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Accepting Politics In Science

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The Bush administration has been hammered over the past few years by accusations that it is "politicizing science," especially through the practice of stacking advisory panels with political partisans. For instance, in 2002 a professor at the University of New Mexico claimed that an invitation to join the National Advisory Council on Drug Abuse was rescinded when he failed to express to an agency official his support for President Bush.

An accumulation of such experiences has led to a number of investigations and reports on the process for selecting members of federal science advisory panels. These panels provide scientific input to the government on issues ranging from environmental standards to regulation of prescription drugs. But the apparent solution to this problem -- to cleanly separate science from politics -- is impossible, and the commonly prescribed cure for current abuses is worse than the disease.

A November report of the nation's leading nongovernmental science advisory body -- the National Research Council (NRC) -- recommended that presidential nominees to science and technology advisory panels not be asked about their political and policy perspectives. The NRC describes the political and policy views of prospective panelists as "immaterial information" because such perspectives "do not necessarily predict their position on particular policies." This "don't ask, don't tell" approach has been endorsed by Democratic decision makers, as well as by the Union of Concerned Scientists. Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) commented, "Once you begin letting politics get in the way of choosing scientists to offer expert advice, you corrupt the very process designed to get you good advice."

But in fact politics is unavoidable in the empaneling process. The real question is whether we want to openly confront this reality or allow it to play out in the proverbial backrooms of political decision making.

In nearly every other area of politics, advice is proffered with political and policy perspectives at the fore: the Supreme Court, congressional hearing witness lists, the Sept. 11 commission, to name just a few. In no other area where advice is given to the government is it even plausibly considered that politics can or should be ignored. And while science is the practice of developing systematic knowledge, scientists are both human beings and citizens, with values and views, which they often express in public forums.

Thus, whether they are asked or not during the appointment process, many scientists' views on politics and policy are well known. For instance, thanks to a letter of endorsement we know of 48 Nobel Prize winners who supported John Kerry for

president. It would be easy to convene an advisory panel of scientists who happen to have signed this letter without formally asking them about their political views.

Moreover, to evaluate whether a policy focused on keeping political considerations out of the scientific advisory process is working, it would be necessary to have information showing that the composition of particular panels is not biased with respect to panelists' political and policy views, which in turn would require knowing what those views are in the first place. It is a Catch-22.

Finally, science advisory panels never deal purely with science. They are convened to provide guidance either on policy or on scientific information that is directly relevant to policy. And as Arizona State University's Dan Sarewitz has persuasively argued, "When an issue is both politically and scientifically contentious, then one's point of view can usually be supported with an array of legitimate facts that seem no less compelling than the facts assembled by those with a different perspective." Consider the issue of climate change. Even as scientists have come to a robust consensus that human activities have significant effects on the climate, legitimate debate continues on the costs and benefits of proposed policy action, such as the Kyoto Protocol. And evaluation of costs and benefits involves considerations of values and politics. It is hopelessly naive to think that an advisory board on climate change could be empaneled without consideration of how the views of its members map onto the existing political debate.

Rather than eliminating considerations of politics in the composition of science advisory panels, a policy of "don't ask, don't tell" just makes it more difficult to see the role played by politics, which will be ever present.

More important than the composition of scientific advisory panels is the charge that they are given and the processes they employ to provide useful information to decision makers. The current debate over these panels reinforces the old myth that we can somehow cleanly separate science from politics and then ensure that the science is somehow untainted by the "impurities" of the rest of society. Yet paradoxically, we also want science to be relevant to policy. A better approach would be to focus our attention on developing transparent, accountable and effective processes to manage politics in science -- not to pretend that it doesn't exist.

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