

# THE 2006 US MIDTERM ELECTIONS AND SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY POLICY

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The 2006 United States midterm (i.e., between presidential) elections are historic, leading to only the second time in more than 50 years that control of the US House of Representatives will be handed over from one party to the other. The other change in majority occurred following the 1994 midterm elections which ended almost four decades of Democratic control of the House. In addition, the 2006 elections ended four years of unified Republican control of the US presidency and Congress, a situation which last occurred from 1953 to 1955. In the context of the war in Iraq and the looming 2008 presidential contest, the 2006 elections represent a major shift in US politics. But what, if anything, might they mean for issues of science and technology?

To be fair, I should note that I had the opportunity to work for a short time for the Democrats in 1991 on the staff of the House Science Committee under Congressman George Brown (D-CA). Seeing what happened to many of my friends and former colleagues when control of the House changed over in 1994 left a sour taste in my mouth, not simply for the Republicans led by Newt Gingrich (R-GA) who assumed power in 1995, but more generally for the arrogance of excessive political partisanship. I believe that the seeds of the current Republican loss are found not simply in the current policies of the Bush Administration (although, to be sure, this plays a big part), but more deeply in how Republicans have managed the Congress since 1994. With that "full disclosure" out of the way, here are some thoughts about the upcoming 110th Congress.

When I was in graduate school in the early 1990s working toward a Ph.D. in political science, it was popular to talk about the consequences of "divided government," which referred to control of Congress by one party and control of the presidency by the other party. For some political scientists, governance under divided government was considered not only inelegant but also inefficient, because it was so easy for one party to constrain the actions of the other. I recall reading many articles emphasizing the importance of united government. Since 2002, with united Republican control of the legislative and executive branches, discussion among political scientists of the perils of divided government appears to some degree to have waned and has been replaced with concerns over the perils of unified government.

As the United States once again enters a period of divided government, what consequences might we expect for issues related to science and technology policy?

First and foremost, we should expect more oversight. Oversight refers to efforts by the government to hold itself publicly accountable. One of the challenges of unified government is that there are fewer incentives for effective oversight of the executive branch by Congress. One reason for this is that the government does not always perform effectively or efficiently, so oversight can reveal evidence of poor governmental performance. As the 2006 elections indicate, poor governmental performance has implications for whomever the public favors in elections. In this context, a downside of oversight is that politicians use oversight to score political points with the public, and in the process may lose sight of good governance. Oversight is challenging in the best of circumstances, and this is made worse when political incentives are added to the mix. If there is one thing that we might expect from the 110th Congress, it will be greater oversight of the president and federal agencies.

Greater oversight will be a welcome change, as recent congresses have been derelict in their oversight duties. We should expect that a great deal of congressional oversight will be directed to US policies related to Iraq, and appropriately so. But there are also areas of science and technology policy where greater oversight is likely to occur, including issues such as the future of the Space Station, Space Shuttle, and NASA, stem cell funding policies, energy policies, climate policies, state science policies and federalism, academic earmarking, technology transfer, the

fidelity of drug approval processes, government science advice, management of federal scientists who wish to speak out publicly, K-12 on up through postgraduate education, technology workforce issues, and the list goes on and on.

In fact, there is so much opportunity for congressional oversight that it will be very easy for the Democrats to lose their focus and completely waste the next two years. The 2008 election cycle, which will really begin in earnest in late 2007, will compress the time available to the 110th Congress to conduct effective oversight. It will also create incentives for more politically motivated oversight, such as on stem cell funding policies, in an effort to create an advantage for Democratic candidates in the 2008 election. A little of this posturing should be expected, but too much will be a wasteful distraction from implementing effective science and technology policies. Arguably the Republicans lost sight of governance during their run in Congress - the Democrats would be wise to note this lesson, but such wisdom is far from guaranteed.

In the first year of the new Congress, there will likely be those more extreme partisans on the Democratic side who will seek retribution for the past 12 years of Republican rule (particularly in the House). The transition that followed the 1994 Gingrich revolution left bad feelings with many Democrats, who had ruled continuously for decades (and, of course, created pent-up demands for retribution among Republicans). Acting like the Gingrich Republicans may be emotionally satisfying to some Democrats and their more fervent constituents, but it will not contribute either to effective policy making or to the future prospects for the Democratic leadership in Congress. One need only look to the 2006 elections to learn this lesson.

More speculatively, it is difficult to imagine dramatic changes in specific science and technology policies, or even much progressive legislation emerging from the House or Senate. Both chambers are only narrowly controlled by the Democrats, and thus will be governed by the middle, not the extreme. This diminishes the likelihood of radical policy change on issues of science and technology, which have always been characterized by a broad bipartisan support. On the other hand, a few pieces of novel legislation may emerge simply with the goal of forcing a veto of that legislation by President Bush - as for future Presidential candidates, it is never too early to be thinking about the 2008 campaign commercials. Stem cell funding policies and energy policies are two issues that might fit into this latter category. The 110th Congress will likely focus some attention on the issue of climate change. For instance, climate change is likely to see frequent congressional hearings. Such attention will keep the issue in the public eye and perhaps add to the likelihood that a particular Democrat will run for Congress. But as is often the case, it is far easier to talk about climate change than to implement effective policies (and not only in the US). It is unlikely that there will be any significant action or realignment on the issue in Congress and, of course, in a closely divided Congress the presidential veto precludes significant departure from business-as-usual in any case.

As far as funding for research and development, the status quo seems well entrenched. R&D has always enjoyed strong bipartisan support and this will not change in the 110th Congress. The macro-budgetary constraints have not changed and the war in Iraq and looming 2008 election probably rule out any significant change to US fiscal policies. So it is likely that Congress will do its best to fund science and technology, and the R&D lobby will find these efforts unsatisfactory.

Ultimately, congressional behavior on issues of science and technology may be important for what they tell us about politics more generally. Science and technology has always been an area with broad bipartisan support and collaboration. If science and technology policies become highly politicized and partisan, we should then expect confrontation and gridlock across the policy spectrum. Alternatively, effective collaboration on issues related to science and technology might just indicate that the promises of a new spirit of bipartisanship have some meaning to them. Time, and not much of it, will tell.

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