

Shattered illusions

Last-minute cuts to the research budget have left US scientists nervous about future funding. **David Goldston** looks at what Congress and the president might do next.

Trying to follow the actions of the US Congress on research spending in 2007 was like sitting blindfolded on a roller-coaster, and when the year ended in sudden free-fall, science lobbyists were shaken and stunned, and left wondering how they were taken for a ride. The year's victories — a supplemental spending bill in the spring that unexpectedly included additional science funding; legislation in the summer pledging to double research spending over 10 years; and spending bills in the autumn with long-sought increases for the physical sciences — proved to be no harbingers of a bounty for researchers when Congress finally completed its work in December. The final budget for research as a whole for fiscal year 2008 does not keep pace with inflation (see *Nature* 451, 2–3; 2008).

What happened and what does it portend for the fiscal year 2009 budget process, which will begin when the president unveils his proposed spending plan on 4 February? First, it's important to recognize what did not happen: there was no sudden reversal of pro-science sentiment. Rather, the large increases initially destined for research agencies fell victim to a dispute between the president and Congress over the total amount of domestic spending (see *Nature* 449, 962; 2007).

Once the president and his allies in Congress refused to budge on the size of the total spending pie, the Democrats in Congress had little choice but to redistribute some of the money slated for science to protect the full range of their priorities, many of which seemed more urgent or politically salient. Some of the money that had been allotted to the National Science Foundation in earlier bills, for example, went to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is in the same budget bill. Some of the funds for the Department of Energy's Office of Science went to the more applied-research programmes in the agency's Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy division.

The theory one hears most often in Washington these days is that the budget increases for science were pared because the Democrats were unwilling to support any additional funds that had been proposed by the president. The Democrats' attitude towards the president was, supposedly: "You're unwilling to negotiate with us, so we're not going to provide money for any of your priorities." But congressional staff plausibly



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counter that the reductions resulted less from politics than from simple arithmetic — once the total pie shrank, even some favoured pieces had to get smaller. And in the final budget, most science agencies still received increases, whereas domestic spending as a whole was essentially frozen at last year's level — although that is cold comfort for scientists who had visions of sugar plums dancing in their heads.

What's next? Ironically, the fall-out from this year's final science numbers may put science in a stronger political position for fiscal year 2009. The reaction has been swift, vocal and angry, most importantly from high-tech executives, who have been assiduously courted by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (Democrat, California). Stung by criticism from Silicon Valley immediately after the final spending bill passed, Pelosi's office took the highly unusual step of e-mailing a note to high-tech lobbyists, saying: "I want to assure you that my commitment to [science] remains strong and steadfast ... [w]e didn't get all the research funding we hoped for this year. But rest assured we will be back fighting next year and for years to come to ensure" that funding is doubled over 10 years.

So far, the efforts at reassurance seem to have done little good. On the same day as Pelosi's missive, Craig Barrett, the chairman of Intel Corporation, sent her a short, blistering note that was not officially released but continues to circulate widely in Washington. He concluded: "Industry is listening carefully to your deliberations — if there is no government support [for the physical-science research and education] that will dictate our competitiveness for the next century then we might as well just accept that and make our investments elsewhere. I hope

that Congress and the administration can find the will to make the right choices about where to spend our precious tax payers' monies." Barrett has been a leader in pushing for spending increases, but many high-tech executives share his concerns and are more willing to lay the blame for the cuts solely at the Democrats' doorstep.

Especially in an election year, Democrats will be wary about alienating a key industrial constituency. At the very least, Pelosi's office is likely to keep a sharper eye on science spending than it seemed to in December's last-minute, frenzied budget negotiations. And science lobbyists are trying to figure out ways to capitalize on the Democrats' political concerns immediately by pushing to include science money in any supplemental spending bills that could yet add funding in the current fiscal year. That would be an uphill battle, as such bills usually focus on military spending or natural-disaster response. If any money were provided, national laboratories that are facing lay-offs, such as Fermilab in Illinois and the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center in California, would be the most likely beneficiaries.

But it's much too early to predict what will happen. Indeed, administration officials are still arguing over the president's proposal for fiscal year 2009. At issue is whether the president will propose increases for science based on what he had requested for this year, or whether he will ask for less, using the final congressional numbers as a base. And it seems a safe bet that he will again draw a line in the sand on total domestic spending, meaning that next year's budget deliberations could very well still be ongoing on election day in November.

With so much uncertainty, lobbyists and politicians on both sides of the aisle ought to be careful not to create another crisis of rising expectations about science spending. Fanning excessive hope only demoralizes the scientific community. This year's numbers were genuinely disappointing, but the sense of abandonment and betrayal that they have left in their wake is probably much more damaging than what could turn out to be a one-year delay in getting on a better spending trajectory. ■

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