New GOP Chairs Size Up Science

Early indications suggest Republicans are enthusiastic about biomedical research and space, but pressure to cut spending may mean hard times for many other research programs

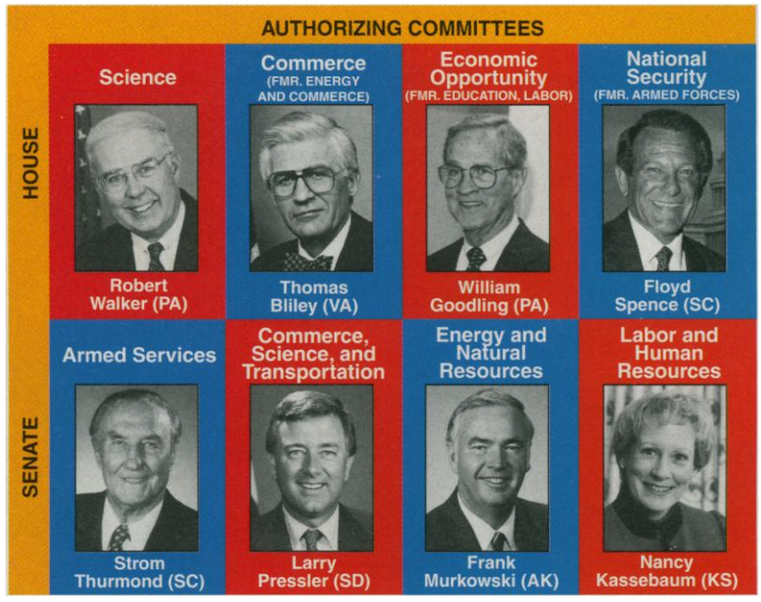
The new Republican majority in Congress, flush with its victory last month at the polls, hasn't wasted any time remaking the institution, eliminating committees, trimming staff, and changing rules that House Democrats have laid down during their 40 years of control. But one thing hasn't changed: Power still rests with the chairs of the panels that pass legislation and set budgets. The new order on Capitol Hill (see charts) could mean good news for biomedical research and space. But it also creates major political uncertainties for other science programs ranging from global climate change to fusion. And the outlook is grim for advocates of a larger government role in industrial research.

Although the key battles over next year's budget will be waged in the spring and summer, the new Congress may not wait that long to begin imposing its spending priorities. Republicans are already preparing a package of proposed rescissions to the current 1995 budget to offer when the 104th Congress convenes next month, and the White House is drawing up its own plans to streamline the executive branch. "There could be a real feeding frenzy," says one worried White House official. "A lot of damage could be done."

How much of an impact those changes will have on science and technology remains to be seen, but the selection last week of House committee chairs provides important clues. Representative John Porter (R–IL), for example, who will oversee appropriations for labor, health and human services, and education, has been a staunch defender of medical research during his 14 years as a minority member of the appropriations committee. Last week he told *Science* he wants to boost the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) by 6%, and he's eyeing cuts in a number of Education Department programs as a way to free up dollars for favored agencies like NIH. But he admits his chances of success hinge on how much money the full committee allocates to his panel, and whether savings in one part of his portfolio can be applied to other programs.

Porter's counterpart in the Senate is Arlen Specter (R–PA), who Porter sees as an ally. "We share the idea that biomedical research is a priority," says Porter.

Another strong supporter of science, Representative Jerry Lewis (R–CA), will chair the spending subcommittee responsible for the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) as well as a hodgepodge of other agencies. He says he will look closely at housing programs under his purview, and if he can find cuts there, that may provide some breathing room for NSF and NASA. "We won't start off the year with a major philosophical battle over whether NSF serves a useful purpose," says one NSF official with relief. But Lewis warned in a statement that "there will be no sacred cows." Senators Phil Gramm (R–TX) and Christopher Bond (R–MO), who support more spending for aeronautics and space efforts, are the leading candidates to chair a parallel panel in the Senate.



The restructuring and downsizing of the authorizing committees in the House is another factor that will shape science policy in the new Congress. The powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee, long presided over by the formidable John Dingell (D–MI), for example, will no longer oversee the Energy Department laboratories; that job instead will go to the Science Committee, the new moniker for what had been the Science, Space, and Technology Committee. The committee will be chaired by Representative Robert Walker (R–PA), an outspoken advocate of space and energy research.

Walker has served on the panel for 18 years and is the senior Republican. He consistently has pressed for more money for NASA and Energy Department programs to develop alternative energies such as fusion and hydrogen. Representative George Brown (D–CA), who will hand the committee reins to Walker when the next Congress convenes, says the new chair shares his distaste for academic pork projects and his support for earthquake mitigation and hazard reduction.

Walker is also likely to revive the notion of merging all civilian science-related agencies into a single Department of Science and Technology as a way to save money and improve coordination among disciplines. "I expect that Walker will push this," says one administration official. In response, White House officials say that the National Science and Technology Council was created last year to achieve exactly that goal without the need to restructure the nearly two dozen agencies that fund research.

Walker and his staff are said to be considering major cuts in several programs, although the new chair declined to provide specifics. But he has already made a symbolic gesture to the research community by overturning the recommendation from House colleagues to rename his panel the Technology and Competitiveness Committee. "It sent a terrible signal to the scientific community," groans one Republican staffer. Brown agrees the name change was a mistake. "The community is already paranoid about what might happen to basic research," he says.

Such bipartisan cooperation is not expected to carry over to debates on how to help make U.S. businesses more competitive, however. The Clinton Administration strongly backs joint government and industry efforts to spread new technologies,

Two Senators Target Defense Research

While most federal programs are bracing for cuts, one area has been promised more money: the military. But those increases may come at the expense of basic research funded by the Pentagon. In a letter sent last week to President Bill Clinton, two prominent senators on the Armed Services Committee proposed eliminating $1.5 billion now being spent in military-sponsored medical and university research—including a prominent breast cancer research program—so that the Defense Department can beef up troop readiness, quality of life, and modernization efforts. These research efforts are included in an $8 billion package of defense programs that Senators John McCain (R–AZ) and John Warner (R–VA) claim "are wasteful and which contribute little, if anything, to our defense posture."

White House officials have reacted vigorously to the senators' plan to cut current spending. "This would have a devastating impact on both our top 200 research universities and our engineering and science talent," says Lionel (Skip) Johns, associate director for technology at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

The research cited by the senators includes high-performance computing and several dual-use technology programs, as well as a collection of defense conversion programs, totaling $1.5 billion, and the $550 million Technology Reinvestment Program (*Science*, 25 March, p. 1676). However, the proposed McCain-Warner cuts are not the first attack on the 1995 defense budget for academic research: Last summer the Democratic-controlled Congress trimmed $200 million after rejecting a $900 million cut sought by Representative John Murtha (D–PA).

McCain and Warner based their proposed cuts on information provided by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), which was asked to identify programs in the $263 billion defense budget that fall outside a strict definition of national security. Although CRS analysts noted that many of the programs fall into a gray area, the senators simply targeted most of the items on CRS's list.

The fate of the proposal will be determined when the new Congress takes up a package of rescissions to the 1995 budget. And the White House is hoping to beat back the challenge. "I'm confident the impact of these proposed rescissions has not been made clear to the senators," says Johns.

–A.L. and Jeffrey Mervis

and has won huge increases for the Commerce Department's National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to do so. But Walker and a number of Republicans see much of its growth as unnecessary governmental interference in the private sector and are likely to go after such efforts as the Advanced Technology Program (ATP).

"We're going to have to educate [congressional] members about the value of ATP," says Commerce Undersecretary Mary Good about the $430 million program that funds joint government and industry partnerships in a host of high-risk technologies. "A lot of them just don't realize how important it is to industry." NIST Director Arati Prabhakar admits it won't be an easy sell. "Given our philosophical differences with Mr. Walker, we don't anticipate turning him into a big supporter," she says.

The Senate may be more receptive to the Administration's message, however. Senators Larry Pressler (R–SD), who will chair the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, and Conrad Burns (R–MT), who will oversee the committee's panel on science, support NIST, says Prabhakar. Burns was the lone Republican senator to support the National Competitiveness Act that encouraged government-industry partnerships, and last week he told an industry group that NIST efforts like ATP "are headed in the right direction." Even so, Burns said he will hold hearings next year to assess the programs.

A host of other programs spread among federal agencies could be in even bigger trouble, according to federal agency officials and congressional sources. Some agricultural research and the proposed National Institute for the Environment seem unlikely to find favor in a cash-strapped Republican Congress, and the government's $1.5 billion in global climate change research could also become a target for conservatives who discount the threat from global warming. Senators Trent Lott (R–MS), the new majority leader, and Burns have pressed to reduce money for this research, but James Baker, chief of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), says "the ideological difference is over what policy decisions to make" based on the data being collected, not whether the research is valid.

Fusion advocates hope to find greater support for their cause among the new Republican chairs, although budget constraints may limit their options. Representative John Myers (R–IN), who will chair the appropriations subcommittee that oversees energy programs, pressed the Energy Department this year to choose a site for the $8 billion to $10 billion International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, now being planned by teams in the United States, Germany, and Japan. In the Senate, Mark Hatfield (R–OR), who will head the full Appropriations Committee as well as the energy and water development subcommittee, has also supported fusion efforts.

Meanwhile, White House officials are pondering a strategy for saving their science and technology priorities. "We have to communicate to members of the new majority the importance of investing in basic science," says Lionel (Skip) Johns, associate director for technology at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. "We have a great deal of evidence that supports our strategy. ... But we have to make the sale."

–Andrew Lawler