

Statement on the Defunding of Political Science Research at the National Science Foundation

April 2013

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) condemns recent congressional action to defund the political science program of the National Science Foundation. We believe that efforts by politicians to restrict research support for certain disciplines is misguided, and threatens the integrity of the rigorous scientific review process used by federal agencies to fund research that advances knowledge.

The provision to defund the political science program was offered as an amendment by Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma to HR 933, the Continuing Appropriations Act to fund certain government agencies for the rest of the 2013 fiscal year. Senator Coburn modified the amendment to allow an exception for research certified by the Director of NSF as “promoting national security or the economic interests of the United States.” It passed on a voice vote in the Senate. The House of Representatives accepted the Senate amendments, and President Obama signed the bill into law on March 26.

Senator Coburn, in a letter to the NSF dated March 12, called on the agency to consider eliminating funding for “political science” (quotations in the original). Senator Coburn writes “Studies of presidential executive power and Americans’ attitudes about the Senate filibuster hold little promise to save an American’s life from a threatening condition or to advance America’s competitiveness in the world.” The AAUP finds this interference in the scientific review process threatening to academic freedom. Allowing for exceptions based on interpretations of “national security” and “economic interests” does not resolve the problem. When politicians can defund research using non-scientific criteria, all scientific research is potentially chilled.

The AAUP calls on Congress to rescind this provision and to respect the importance of scientific peer-review that is free of political constraints to the advancement of knowledge and is essential to a democratic society.