

## Republicans foster science (*pro tem*)

**After a year, the Republican party has full control of the US Congress and has been kinder to science than its critics allow. But that disposition is unlikely to last for long.**

A YEAR ago this week, when the Republican Party won control of both houses of the US Congress for the first time in 40 years, few anticipated how quickly they would come to dominate the Washington agenda. There is, after all, still a Democrat in the White House. But the growing fissure between Clinton and his alleged Democrat colleagues in Congress has disarmed the Democrats and in science policy, as elsewhere, the Republican hegemony is virtually complete.

The Republicans have been kinder to science than the science lobby cares to admit. Although the budget for the present fiscal year, which started on 1 October, has yet to be agreed, the National Institutes of Health are the only substantial component of it for which the House of Representatives, the Senate and administration each call for an increase that will cover inflation. The National Science Foundation and the main physics accounts at the Department of Energy are set to get flat funding. Sharp cuts will be made in fusion research, in the search for renewable energy sources, in environmental research and in technology support programmes. It will not comfort the victims of these cuts to point out that, in the case of fusion and renewables, the reductions are merely the logical outcome of years of programme drift at the Department of Energy, and that the environment and technology programmes are simply being returned to where they were before Clinton's election.

But in the longer term, the picture for science funding does not look bright. Given that science and technology account for one-seventh of the entire discretionary budget, that is inevitable. Budget projections being prepared by the Republicans for the next seven years generally assume flat funding (whose value would be eroded by inflation) for most science agencies, and sharp cuts at Energy and at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). But these are approximations; actual programme budgets will be set by the annual appropriations process.

Democrats have argued that all of this amounts to a wholesale onslaught on the tradition of the enlightenment. But their arguments have been undermined by the inconsistency, on budget matters, of the Clinton administration. To recap briefly, the administration proposed a budget last February that was generous to most science programmes, but would have slightly increased the budget deficit. Administration officials defended that budget as prudent, because, they said, the deficit would increase by less than the growth in the overall economy. The administration would borrow more in

1996, in other words, but not much more. For domestic critics, and for the international financial markets that now dictate these things (see *Nature* 377, 562; 1995), this was clearly inadequate.

Acknowledging as much, Clinton hastily revised his budget in July, saying he would balance it after all. But details of how that would be achieved, on a programmatic level, have never been spelt out. The administration has budget figures for its science agencies — the February ones — but it has none to match the president's recent rhetoric, as he has crawled to meet the Republican position. Thus the initiative has not so much been grabbed by the Republicans as been thrust upon them.

So what have they done with it? Bob Walker (Republican, Pennsylvania) did not much want to chair the House Science committee, but he has emerged as an honest and effective leader for science in Congress. His approach to running his committee verges on the dictatorial. But the committee's output counts for something, and everyone operating under its jurisdiction — including most people in the physical sciences in the United States — knows where to complain.

The life sciences, meanwhile, have looked to old Republican allies for preservation, and have not been disappointed. Even Newt Gingrich (Republican, Georgia), the House speaker and Washington's dominant figure, has been convinced that biomedical research is deserving of strong support from the federal government.

But Gingrich, addressing the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) last week, made it pretty clear that such support is unlikely to extend to inflation-matching increases each year (see page 117). Citing indices which show that some services are becoming cheaper each year because of improvements in efficiency and technological change, he told the medical schools to start thinking about doing more for less. It may be time for research providers to start addressing this argument.

Gingrich's impulsiveness scared some of the 2,000 AAMC delegates, while others were impressed with his clarity of purpose and, above all, his obsession with the power of ideas. Senator Christopher Dodd (Democrat, Connecticut), chairman of the Democratic National Committee, who had the misfortune to follow Gingrich at the podium, sounded like a stump politician, vainly seeking to defend the priorities and programmes of the past. The contrast between the two men spoke volumes about what is happening in Washington, one year into the Republican revolution. □