knowledge

of science. “Trump said he’d appoint good people and I believe him,” says Deming, who has written newspaper opinion pieces in support of Trump.

Other scientists who plan to vote for the Republican say they have been let down by US President Barack Obama, and think that Clinton — another Democrat — would bring more of the same. To them, Trump represents change. “The current status quo seems like it’s not working for a lot of Americans,” says one Trump-supporting chemist at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, who asked for anonymity. “I’m hopeful for a modest improvement, and that’s about as much as I can hope.”

William Briggs, a statistician at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, likes the fact that Trump has not emphasized science. “The federal government has become far too involved in setting the scientific agenda,” says Briggs, who argues that Obama has misused science in politically charged debates over climate change and energy policy. “I think Hillary would worsen that.”

Kaylee, who disagrees with Trump’s views on women and minorities, says that her desire for a more conservative Supreme Court is driving her vote. With the next president likely to nominate at least one Supreme Court justice — a lifetime appointment — she sees Trump as a tool to move the court’s ideological balance to the right. Otherwise, Kaylee would vote for a ‘write-in candidate’ who won’t appear on the presidential ballot: her lab’s principal investigator, who has given her a safe space to express conservative views.

“I am 100% certain I will not vote for Hillary Clinton.”

But not everyone is so lucky. And as the 8 November election nears, talk of the hard-fought presidential race grows trickier to escape. Some scientists who support Trump worry that political discussions in the lab will not only harm their careers in the long term, but also hinder current collaborations with colleagues, and waste time.

“I’ve avoided discussions among my real-life peers for a while,” says the anonymous chemist at the University of Pittsburgh, who prefers to talk about politics online. “A lot of people, if they’re not willing to come out in favour of Hillary, will give the third-party dodge.” ■



Like his opponent, Donald Trump has not emphasized science issues during his campaign.