

# Determinants of Representatives' Votes on the Flake Amendment to End National Science Foundation Funding of Political Science Research

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**ABSTRACT** In May 2012, political scientists learned of efforts by representative Jeff Flake (R-AZ) to eliminate political science funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF) budget. The American Political Science Association (APSA) was caught off-guard, and concerned political scientists scrambled to contact their representatives and urge the amendment's defeat. Flake's initial effort to cut funds overall from the NSF was defeated, but a second measure, specifically to keep the NSF from funding political science, passed only hours later. This was the second time in three years that legislators targeted the NSF Political Science Program. Although these measures have been sponsored and widely supported by Republicans, some Democrats have supported these measures as well. This article examines the vote on the Flake Amendment to understand why individual representatives voted for or against cutting NSF funding for political science research.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) supports political science research by faculty, as well as by undergraduate and graduate students. In fiscal year 2011, the Political Science Program spent about \$1,000,000 on new research, training and workshop projects, and dissertation grants.<sup>1</sup> In 2009, this important source of research funding was threatened when senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) filed an amendment to eliminate political science funding from the NSF budget. Coburn argued that political science “really is not science at all” and that “theories on political behavior are best left to CNN, pollsters, pundits, historians, candidates, political parties, and the voters, rather than being funded out of

taxpayers' wallets.”<sup>2</sup> The Coburn Amendment, as it came to be known, was defeated in the Senate with little debate. Studies analyzing that amendment found that while party was the largest determinant of senators' votes, the number of highly rated political science PhD programs in each state, the proportion of each state's population with an advanced degree, and whether the senator had majored in political science as an undergraduate significantly influenced the votes as well (Uscinski and Klofstad 2010).

Following the defeat of the Coburn Amendment, it seemed political science NSF funding was safe. Thus, when representative Jeff Flake (R-AZ) sought to diminish NSF funding in May 2012, the American Political Science Association (APSA) was seemingly caught off-guard, and political scientists were only told of Flake's efforts as they unfolded. Unlike the Coburn Amendment, there was little build-up to Flake's proposals because they were not subject to a drawn-out committee process.

Representative Flake first introduced an amendment to reduce overall NSF funding by \$1.25 billion, returning it to “pre-stimulus” 2008 funding levels. The vote took place May 9, 2012; the

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amendment was defeated 121-291 with 19 not voting. The 179 Democrats who voted opposed the amendment; the 233 Republicans had a near even split, 121-112. News of the amendment's defeat quickly spread through the blogosphere, eliciting a hesitant sigh of relief from political scientists. As Greg Koger of *TheMonkeyCage.org* commented, "the good news is that even a Tea-Party tinged House in the midst of a huge budget shortfall realizes that the NSF plays a vital role in our society. On the other hand, it is not clear what the margin would be for an amendment targeted at political science."<sup>3</sup> Political scientists would soon find out.

In response to his initial defeat, Flake proposed a second amendment (hereafter referred to as the "Flake Amendment") that would leave NSF funding intact, but bar the use of funds for political science research (this amendment borrowed language from the 2009 Coburn Amendment). When Flake began his remarks on the proposed amendment by mentioning debt and spending, he pointed out that the measure did not actually reduce spending, as his previous failed amendment would have. He therefore argued through most of his remaining remarks that political science research wasted "taxpayer dollars on a meritless program."<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, Flake, who holds a master's degree in political science from Brigham Young University, pointed out that political science research "has its benefits. The work of political scientists advances the knowledge and understanding of citizenship and government, politics, and this shouldn't be minimized." But, he went on to minimize it anyway, claiming that many current NSF grants would not pass the "laugh-test," and that while "these studies might satisfy the curiosities of a few academics," he "seriously doubts society will benefit from them."<sup>5</sup> The irony in Flake's reasoning was carried further a few days later in a post on his Facebook page:

I'm a big fan of political science, a field in which I have an advanced degree. In fact, I think so much of the science that I don't believe that federal funding, particularly in an era of trillion dollar deficits, is necessary to validate it.<sup>6</sup>

*Although both Coburn and Flake justified their efforts due to concerns over government spending, neither of these amendments would have cut overall spending; they would only keep funding from going to political science researchers. And, while other social science disciplines continue to fly under the radar, political science is continually targeted.*

In response to Flake's floor discussion, representative Chaka Fattah (D-PA) argued that although the NSF budget was substantial, ignorance is worse: "It is important that we understand the political dynamics, radicalization of populations around the world, how political parties operate in the former Soviet Union, all of the other issues that are being studied." Fattah holds an undergraduate degree in political science, and like Flake, a master's degree as well. He noted it is both easy and politically expedient for Flake to call out certain NSF funded projects:

Now, there's some advantage, I guess, politically to appear to be anti-intellectual, to have some desire to know little or less about what's going on in the world about us. But it is not worthy of a great Nation . . . I can see that you could probably bring a list of studies in front of the Congress from the National Science Foundation and get

a laugh on any day. But these studies are important. They're merit based. They're decided on merit only.<sup>7</sup>

With discussion only from Flake and Fattah, the vote to eliminate political science funding took place just before midnight on May 9, 2012, and passed 218-208 with 5 not voting. Most of the support came from Republicans: 213 Republicans and 5 Democrats. The 181 noes came mostly from Democrats, but 27 Republicans voted no as well. With passage secured in the House, the spending bill with the Flake Amendment moved to the Senate. The Flake amendment did not become law. However, in March 2013 Senator Tom Coburn sponsored an amendment to eliminate political science funding; but a compromise was reached to keep political science funding but limit it to projects "promoting national security or the economic interests of the United States."

Little media attention was given to Flake's efforts prior to reaching the House floor. But, after the amendment to eliminate political science funding was passed, the value of funding political science research elicited an uncharacteristic amount of discussion in the popular media. Charles Lane (2012) and Ezra Klein (2012) of the *Washington Post* both addressed the topic, the latter supporting political science funding, the former decrying it. *The New York Times Sunday Review* gave space for discussing political science funding as well (Stevens 2012). Much of this coverage appears to have been driven by the efforts of political scientists to justify political science research and funding in the blogosphere. In particular, *TheMonkeyCage.org* highlighted past NSF-funded research and extolled its value.

Even with the slim chance that the Flake Amendment will ever become law, its passage greatly concerned political scientists, and academics writ large (e.g., "A Different Agenda" 2012). This is the second time in three years NSF political science funding has been targeted by Congress. Although both Coburn and Flake justified their efforts due to concerns over government spending, neither of these amendments would have cut overall

spending; they would only keep funding from going to political science researchers. And, while other social science disciplines continue to fly under the radar, political science is continually targeted.

The Flake Amendment did not address issues salient with the wider public or the media, nor did career or party fortunes appear to rest on the outcome. We have little reason to expect that either party would expend much effort in cajoling members to vote one way or the other (e.g., Bawn and Koger 2008). Given this, the vote on the Flake Amendment provides an ideal case to determine what factors, other than party, influence legislators to support or not support political science NSF funding. The analysis that follows demonstrates the impact that representatives' relevant individual, constituency, and institutional characteristics have on their vote.

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## DATA

### Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is a binary measure of representatives' votes on Flake's proposed amendment to eliminate political science funding.<sup>8</sup> Votes in favor of the amendment (and in favor of cutting political science funding) are coded "1," and votes against the amendment (in favor of keeping political science funding) are coded "0." We exclude those not voting.

### Individual Characteristics

Legislator's personal experiences, generational cohort, religion, education, race, gender, and other personal characteristics have been found to predict voting behavior (e.g., Uscinski et al. 2009, Rocca, Sanchez, and Uscinski 2008). Given the specificity of the vote in question, we expect representatives' educational experiences to be the individual characteristic with the most explanatory power. Because college students choose degrees in subjects they have an affinity for, we expect representatives with political science or related degrees to vote to keep NSF political science funding. Our analysis accounts for whether each representative has an undergraduate degree in political science, a master's degree in political science, a master's of public administration, a law degree, or a doctorate in political science. In total, 135 representatives who voted on the amendment majored in political science as an undergraduate (73 Democrats and 62 Republicans).<sup>9</sup> Of the members who voted on the amendment, 21 hold master's degrees in political science, 21 hold a master's in public administration, 160 hold law degrees, and 5 hold a doctorate in political science.

### Constituency Characteristics

Beyond making good policy, legislators' concerns center on reelection—without it, no policy objectives can be attained (Fenno 1973, Mayhew 1974). Therefore, scholars have found that district characteristics and constituent demands/preferences drive legis-

Our final two measures of constituency opinion are each districts' education and income levels. We expect more highly educated and higher-earning constituencies to be disposed toward keeping funding for social science research. We measure these factors as the percentage of each district with an advanced degree and as the median income of each district.<sup>13</sup>

### Institutional Characteristics

Along with individual and constituency characteristics, institutional factors also affect legislators' voting behavior (Fenno 1973, Snyder and Groseclose 2000). We include a binary variable to denote party identification; Democratic representatives are coded "0," and Republicans "1." We expect Democrats to favor keeping political science funding given that Democrats mostly voted against the 2009 Coburn Amendment (Uscinski and Klofstad 2010), and also because social scientists tend to overwhelmingly support Democrats (e.g., Cardiff and Klein 2005). In contrast, it remains a mystery why Republicans continually single-out political science for defunding. We also include a variable measuring the number of years since each representative first took office in the House. We expect representatives who are more senior to support further political science funding because it is likely that they have had more exposure to political science research over the years for campaign strategy and policy analysis.

## RESULTS

We present the results of logistic regression analysis of votes on the Flake Amendment in table 1. Positive coefficients indicate an increased likelihood of voting in favor of the Flake Amendment (cutting political science funding). Given that logistic regression coefficients are not readily interpretable, for significant coefficients we present the substantive influence we estimate each variable to have had on the likelihood of voting for the Flake Amendment.<sup>14</sup> Each estimate was made while holding all other

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lative behavior (Miller and Stokes 1963). In the case of the Flake Amendment, we measure the degree to which a representative's constituency would care about NSF political science funding.<sup>10</sup> First, we expect House members from districts with prominent political science PhD programs to vote to keep political science NSF funding for fear of angering those constituents. Therefore we include the number of top-50 political science PhD programs in each district in our analysis.<sup>11</sup> In this same vein, we also expect representatives from districts with scholars who recently received NSF political science funding to be less likely to support cutting that funding. Although the Flake Amendment would not affect past awardees, legislators do not want to "take away the bacon," by cutting future opportunities to those currently relying on government dollars. Therefore, we include a variable measuring the number of NSF political science grants awarded by district for fiscal year 2008.<sup>12</sup> We expect increases in both of these variables to increase the likelihood of each representative voting to keep NSF funding.

factors in the model at their means. Dichotomous variables are interpreted by comparing the likelihood of voting for the amendment between the two categories (e.g., Democrats versus Republicans), while nondichotomous variables are interpreted by comparing the minimum and maximum value of the variable. The model performs well; it correctly predicts 93.19% of the Representatives' votes, and provides a pseudo  $R^2$  of .67.

### Individual Characteristics

In section A of table 1, we see that representatives who majored in political science as undergraduates were more likely to support funding political science research by voting against the amendment. Substantively, representatives who majored in political science were 16 percentage points less likely to vote for the amendment. This suggests the affinity students have for the subjects they studied during their college years carries on later into life. For example, representative Robert Aderholt (AL-4), a Republican, majored in political science as an undergraduate and voted

**Table 1**  
**Regression Analysis of “Yes” Vote to Eliminate NSF Political Science Funding**

		PREDICTED LIKELIHOOD OF “YES” VOTE	
		IV Min	IV Max
<b>Section A</b>			
<b>Individual Characteristics</b>			
BA/BS in Political Science	-.75* (.41)	43%	27%
MA in Political Science	-.25 (.60)	—	—
MA in Public Administration	.05 (1.26)	—	—
Law Degree	.03 (.38)	—	—
PhD in Political Science	-2.60* (1.34)	39%	8%
<b>Section B</b>			
<b>Constituency Characteristics</b>			
Number of Top 50 Political Science PhD Programs	-1.56*** (.62)	42%	6%
Number of Political Science NSF Grants	-.61* (.32)	40%	6%
Percent of Population with MA Degree or Better	.07 (.38)	—	—
Median Income	<.01 (<.01)	—	—
<b>Section C</b>			
<b>Institutional Characteristics</b>			
Party Affiliation (Republican)	5.93*** (.75)	2%	89%
Number of Terms in Office	.02 (.04)	—	—
<b>Intercept</b>	-2.13** (.95)		
<b>Log-likelihood</b>	-97.45		
$\chi^2$	182.60***		
<b>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></b>	.67		
<b>N</b>	426		

\*p ≤ .10 \*\*p ≤ .05 \*\*\*p ≤ .01 (robust standard errors in parentheses)

Model Type: Logistic Regression

Notes: Standard errors were clustered by state; robust standard errors in parentheses. The model correctly predicts the vote of 93% of Representatives.

to keep political science funding. However, not all political science majors supported political science funding: representative John Barrow (GA-12), a University of Georgia political science undergraduate, was one of five Democrats who voted to end NSF funding for political science.

The model shows that holding a master’s degree in political science or public administration was not a significant predictor of the vote. As previously mentioned, Flake holds a master’s degree in political science. In addition, holding a law degree was not a

significant predictor of the vote. However, those holding doctoral degrees in political science were significantly more likely to support political science funding. Members who hold a PhD in political science are 31 percentage points less likely to have voted to end political science NSF funding than those who do not. All representatives holding a political science PhD excepting Republican Tim Huelskamp (KA-1), voted to keep political science funding.

**Constituency Characteristics**

Moving to section B of table 1, we find that political science-specific district characteristics are highly related to representatives’ voting behavior. The number of top-50 political science PhD programs in one’s district increases the likelihood of voting against the Flake Amendment. Having the maximum number of top-50 political science PhD programs in one’s district decreased the likelihood of a yes vote by 36 percentage points. These results suggest that representatives may be unwillingly to take potential funding from prominent political science departments within their districts. The number of political science NSF grants awarded in each district in 2011 also correlates with votes on the Flake Amendment. Representatives from districts with the highest number of grants received were 34 percentage points less likely to support the amendment compared to representatives from districts with no grants. The results also show that House members who represent districts with higher percentages of residents with advanced degrees and higher incomes were not more likely to vote for or against the Flake Amendment.

**Institutional Characteristics**

In this age of party polarization (Poole and Rosenthal 2007), one would expect party to be an overwhelming predictor of voting behavior in general. In contrast, however, given that political science funding is neither salient to the wider public nor tied to party reputation, one might expect party to play a lesser role in the Flake Amendment vote. Our results show that party is the most potent predictor of the vote. Democrats were 87 percentage points less likely to support cutting political science funding than Republicans. Section C of table 1 suggests that

while party affiliation was an important determining factor, tenure was not.

**DISCUSSION**

Recently, a greater effort, particularly in the blogosphere, has been made to extend the reach of political science research and make the public aware of its value. For instance, two blogs by political scientists, “The Monkey Cage” and “Daniel W. Drezner,” were named as two of *Time Magazine’s* top 25 blogs in 2012. It is hoped

that outreach efforts such as these will increase awareness of the utility of political science research in the public, media, and government.

In this same vein, these results also speak to how our discipline is (or, is not) represented in Washington, DC. The flagship organization of the political science discipline, the American Political Science Association (APSA), is in transition. Executive director Michael Brintnall is stepping down, and the search to replace him is under way. Given the repeated efforts by Congress in recent years to defund political science research, our analysis of the Flake Amendment suggests that Brintnall's replacement and APSA's future leadership will need to make targeted efforts to establish ties on Capitol Hill and lobby on behalf of the discipline. Without outreach efforts, it is unlikely that political science NSF funding will remain intact.

The vote on the Flake Amendment provides a unique opportunity to identify which types of congressional members can and should be targeted by future lobbying efforts. Constituency characteristics such as the number top political science PhD programs in the district and the number of recent NSF grants predict support for political science funding. Legislators who have degrees in political science (bachelors' or doctoral degrees) are more likely to support political science funding. Given that almost one third of current representatives majored in political science, our students may very well wind up in the House one day. Therefore, it is imperative that political science educators stress our work's value to undergraduates.

In conclusion, while this paper sheds light on the determinants of the Flake Amendment vote, a number of additional questions remain unanswered. This is the third time since 1995 that Republicans in Congress have attempted to cut NSF funding for political science. Why does this continually occur? Why do Republicans target political science and not other social sciences? Political scientists should expend greater effort in answering these questions.

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## NOTES

1. In addition, the NSF supports the American National Election Studies survey, one of the most important sources of data on the political opinions and behaviors of the American people.
2. [http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore\\_id=82180b1f-a03e-4600-a2e5-846640c2c880](http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore_id=82180b1f-a03e-4600-a2e5-846640c2c880)
3. <http://themonkeycage.org/blog/2012/05/09/update-flake-amendment-to-reduce-nsf-funding-defeated-121-291/>
4. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2012-05-09/pdf/CREC-2012-05-09-pt1-PgH2515-3.pdf#page=29>
5. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2012-05-09/pdf/CREC-2012-05-09-pt1-PgH2515-3.pdf#page=29>
6. <https://www.facebook.com/JeffFlake1?ref=ts>; May 12, 2012
7. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CREC-2012-05-09/pdf/CREC-2012-05-09-pt1-PgH2515-3.pdf#page=29>
8. Although not as germane to our purposes, we did analyze the vote on the prior Flake amendment seeking to cut NSF funding. A similar model to that

shown in the text does fairly well in explaining that vote; it correctly predicts 71% of the votes (this model excluded party as a variable).

9. Our count of political science undergraduate degrees includes representatives who double-majored in political science and another discipline, and those that majored in a closely related discipline such as public administration, government, or international relations.
10. We do not include in this analysis direct measures of representatives' or district ideology. Most measures of legislator ideology are based on past voting behavior; therefore, their inclusion in our model would lead to a tautology—predicting votes with votes. With this said, the Voteview blog has a comparison between the vote and ideology scores for interested readers. See <http://voteview.com/blog/?p=490>. This shows that “the vote was largely party-line with five Democrats voting ‘Yea’ and twenty-seven Republicans voting ‘Nay.’ The Democratic defections do not appear to be ideologically-driven, but the twenty-seven Republicans who broke party ranks are generally less conservative than their counterparts who supported the amendment.” We exclude measures of constituency ideology because they would encompass the constituency characteristics we are trying to retain estimates for, thereby masking the effects of our independent variables of interest. We estimated an alternative model with a district ideology score (Obama's margin of victory). That coefficient was significant and negative as predicted.
11. To measure the top-50 programs, we used the most recent *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. Forty-six districts have top-50 programs, while MA-8 and NC-4 have two.
12. The variable counts the number of NSF political science grants awarded to universities within each district in 2011, according to *PS: Political Science and Politics*, January 2012: 34 districts received grants. North Carolina's 4th District (Duke University, University of North Carolina) received the most with 6, while New Jersey's 12th district received 5; Wisconsin's 2nd, New York's 13th, Massachusetts' 3rd, and California's 53rd received 4 grants each.
13. The “MA + Population” variable reports the percentage of district residents who hold a graduate degree, as of 2009 (<http://proximityone.com/cdprofiles.htm>). The “District Median Income” variable indicates the 2010 household median income for district residents per *The New York Times*.
14. These were estimates with the Clarify program in Stata (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2001).

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