

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

The Chronicle Review

[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [The Chronicle Review](#)

October 14, 2009

What's the Value of Political Science?

By Jeffrey C. Isaac

Republican Sen. Tom A. Coburn, of Oklahoma, has introduced an amendment to House Resolution 2847 that would eliminate support from the National Science Foundation for political-science research. Scholars in the discipline are understandably against this move. As a citizen who is a political scientist, I, too, oppose the initiative, which appears to be a form of populist vindictiveness.

Coburn's argument, such as it is, is to list odd-sounding NSF-supported projects—all of which have met rigorous scholarly peer review—and to insist that those projects cannot be "scientific," since they produce no breakthroughs in medicine, robotics, or biotechnology. He invokes a myopic view of how different kinds of research can "matter." Indeed, even as he seeks to snatch support from political science, other branches of the government—including the Department of Defense, the Agency for International Development, and the Department of Education—are promoting social-science research that generates indispensable knowledge of a complex world.

But if Senator Coburn is misguided, we political scientists are passing up an opportunity for self-reflection if we respond defensively, in the manner of a mere interest group (though scholarly associations are legitimate players in a politics based on interest groups). Yes, we want public recognition and support, for what we do is valuable. But the most compelling aspect of our demand for recognition is that we are a community of scholars dedicated to free and critical inquiry. And while our teaching and research produce many social benefits, our activities' primary value, in a democratic society, is the value of inquiry itself.

Yet here a bit of candor is in order. For while most NSF-funded research is surely as valuable as many other federally supported projects, we political scientists kid ourselves if we think this

research typically has the obvious public benefit that we might defensively, if legitimately, claim for it. In fact, in playing up political science's scientific credentials, we might be losing sight of some of its most obvious potential public benefits. Most political-science research that is modeled on the hard sciences professes a naïve "value neutrality." Much of that work, moreover, is framed in fairly narrow disciplinary terms, and is little concerned with illuminating public problems in ways that might easily enhance public understanding. One more study of whip counts in Congress surely does no harm. But is it the best our profession can offer? I think we can do, and have done, better.

While some of our research has little immediate clear public relevance, much of it has both public purpose and public value. One good example is the research of my Indiana University colleague Elinor Ostrom on the governance of common resources, which recently earned her the first Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science ever awarded to a woman. Her work, which speaks to pressing problems of environmental sustainability, is relevant to policy makers and citizens. Sure, most NSF-funded work does not rise to that level of importance and relatively direct applicability. But that's true of most work in most intellectual domains. And it is only through competitive support processes that agencies such as the NSF can invest in promising lines of research in the hope that some will bear fruit. High-profile "successes" are possible only because of a broader environment of scientific inquiry in which narrow, everyday research of dubious public "value" also makes a contribution.

Moreover, even as we resist Senator Coburn's ill-conceived maneuver, we should keep the NSF in perspective. NSF-type basic research in political science is worthy of support even if much of it is fairly banal. But few political scientists benefit directly from these funds or are even eligible to receive them. And even the best and most "scientific" political-science research rarely generates the kind of direct benefits that basic research in physics, molecular biology, or informatics can produce. For political science is a science of a different kind than the natural sciences, one that draws upon ordinary language and experience of public problems and that develops tentative, fallible, and contestable interpretations of

those problems.

It is a science the subject matter of which eludes reductive explanation and prediction. Its "truths" are best seen as contributions to the self-understanding of societies that ceaselessly change along with the values and purposes of their members. The big questions of political science are not reducible to mathematical or experimental analysis, even if such techniques sometimes play an important role. They are, rather, conceptual, practical, and ethical, regarding such things as the causes of order and disorder, the constructive and destructive potential of violence, and the sources of social conflict. Political science contributes to answering difficult questions by providing interpretations that provoke new insights and illuminate public dialogue. Such a political science is not a technology but a means of public enlightenment and discussion.

Political science as a discipline has not always been sufficiently mindful of that vocation, but in recent years it has become more so. New research agendas—concerning gender and politics, ethnic conflict, civil wars, transnationalism, and other topics—have emerged to meet the needs of a globalizing society. And the American Political Science Association has wisely sought to enhance both the public visibility and the public contribution of the discipline.

One result is *Perspectives on Politics*, a journal whose editorship I recently assumed. *Perspectives* was created eight years ago in order to promote high-quality research that takes on problems of public consequence, speaks to a broad audience of political-science scholars, and reaches beyond academe to learn from and contribute to broader public discussion. The journal aims to promote a genuine political-science public sphere.

In recent years it has featured important research on topics such as the causes of civil wars, the dynamics of democratization and retrenchment in the post-Soviet republics, the implications of demographic change for racial politics in the United States, the role of international-relations scholars in public debates about the Middle East, the gendered nature of inequality, and the strengths and weaknesses of the *U.S. Military Counterinsurgency Manual*. Such work draws upon NSF-supported basic research employing

high-level mathematical and experimental methods. It also draws upon language and culture scholarship supported by Title VI area-studies centers, and upon research in history supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Much of the work is done by scholars who themselves receive no such direct funds, but whose work is possible only because we have strong institutions of higher learning that are partly supported by the federal government.

That kind of work is the most powerful testament to the value of political science. It does not necessarily produce an immediate economic payoff, in the form of a new robot, video game, antibiotic, or weapon of mass destruction. But it contributes to the education of young citizens, informs policy making in a world of risk and uncertainty, and enhances public understanding and communication in a democratic society.

NSF support for social-scientific research ought therefore to be defended and indeed enhanced.

At the same time, we can best attract such support if we acknowledge that political science can do a much better job not simply of explaining its relevance to the public at large, but of being relevant and valuable to the world at large. The most exciting thing about being a political scientist today is that such relevance is being taken seriously and has real institutional support. Just as much as the NSF's political-science programs, these conversations deserve public recognition, along with the strong support of all political scientists who care about the future of the discipline and the ways that it might contribute to a better future for the world.

Jeffrey C. Isaac is a professor of political science at Indiana University at Bloomington. His books include "Democracy in Dark Times" (Cornell University Press, 1998) and "The Poverty of Progressivism: The Future of American Democracy in a Time of Liberal Decline" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

Copyright 2009. All Rights reserved

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037