

Political Science at the NSF: The Politics of Knowledge Production

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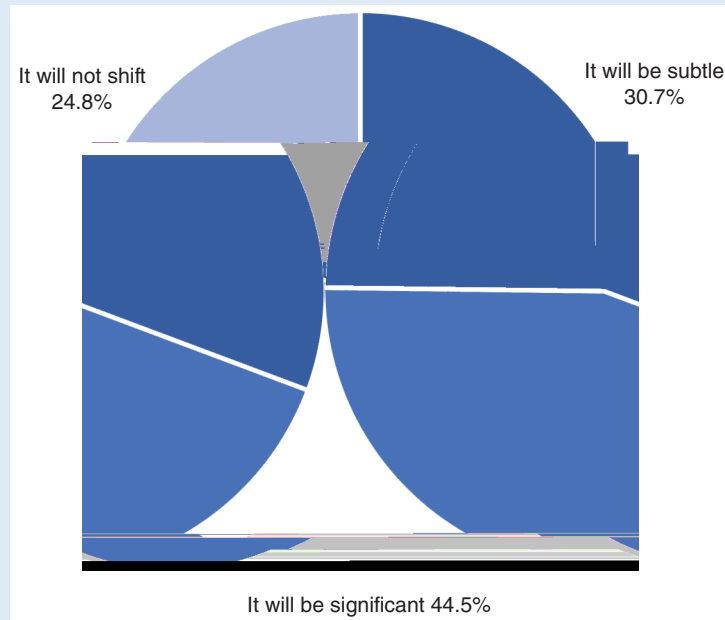
ABSTRACT

The National Science Foundation (NSF) recently replaced its long-standing

loaded, potentially exposing NSF-funded political science research to more congressional scrutiny, not less. The “rebranding” raised important questions about political science research at the NSF and within the discipline more generally.

DISCUSSION

Figure 3



Note: Respondents were asked: "Do you believe the new themes will shift the focus of NSF-funded political science research?"

In terms of direct changes to the applicant pool, 12.9% of NSF award recipients indicated that they would not submit a proposal under the new NSF programs. All but two of these respondents believed that the impact of the program changes on NSF-sponsored research "may be significant." This finding should raise concern; it is in direct tension with the assurance that the new programs will be "business as usual" for political science at the NSF. Whether or not respondent perceptions are accurate is beside the point. The survey data suggest that these perceptions will directly shape who applies and who looks elsewhere for research support. In turn, changes in the applicant pool constrain the ability of NSF selection panels to support the full range of research that they might otherwise deem important and meritorious.

Among those who indicated that they would apply despite the program change, almost half (48.9%) of respondents believed that they would need to alter the framing of their proposal in some way to accommodate the new program themes. When considered with the 12.9% of respondents who would not apply at all (question 1), we can understand that most respondents did not see their previously funded work fitting comfortably into the new program

thirds (69.3%) of respondents believed that there will be a subtle or significant shift in NSF-funded political science research suggests that these perceptions are not the result of distinctive characteristics of the respondents' specific projects. Instead, there is a more general perception of a qualitative shift in NSF funding priorities. In short, whereas the NSF leadership has assured political scientists of its commitment to the discipline, a substantial percentage of respondents arrived at a different conclusion.

These data are even more striking when we consider the selection criteria. The survey did not sample political scientists generally. Instead, each respondent had previously been vetted and supported by the now-closed NSF Political Science Program. A substantial number of these past grant holders now question whether their previously funded research has a place within the new NSF programs.

Of course, the NSF had always catered to a particular vision of the discipline. The Political Science Program primarily funded large-N data-gathering exercises. Positivist and behavioral approaches were embraced and normative work was discouraged. This orientation is so well understood that political theorists, scholars using qualitative or interpretive approaches, and others

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descriptions. The fact that almost two thirds (61.4%) of respondents believed that their previously funded proposal either would not succeed or were unsure whether it would succeed further suggests a perception of change in NSF funding priorities and the belief that new proposals would require changes to accommodate the program themes. Finally, the finding that more than two

thirds (69.3%) of respondents believed that there will be a subtle or significant shift in NSF-funded political science research suggests that these perceptions are not the result of distinctive characteristics of the respondents' specific projects. Instead, there is a more general perception of a qualitative shift in NSF funding priorities.

Nonetheless, the "repositioning" of the Political Science Program marks a new chapter for political science at the NSF. The Political Science Program was agnostic in terms of thematic

content. By contrast, the new NSF programs are both thematic and directive. Let us now consider the implications of the Security and Preparedness Program for new knowledge production.

THE SECURITIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The Security and Preparedness Program call for proposals presents applicants with examples of substantive research areas. Each area is positioned under the more general rubric of “global and national security.” The clear message is that if an applicant applies under one of the subtheme examples—international and compar-

ative political economy, for instance—the research project should address global and national security concerns, which themselves are positioned under the thematic program title of Security and Preparedness. Political economists with interests in inequality may feel compelled, at a minimum, to frame their proposals within the rubric of global and national security, subtly securitizing research agendas that might otherwise focus more squarely on issues of race and ethnicity, taxation, or other salient matters. It is no surprise that APSA council members raised concern that the NSF program reform represented a further step toward the “securitization” of the discipline.

An exhaustive analysis of the broader trend toward the securitization and militarization of the American academy is beyond the scope of this article. However, even a cursory review of developments across the social sciences validates the concern. In the two decades since September 11, 2001, myriad government programs have enlisted universities in the service of national security. The most prominent players are the US Department of Homeland Security and the US Department of Defense. The Office of University Programs within the US Department of Homeland Security works to “foster a homeland security culture within the academic community through research and educational programs” (US Department of Homeland Security 2020). Similarly, the Minerva Research Initiative, organized through the US Department of Defense, strives to “focus the resources of the Nation’s top universities” toward “addressing specific topic areas determined by the Secretary of Defense” (US Department of Defense 2020). To be sure, total federal support for security research in the social sciences is but a minute fraction of the overall spending of the US Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. Nonetheless, these funds constitute substantial resources for cash-strapped institutions of higher education. And whereas earlier national security initiatives (e.g., Title VI of the National Defense Education Act) were administered by the US Department of Education, the more recent initiatives are managed and guided more directly through national security bodies.

Coupled with similar long-term trends across the academy, the securitization and militarization of the NSF funding stream should

deem worthy of funding, if only because the applicant pool itself has shifted. If the NSF Program Change Survey data are any indication, the cumulative effect of the NSF repositioning will be a shift in new knowledge production, with more NSF-funded projects entering the orbit of “security and preparedness.”

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data will be made available on request. However, only aggregated data may be in the public domain according to the stipulations
