

SENATORIAL PEER REVIEW

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Senators don't think the National Science Foundation should fund research they think is a) covered somewhere else in the government, or b) stupid?

Answer: c) both.

"Determinants of Husband-Initiated and Wife-Initiated Divorces," read Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, a Texas Republican, in an effort to point out what she thinks is a ridiculously titled endeavor for the NSF to be funding.

Hutchison, chair of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation's Subcommittee on Science and Space, which had a hearing Tuesday on the NSF budget, repeatedly took the mic to express her bewilderment at certain NSF social science projects, several of which involved study of topics before the 17th amendment to the Constitution.

"U.S. legislatures picking senators before the 17th Amendment?" Hutchison said incredulously to Arden L. Bement, director of NSF. "How can you say this is that important?" She did, however, concede that the topic is "probably very interesting." (While the NSF is best known for its work in the physical sciences, it in fact has a long, Congressionally authorized history of supporting work in the social sciences.)

Wendy Schiller, associate professor of political science and public policy at Brown University, certainly thinks so. She and a collaborator were awarded \$212,000 each by NSF to establish the U.S. Election Database for the years 1871-1913.

Schiller, who was reached by phone and had no idea Hutchison would attack her research, said she was once a legislative staff assistant for the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a New York Democrat who actually was a social scientist, and that "I've seen projects I wondered about, but this is worthwhile."

Schiller said there is currently no aggregate record of "who served in the legislatures, where they came from, how long

they served, and what they did. It's a whole chunk of history we don't even have, except for Mark Twain's 'Gilded Age.'"

The flies in Hutchison's soup seemed to be anything NSF funded that she doesn't think is the kind of basic research that will keep the United States ahead of China and India in the physical sciences and engineering.

Bement responded that he views NSF's mission as spurring science broadly, and he said that scientific disciplines are increasingly interrelated.

Schiller, who will make all the data publicly available when she's done, said that there's hardly anywhere else to turn but NSF for funding to do data collection.

Paula England, professor of sociology at Stanford University, lead researcher on the determinants of divorces study, called it "scary" and "disturbing" when she got the news that Hutchison had singled out her study.

England received about \$160,000 from the NSF to conduct research over two years. She said that she used to use sexier titles, like "sex differences in pay," but that NSF took to sanitizing them to things like: "gender differentials in income."

But she acknowledged that Hutchison was attacking the place of social science in NSF, rather than just the title.

"Except for a few sub-areas," England said, "NSF is the only place sociology gets funded." As far as justifying social science research, England asked: "Isn't studying humans as important as studying the environment? It really does help us make policies that work for social problems.... No one else is going to support it, so then we just don't know much about human society."

Hutchison repeatedly argued that the U.S. must focus on economic gains, not social science. "At a time when we're trying to get every dollar directed toward research that will keep American competitive, I would have to question" work like the election database, she said.

Hutchison took a moment to find the right word for what she thinks social sciences are doing to NSF's ability to carry out the President's American Competitiveness Initiative. She eventually landed on: "burdened." Beyond that, Hutchison mostly asked Bement in several different ways whether the mission of NSF should be redefined to focus on basic research in the physical sciences and engineering.

Eventually, with just a hint of her preference, she went with: "Do you think we should reassess the mission of NSF in any way?" Bement, as if magically sensing a theme in the senators' questions, eventually pegged his response to applied science. Social sciences "compress the lead time from discovery to application," he said.

Hutchison isn't the only senator that doesn't like stuff, and let Bement know it in emphatic terms.

Sen. Ted Stevens, an Alaska Republican, wants the NSF to "light a fire" under science education, and Sen. John Sununu, a New Hampshire Republican, thinks NSF should get out of the education game altogether.

In Stevens's high school, "science teachers made the subject come alive." Stevens expressed some discontent that he may not be raising a pack of Einsteins. "Today ... as a father of six I'm stupefied to see that kids would rather clean their room" than study science. "What took out the spark?"

Steven's also blamed the Internet, which was developed and proliferated with United States government funding, for letting students push a button for answers, thus straying from books and "personal contact."

Sununu asked Bement to identify where the funding dearth is that is allowing India and China to catch up.

Bement said "that's a question that changes daily," which was the comment that broke Sununu's camel's back.

"When the head of NSF has trouble answering that question," Sununu said, "I frankly wonder what you're spending your time on."

Sununu also implied that he doesn't find senators - as in, those studied in the election database - worthy of study. "Conversely, you seem to have no trouble studying how and

why people vote for U.S. senators I though it is my current profession I don't think that's useful."

Anything else Bement had to add, especially about education, was basically tied to the tracks with the Sununu express barreling through. "Everybody likes to talk about education," Sununu said. "It makes it seem like we care" about "kids about the future. But to direct money to K-12" is "counterproductive when we're spending" big bucks in the Education Department every year.

Bement said that funding priorities depend on national priorities, whether defense or economic, or otherwise.

Sununu added that "if you can identify an economic benefit [for research] you shouldn't be funding it, that's what we have a venture capital community for."

Before he got off the hot seat, Bement and Hutchison had just one more minor communication slip.

Hutchison stressed her desire for NSF and NASA to collaborate, whereupon Bement noted that the deputy director of NSF is a former NASA chief scientist. Well "ask him" to make sure there's collaboration, Hutchison suggested. "Her," Bement replied, referring to Kathie L. Olsen.

"Oh good," Hutchison replied. "I wasn't sure."