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Major Changes in Congress May Mean Major Changes for Science Policy

JULIE PALAKOVICH CARR

This month, voters across the nation will head to the polls for the midterm elections. Regardless of the final results, the departure of several long-standing science and education advocates will most likely change the way science is viewed in the 112th Congress.

"The retirements of champions of science, such as Representatives Brian Baird, Bart Gordon, Vern Ehlers, and Dave Obey and the defeats of Senator Arlen Specter and Rep. Alan Mollohan [in primary elections earlier this year] mean the loss of considerable support for science in the Congress," warned Howard J. Silver, executive director of the Consortium of Social Science Associations, in an e-mail interview.

The House Committee on Science and Technology will be hit hardest by these departures: Committee Chair Bart Gordon (D–TN) is retiring after 26 years in Congress. Since becoming chairman in 2007, Gordon twice championed the America COMPETES (Creating Opportunities to Meaningfully Promote Excellence in Technology, Education, and Science) Act, the law that aims to stimulate innovation and improve science education by increasing funding authorizations for the National Science Foundation (NSF) and other federal agencies that support basic research.

The leadership of several House science subcommittees will also change. The top Democrat and Republican on the Subcommittee on Energy and Environment will leave Congress in December. Chairman Brian Baird (D–WA), a clinical psychologist, is retiring; Ranking Member Bob Inglis (R–SC) was defeated in a runoff election during the Republican primary. Subcommittee on Research and Science Education Ranking Member Vernon Ehlers (R–MI), a physicist, is also retiring after 17 years in Congress.

Collectively, the House science panel will lose at least 50 years of congressional experience. "Representatives Gordon, Ehlers and Baird will be missed," said Samuel M. Rankin III, associate executive director of the American Mathematical Society. "They all understand the value of federal support for science research, are strong advocates for science, and are willing to work across party lines to gain support for legislation impacting science research and education."

Unlike many congressional committees, the House Committee on Science and Technology was able to maintain a degree of bipartisanship under Gordon's leadership. According to a committee press release, all of the committee's bills passed by the House in the past four years have had bipartisan support. With ever-increasing partisanship on Capitol Hill, it is unclear whether this tradition of bipartisanship will remain the norm in the new Congress.

The loss of these members leaves the future uncertain for many of the issues they have advocated. "Reps. Baird and Ehlers have been particularly important for the promotion and defense of peer review and the social and behavioral sciences," Silver said. "Reps. Gordon and Ehlers have been key supporters of improving science education."

Federal investments in science could also be in jeopardy. Representative David Obey (D–WI), chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations, is retiring after 21 terms in Congress. As chairman, he worked to increase funding for science and education, including major investments in medical research. Additionally, Representative Alan Mollohan (D–WV), who was defeated in a Democratic primary, will no longer lead the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations, in which he worked to increase funding for the NSF and NOAA (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). Senator Arlen Specter (D–PA), who switched party affiliation last year, was defeated in his first Democratic primary race. A force behind the effort to double the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Specter successfully lobbied for the inclusion of $10.4 billion for the NIH in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The biggest uncertainty in the future of federal science funding may be a desire by members of both political parties to reduce spending. "The continued emphasis on deficit reduction will likely constrain science funding no matter what political situation we face in the 112th Congress," Silver said. "We hope that new champions emerge to replace those who will no longer be there to thwart attacks on science and peer review."

Others in the scientific community share Silver's hope that new leaders will emerge. "The departure of these champions for science will leave big shoes to fill and provides an opportunity for the scientific community to encourage other members of Congress to assume leadership roles and cultivate broad support for science," commented Adam P. Fagen, public affairs director for the American Society of Plant Biologists.

Philippe Cohen, of Stanford University's Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, also recognizes the need for scientists to engage with the new Congress. "Scientists will need to maintain a high profile in the development of science policy at every level of government and education," he said. "To do otherwise is to abdicate our responsibilities to a society that has invested heavily in our careers."

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