

Reagan Versus the Social Sciences

OMB's first-term attempts to mug social and behavioral sciences partly foiled by Congress; researchers hope the worst is over

Although the Reagan Administration has generally been supportive of basic research during its first term, the social sciences have taken something of a battering. There has thus been some trepidation among social scientists about what lies in store following the Administration's return to power after a landslide victory. To judge by the first 4 years, tensions between the social science community and the Administration will probably persist, particularly if the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is determined to halve the deficit by 1988.

Anyone comparing the last Carter budget with the first Reagan budget would perceive a sharp discrepancy, like a geological fault line, running between the 2 years next to any elements of the research budget that had to do with the social and behavioral sciences. Their share of the federal basic research budget decreased from 4.9 percent in 1980 to 3.6 percent in 1984.

1981 was truly a year of crisis for these disciplines, which have not managed to shrug off the label of "soft" research. Budget cutters reportedly contemplated some extraordinary ideas, such as elimination of the entire biological, behavioral, and social sciences directorate of the National Science Foundation (NSF). The actual proposals appeared to be not merely ill-informed attempts at excising nonessentials, but punitive and politically motivated. At the NSF, the Administration ended up proposing a 70 percent budget cut for the social and behavioral science divisions, and the science and engineering education directorate was targeted for extinction. Perhaps most alarming were wholesale attacks on federal statistical programs that threatened to permanently damage long-term data bases and undermine the whole information infrastructure of the government.

Fortunately, Congress was unwilling to condone such radical departures from policies that have enjoyed many years of bipartisan support. The fiscal 1982 budgets were severely reduced but most programs subsequently began a gradual recovery, to the point where some are beginning to approach the levels of 4 years ago.

Social scientists still do not feel they have any friends to speak of in the White House or the OMB, but their general sense is that overt hostility has been replaced by a measure of tolerance. They point out that officials who knew nothing about social sciences—except possibly to equate them with liberal social programs—discovered that time-honored tools for decision-makers, such as systems analysis and econometric modeling, were products of social science research, and that the data sets, such as the widely heralded Survey on Income and Program Participation, are needed for policy-making.

The Administration also discovered

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that political support for social and behavioral sciences was far stronger than they had supposed. Not only did Congress, notably the House Science and Technology Committee, resist such sweeping changes but the research community sprang into action. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) issued a resolution protesting the cuts. Professional groups were frightened into organizing several new lobbies, including the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), which has done much to foster communication between researchers and decision-makers.

What of the fate of these branches of science under the second Reagan term? Science adviser George Keyworth recently provoked speculation with a confusing comment on the 1981 budget cuts at the NSF: "I think great courage and wisdom was executed in squashing the daylights out of the NSF's social science programs, as well as the science and math [education] programs." He said

some were of "phenomenally low" quality. "I think you are seeing a rebuilding of the NSF programs. . . . There are a number of areas that needed a renaissance—the cognitive sciences, for example, and we're seeing it. . . ."

The NSF division of social and economic science has not in fact been altered—only diminished. According to Ralph DeVries of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, Keyworth was mainly referring to the science education programs, which the administration tried to abolish. That directorate, NSF officials concur, needed cleaning up. DeVries says the program, which sank to \$16 million before being restored to \$87 million, has been rebuilt, with new emphasis on developing good teachers and on maximizing private sector involvement.

Keyworth's approving reference to cognitive sciences relates to the \$8 million (over 2 years) the Senate has directed NSF to spend on research on teaching and learning in science and math. Keyworth is "very very excited" about physiologically based learning research, says DeVries. Actually, the part of NSF that has undergone the most "squashing" has been the behavioral and neural research division's program on cognitive sciences. This was cut by almost two-thirds when Reagan came in and has scarcely grown at all, although neuroscience has been holding its own.

Keyworth has made it clear that the proper way to make the case for such research is to set priorities. As DeVries of OSTP explains it, when the decisions "are left to us, we will pick what is most empirical and quantitative." That is, long-term economic and demographic data bases. But "whenever a community is willing to do that prioritization, it has favorably affected budget increases." Thus, the White House and the budget people have expressed strong interest in the "decade outlook" survey of future social science priorities now under way at the NAS.

As for other high-level thinking, one must turn to the past for clues. One concern when the Administration came to power was that its conservative ideology would not only result in reductions for the social sciences but also shape

patterns of research. The worst early fears have not been borne out, but ideological factors have had an impact in some areas. For example, one of the hallmarks of the Republican stance toward social science has been dismissal of the demand for immediate relevance. As with other branches of science, the conservative view is that applied research is best left to the private sector. This means sharp cutbacks in program evaluation and policy research.

"There is a tendency to feel they have all the answers—therefore they don't need exploratory research," comments one research administrator. On the plus side, says another official, social science is no longer burdened with a mandate to "solve the world's problems—we just have to promise to make knowledge gains."

Ideology has also played a part in the types of research undertaken. "Social research," for example, is taboo, implying as it does "social engineering." Anything to do with abortions is out (the Agency for International Development's small abortion research arm has been abolished). Anything that promises more private sector involvement is favored. Evaluations of social programs have been sharply curtailed, which in part reflects the conservatives' suspicion about researchers' fondness for government intervention.

Structurally, the Administration favors decentralization, particularly of anything that looks like planning. A notable example has been the OMB's attempts to sharply reduce the budget for the Department of Health and Human Service's (HHS) Office of Planning and Evaluation, which has been cut by more than half of its 1981 level of \$20 million. The OMB, following recommendations of the Grace Commission, wants these functions dispersed to the main operational branches of HHS. Social scientists are distressed at this development which they see as a dismantling of the only office in the department that has the discretion to examine a broad range of programs. The Social Security Administration's office of research and statistics has also been decentralized.

Although the Administration's ideology has had some effect on patterns of research support, there have been very few attempts to meddle with the granting process itself. And the few examples of questionably motivated grants that have come to light have stimulated prompt and vocal opposition. For example, researchers last year protested a Request for Proposal from the HHS Office of

Human Development Services, which called for a project examining whether the private sector would be a better provider of certain social services than the government. Critics complained that the proposal required the awardee to share the government's view on the matter. (The OMB has tried unsuccessfully to combine the research and evaluation programs of this office and cut the budget by almost three-quarters.)

In another case, official concern about pornography (a presidential commission is in the offing) figured in a controversial grant award by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The office gave \$800,000 to Judith Reis-

with the National Institute of Education (NIE) (the first was head of the New Hampshire Moral Majority), thus stirring up unhappiness over attempts to politicize the research agenda. The President also has made some seemingly arbitrary selections for the National Council on the Humanities. None of the core disciplines is represented in the group, which includes a Catholic theologian, a bioethicist, and a member of the Eagle Forum. The forum opposes thought in such fields as "secular humanism" and "cultural relativism." The National Endowment for the Humanities was also scheduled for severe cuts in the 1982 budget, but the situation has stabilized there un-



Science adviser George Keyworth

Keyworth sees a "renaissance," at least in the cognitive sciences, and is particularly supportive of physiologically based research on learning.

man of American University for a study designed to assess the effect of pornography on juvenile delinquency by convening multidisciplinary panels of experts to arrive at a consensus. The grant, which was not subjected to peer review, was severely criticized by academics. The episode is one of several that has led Congress to spell out extensive new requirements relating to peer review and awards of noncompetitive grants. (The Administration budget would have eliminated the whole juvenile justice office along with its modest research arm, but Congress has instead reorganized everything into a new Office of Justice Assistance.)

Ideological biases are perhaps most evident in the President's penchant for rewarding his supporters with government posts regardless of whether they possess relevant expertise. He did this

der the conservative, back-to-basics leadership of William Bennett (who at this writing was favored to succeed Terrell H. Bell as Secretary of Education).

In some areas of the social sciences, the Administration's conservative stance has softened over time. For example, Reagan's philosophy about keeping the government out of education has undergone some modification in light of widespread alarm over science education and the threat to America's technological supremacy. In addition to restoring science education at the NSF, the President this year asked for a \$6 million boost for the NIE, which has made educational technology its top priority (it got \$3 million, for a total of \$51.2 million). Conservative political pressures have kept NIE's substantive focus on the "basics" in designing this year's competition over the labs and centers program. However, lan-

guage and area studies have not benefited from the new education push—the OMB proposed to eliminate funds for foreign studies grants and fellowships, including the Fulbright program, but Congress restored them.

Research conducted in the schools by behavioral scientists is kept on a tight rein, thanks to Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), chairman of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources. The Department of Education has proposed regulations that could further inhibit research by broadening disclosure requirements and expanding the definition of psychological tests.

There has been some softening of attitudes toward health-related behavioral research but, as with other areas of social science, patterns of support have changed. The first impulse of the Reagan OMB was to get rid of such research—for example, there was talk of eliminating all the social and behavioral research in the National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA), which would have meant erasing half the budget.

In the end, the OMB took the unusual step of issuing a directive to the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) spelling out what kinds of research were acceptable. All “social” research—that is, work with implications beyond the immediate purview of the agency, such as research on the mental health effects of bad housing—was eliminated. The Department of Health and Human Services was prompted to declare it was not in business to support “studies of large scale social conditions or problems.” And at NIH, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development took the precautionary step of changing the name of its social and behavioral science office to the demographic and behavioral sciences branch.

According to one science official, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) still retains the aura, in many minds, of the 1960’s when psychiatry was being widely applied to social problems—although in fact, there has been a strong increase in emphasis on biochemical and neural science. Still suffering from a major reduction in force mandated in 1981, NIMH was targeted for another 8 percent reduction this year. Congress, however, resisted this along with OMB’s perennial attempt to ax the clinical training program, and NIMH got a 7 percent budget increase.

The other two institutes in ADAMHA—NIAAA and the National Institute on Drug Abuse—also received

respectable budget increases. They have benefited from this Administration’s particular interest in stemming addiction among young people, a priority evident in the selection of new ADAMHA director Donald Macdonald, a pediatrician who has made a name for himself warning teens of the dangers of alcohol and drugs.

Given the rapid growth of interest in and knowledge of health and behavior, support for biobehavioral research is unlikely to shrink during Reagan’s second term. Already enjoying a significant budget hike is the National Institute on Aging, which is likely to benefit across the board from the new attention being accorded Alzheimer’s disease. HHS secretary Margaret Heckler has expressed a



Budget director David Stockman

He cannot touch Social Security or the military—what will be “zeroed out” next?

strong interest in aging research, but a more compelling force is the demographic revolution, which promises to create a trillion-dollar deficit for Medicare by 2000.

The child development, heart, and cancer institutes also have an increasing stake in behavioral research. The outgoing assistant secretary for health, Edward N. Brandt, Jr., strongly supports this direction and tried this year to get \$7 million for a new research program on health behavior. Although he was unsuccessful, it is unlikely that a competent successor will fail to continue this effort.

Overall, the social and behavior science endeavor sponsored by the federal government has not suffered grave injury or distortion, just shrinkage. Anticipations for the future vary. Clarence Martin of the Association for the Advance-

ment of Psychology does not feel there has been much of a learning process: “every year with every budget the President comes back with the same kinds of cuts and proposals.”

Kenneth Prewitt of the Social Science Research Council is growing weary of the battles. “It has cut heavily into research life to keep the budget in place after 20 to 30 years of building,” he says. “We have had to educate and reeducate.” There is resentment among social scientists at being repeatedly called upon to prove that what they do is science, and that most social and behavioral science is as apolitical as anything in biology or physics.

Thomas F. Juster, head of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, is fearful of the “subtle consequences” of years of limited funding. The lack of money for big multiyear projects is causing social scientists to focus on small-scale ones and this is “affecting the way social and behavioral scientists think of what’s feasible.”

Other observers voice guarded optimism and feel that Reagan may have done them a favor by getting them unified politically. Roberta Balstad Miller, the first COSSA head, who is now at NSF, says that for the purpose of defending their cause researchers “have shown a new willingness to define themselves as social scientists, rather than by discipline.” Adds Marshall Robinson of the Russell Sage Foundation, “four years ago, few would have put much faith in social scientists to do this in a sustained, effective way.” Government authorities for their part have discovered that “sociologists are not all trying to undermine the fabric of Western civilization,” says Robinson.

Many social scientists feel that the situation has more or less stabilized and that the amounts of money involved are too insignificant to attract budget-cutters. Nonetheless, social and behavioral scientists are well aware that constant effort is required to demonstrate that their work is either good or bad science, not “hard” or “soft.”

Massive cuts in domestic spending will be proposed by OMB in the coming weeks. The deficit has turned out to be larger than expected, and OMB director David Stockman has been chafing under orders to hold taxes down and keep his hands off the military budget and Social Security. Decisions taken this winter will probably be a good indication of whether social and behavioral research has finally been accorded a place among the nation’s scientific priorities.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN