

NSF Candidate Study Irks Congress

Members of the House of Representatives, who face reelection every 2 years, have an intense interest in what motivates potential candidates to run for office. But some are not eager to have social scientists looking into the question. At least 70 members have complained that the research, a \$175,000 study funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to learn why many qualified people don't enter the fray, is a waste of money, and there have been calls for two separate investigations.

Welcome to the latest flap involving NSF's social and behavioral sciences directorate. Two years ago, the directorate survived an attempt by retired Representative Robert Walker (R-PA), then chair of the House Science Committee, to kill it. Now, NSF officials find themselves in the uncomfortable position of defending a social science project—and by extension the peer-review process that funded it—to skeptical members of Congress at the same time NSF's annual budget is under consideration.

In the hot seat are political scientists L. Sandy Maisel of Colby College in Waterville, Maine, and Walter Stone of the University of Colorado, Boulder. The duo began their study last year by soliciting the names of persons well qualified to run for Congress from leading political figures in 200 randomly selected districts. This fall, the researchers will send out a questionnaire asking those would-be candidates about all the factors affecting their decision to run or to stay on the sidelines. Maisel says he believes the study "could tell us a lot about how a democracy works," in particular the factors that discourage such persons from becoming candidates.

But that's not how Representative William Clay (D-MO) sees it. Clay, a 15-term House veteran and the most outspoken critic of the study, has tried unsuccessfully to obtain the names of the districts being sampled (almost half the total of 435) to see if they are, indeed, random. But his main concern, he says, is that there are many more deserving problems facing the nation. "There is never any shortage of good and qualified people [in my district] who feel they could serve in Congress," he declared in a recent press release. "One thing we, as Americans, have never been short of is politicians running for office." Some 70 House colleagues

have expressed their opposition to the NSF study by signing a letter to the editor from Clay to two newspapers that have written about the controversy.

In its own letter to every House member, NSF defends the study and explains the rationale behind it, the methodology, and the rigorous selection process by which the grant was awarded. "I expect you may have a natural interest in [this study]—it's your field, it's what you do," writes Bennett Bertenthal, head of the directorate. "[But] the general objective of this study is straightforward. The researchers are interested in understanding the reasons individuals do not run for office."

Maisel says he's glad that NSF "has stood up" to Clay's attack, which he characterizes

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—L. Sandy Maisel

as an attempt to demonstrate that "he's more qualified to judge the quality of a research proposal than a peer-review panel." At the same time, Maisel doesn't think the fight is really about the quality of the research. "We've tried to explain that it's not an attempt to find candidates, nor does it pose a threat to any incumbent," says Maisel. "We've also tried to explain why confidentiality is so important. But [Clay] doesn't seem to want to hear any of that." Adds Maisel: "I think this episode shows that members are concerned about their electability, not about the science that NSF is funding."

Clay has asked the General Accounting Office, the congressional watchdog agency, to investigate the award. And last week, the House spending panel that oversees NSF (see p. 28) approved language asking NSF's inspector general to look into whether the researchers are following their protocol in carrying out the study. Those investigations may give the combatants a cooling-off period. But any truce could be short-lived. A floor vote on the NSF bill later this month will give House critics another forum to air any remaining concerns.

—Jeffrey Mervis

SPACE STATION

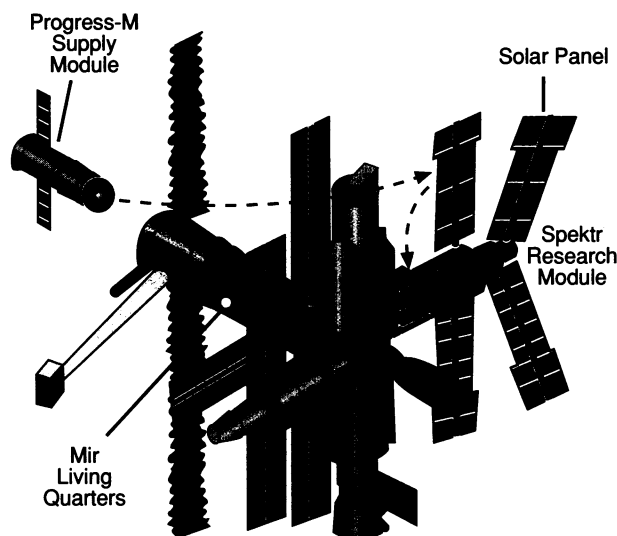
Accident Clouds U.S. Future on Mir

Supporters of the international space station are waiting to see if the gash ripped in the Mir space station last week will wreck more than just the science module that served as living quarters and laboratory for U.S. astronauts. Lawmakers on Capitol Hill are pressuring NASA Administrator Dan Goldin to cancel plans for further long-term stays by astronauts on Mir until the agency certifies that the Russian station meets or exceeds U.S. safety standards. Such a step could jeopardize U.S.-Russian collaboration, including the scientific and technical experience that NASA officials say is an important element in assembling and working on the space station.

The accident, in which a Russian cargo module rammed into the Spektr science module while being guided remotely by a Mir cosmonaut, has put NASA in an awkward situation. While the agency is responsible for the safety of its astronauts, the shuttle-Mir program is the cornerstone of U.S. and Russian space cooperation. It serves both as a barometer of

goodwill between the two nations and as a mechanism for scientific exchange. The impact of a U.S. withdrawal, says Marcia Smith, an analyst with the Congressional Research Service, "would depend on how gracefully it's done."

The immediate issue for NASA is how to react to language in its 1998 authorization bill, passed by the House of Representatives and pending in the Senate, that calls for the



Damage control. Collision between a cargo ship and the Spektr module could weaken U.S.-Russian space ties.