

POLICY ARTICLE

SCIENCE FUNDING

# Partisan disparities in the funding of science in the United States

Republican lawmakers consistently provided robust federal funding, often exceeding Democrats

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The increasing complexity and extended timelines involved in scientific research and technological innovation highlight the importance of consistent, reliable support for science. The United States government—the largest research funder in the world—plays a pivotal role, mobilizing resources domestically while also serving as a global leader, shaping strategies of international funders and policy-makers (1, 2). Despite this central importance of the US government in global science, the relationship between its political control and science funding remains poorly understood. This gap in understanding is particularly pressing in an era of growing political polarization. Here we leverage a comprehensive database of appropriations—the funding levels denoted in statute and directly set by policy-makers—to capture federal support for science from 1980 to 2020. Despite occasional public skepticism of science (3), Republican lawmakers consistently provided robust funding, often exceeding Democrats, underscoring the importance of bipartisan investments in science and research.

Partisan control of Congress and the presidency oscillates between Democrats and Republicans (4), creating short-term dynamics that can conflict with the long-term commitments that science demands. Divergence between the transient nature of political control and the enduring needs of scientific research raises critical questions: How do these political shifts influence the allocation of federal science funding? Does political volatility pose a threat to the steady investments essential for scientific progress? Understanding the interplay between political polarization, funding trends, and the lengthy timelines of scientific research is essential for safeguarding the future of long-term research.

The urgency of addressing these questions is heightened by recent proposed shifts by the administration in federal funding priorities. Recent decisions affecting indirect cost rates, federal grant disbursements, and agency funding priorities have introduced new challenges for research institutions and heightened uncertainty within the scientific community. Although some of these measures have faced legal and institutional pushback, the broader instability surrounding science funding under-

scores the need for a deeper understanding of how political control shapes long-term investments in research.

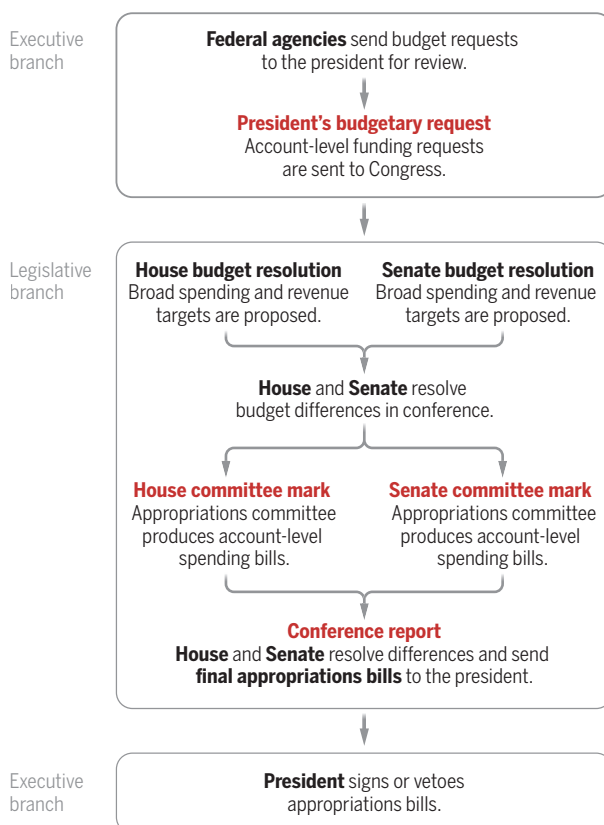
Since the US federal government began funding scientific research after World War II, this funding has primarily been guided by a vision of science, articulated by Vannevar Bush, in which scientists themselves hold substantial discretion over research methods and scope. This ideal of science highlights its philosophical and cultural independence and the need to shield research from short-term political or bureaucratic pressures.

Yet there are reasons to believe that science funding is not immune to political forces. Federal funding agencies are ultimately responsible to the political institutions that set their budgets, conduct oversight, and appoint their top officials. Congress and the president have a number of tools at their disposal to influence the bureaucracy. For example, all government funding requires an act of Congress, and members of Congress may attach strings and restrictions to this funding. Top jobs at federal agencies are usually held by presidential appointees, some of whom require Senate confirmation. The Executive Office of the President oversees many agency decisions, including promulgating regulations and requesting funds from Congress. A long line of political science research suggests that these factors allow for political control over the bureaucracy (see supplementary materials).

For example, between 2009 and 2012, there were three successive efforts by prominent Republicans in the House of Representatives to drastically cut or completely eliminate National Science Foundation (NSF) funding for political science research. Although congressional support for NSF is mostly bipartisan, Republicans are more likely to express concerns about accountability in NSF spending than Democrats (3) in the midst of long political battles over public funding for social sciences (5). In addition, the inclusion of the so-called “Dickey Amendments” in annual appropriation bills, sponsored and supported largely by Republican legislators for decades, limited the use of federal dollars in human embryonic stem cell research and gun violence research.

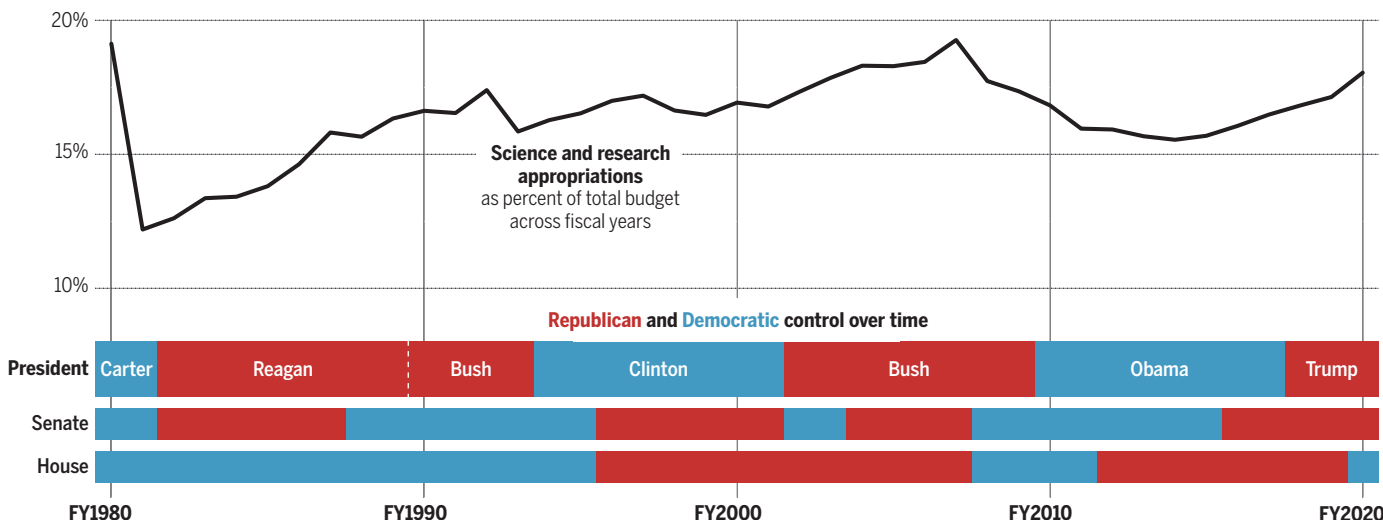
## Key stages of the appropriations process

● Stages where account-level data were captured for study



## The evolution of science- and research-related appropriations, and party control

Analysis of annual budget appropriations figures for 171 science and research accounts reflects how the proportion of the total budget that is allocated to research and development has changed over decades, as party control of different parts of the federal government has also changed. For each fiscal year, party control is shown as of the prior year, when the appropriations for that fiscal year were enacted.



### THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING APPROPRIATIONS

Despite such high-profile examples and reasons for concern about differential partisan support, we lack any systematic evidence about the full scope of federal science funding over time. Our understanding remains limited partly owing to the difficulties in systematically tracing the US government’s science- and research-related expenditures. Here we leverage a database that categorizes discretionary base budget authority for federal science and research accounts from fiscal years 1980 to 2020 (beginning 1 October each year) (6). Base budget authority, as outlined in annual appropriations bills, serves as the primary mechanism for funding the recurring needs of the federal government for the normal operation of programs and agencies. It excludes emergency budget authority [e.g., 2009 “stimulus” American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)], mandatory budget authority (e.g., entitlement spending like Medicaid, Veterans Benefits, or other one-off statutes like the Inflation Reduction Act), and tax expenditures (e.g., tax credits, or exclusions that are counted as foregone revenue instead of expenditures). Our analysis focuses exclusively on funding allocated through the regular appropriations process, which governs discretionary spending and excludes budget reconciliation and other forms of mandatory spending. Distinct from recent large-scale legislative packages that use one-time or mandatory funding mechanisms outside the annual appropriations process, our data capture the routine, institutionalized flow of federal support for science.

The data are derived from the Comparative Statements of Budget Authority (CSBAs) contained in the House and Senate committee reports, as well as the conference reports (or joint explanatory statements) accompanying public laws. CSBAs reflect the official scoring of appropriations language by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), ensuring consistency in how budget authority is assessed.

We manually identify 171 specific federal appropriations accounts across 27 federal agencies associated with science or research activity. Appropriations accounts are the basic units that Congress uses to allocate funds. Each account typically corresponds to an unnumbered paragraph in an appropriations act (see supplementary materials). We define science and research broadly, focusing not only on research and development (R&D) funding but also on social science and policy research. These accounts include funding for the NSF, National Institutes of Health (NIH), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), R&D programs

within the Department of Defense (DoD), the National Agricultural Statistics Service, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, programs within the Census Bureau, policy evaluation by the CBO, and numerous other research, technology, and development programs across the federal government (see table S12 for a full list of programs). The accounts that we identify fund government programs related to science and research (e.g., NSF grants to external researchers), programs at agencies conducting their own scientific activities [e.g., NASA, US Geological Survey, or Department of Energy (DOE) National Laboratories like Fermi or Argonne], and contracts—legally binding agreements in which the government purchases goods or services, including research—from private entities.

All of these accounts are subject to the detailed budget and appropriations processes involving the president and both chambers of Congress (see the first figure). To measure proposed and enacted appropriation levels for every year and for each of these 171 science and research accounts, we use hand-collected comparative statements of new budget authority contained in documents produced at four key stages of the appropriations process: the president’s budget request (the president sends account-level funding requests to Congress), reports from House and Senate committee marks (appropriations committees in each chamber produce separate bills containing account-level spending), and the conference report (House and Senate resolve differences in conference and send final appropriations to the president) of the appropriation that was ultimately enacted. We rely on the CBO score for each account, which reflects the spending within that account that would result from the appropriations bill. The inclusion of presidential budget requests and appropriations in House and Senate committee marks, in addition to enacted appropriations, allows us to explore differences in institutional priorities in the interbranch appropriation bargaining process (6).

The overall share of the federal budget allocated to science- and research-related appropriations accounts has evolved during our period of observation, as has party control of the Senate, House, and presidency (see the second figure). Prior studies of government science funding have tended to focus almost exclusively on grantmaking activity (see supplementary materials). However, our data reveal that the vast majority of federal funding for science comes in the form of government contracts rather than competitive grants. As of 2019—the last pre-COVID year for which data are available—the federal government had \$370 billion in outstanding obligations related to grants (and

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other forms of assistance awards such as cooperative agreements and loan guarantees) for science and research accounts, but it had spending obligations of more than \$1.5 trillion for hiring contractors from those same accounts (see fig. S2A.) These data document that although federal science grantmaking constitutes the majority of science funding allocated toward public and private higher learning institutions, it represents a relatively small proportion of total federal spending on science and research. Indeed, we find that during this period, total disbursements from publicly available grantmaking (7) totaled between 7 and 24% of total nonemergency science and research appropriations, with the exception of a short spike in grantmaking that aligns with ARRA. In addition, a substantial portion of the government's science and research activity is performed by private contractors.

Since 1980, total science appropriations have varied between \$120 billion and \$225 billion in 2021 constant dollars, with the largest share historically devoted to the DoD, followed by Health and Human Services, the DOE, and NASA (see fig. S2B) We observe a large initial outlay of funds for the Department of Energy in 1980, shortly following its establishment (see fig. S2C for the distribution of science and research appropriations across accounts in 2020.)

Together, these facts highlight the importance of studying appropriations—the funding levels denoted in statute and directly set by policymakers—to fully capture the government's role in funding science. Appropriations data have several key advantages over other measures of government funding and public policy. They reflect the budget authority that Congress provides to federal agencies to award grants, enter into contracts, or conduct research themselves, thereby encompassing all major spending categories. Because Congress enacts appropriations legislation annually, we can track yearly changes and fluctuations in partisan control. By examining appropriations legislation at key points throughout the policy-making process, we can see not only the president's request but also the funding levels proposed by the House and Senate, as well as those ultimately enacted into law, allowing us to directly examine the influence of partisan dynamics at each stage of the appropriations process. Focusing on bills enacted by Congress links funding decisions to legislative organization. By contrast, “downstream” measures of government funding (i.e., outlays) can take years to materialize, making it difficult to attribute funding choices to the party in control at the time of legislative action (8). Examining appropriation bills themselves sidesteps this problem.

## FEDERAL APPROPRIATIONS AND POLITICAL CONTROL

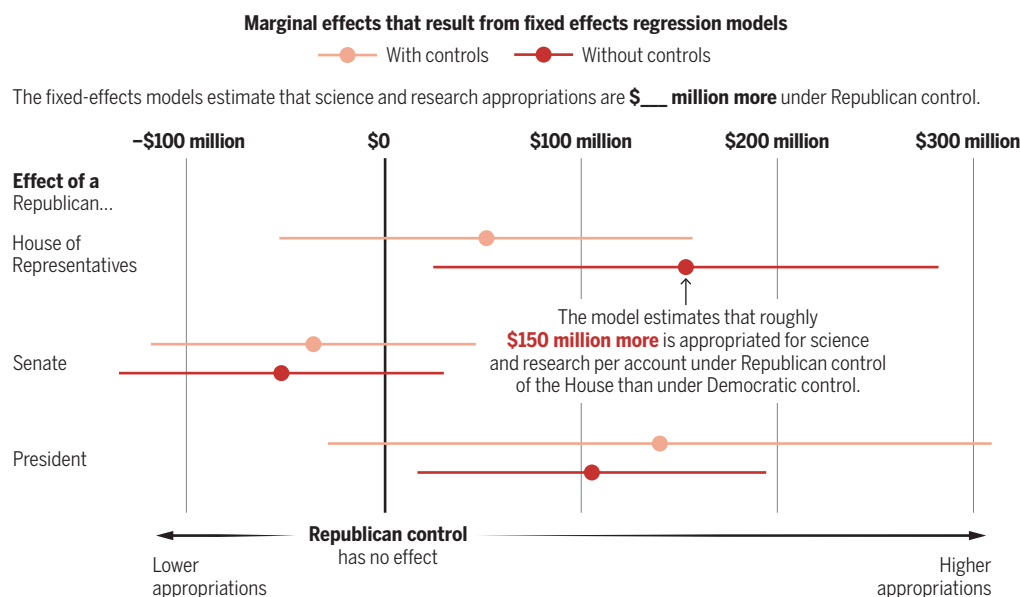
We find that, when the House of Representatives or the presidency has been controlled by Republicans, appropriations have been, on average, substantially higher for science- and research-related accounts than when they have been controlled by Democrats. These results occur in multiple important agencies and departments.

We assess the relationship between partisan institutional control on science funding, using a series of fixed effects regressions on the size of enacted appropriations to science and research accounts within a fiscal year, with indicator variables for Republican control of the House,

Senate, and presidency on grant funding and science appropriations. Although we estimate all models on nominal dollars, we address secular and inflationary trends in spending as well as changes in the statutory discretionary spending caps by including a control for the topline size of the federal budget in all models, as inflation during this period fluctuated more sharply than the budget's overall size, and our descriptive focus is on the prioritization of spending in these accounts relative to the total budget. We choose these simple, parsimonious models with few controls as our main models, because they are most appropriate for drawing descriptive inferences about which party historically allocated more funding to science. Collinear controls may absorb relevant variance, and the descriptive meaning of a regression coefficient becomes increasingly opaque as more variables are included in the model (9). Nevertheless, for transparency and robustness, we also report results from expanded models with numerous additional controls in which we include indicators

## More funding under Republican House or presidency

The chart shows estimated marginal effects, in millions of dollars appropriated to science and research accounts, of Republican control of the House, Senate, and presidency. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. See supplementary materials for full specifications of regression models.



for whether it is a presidential election year, and whether the year's funding vehicle was a full-year continuing resolution, as well as the consumer price index, change in the unemployment rate, the size of the budget deficit (in real dollars), change in gross domestic product per capita, and account fixed effects. In the supplementary materials, we report a suite of alternative specifications—including models using real dollars without the topline budget; account allocations as a share of the topline, agency-level aggregations; stricter definitions of “science-related” accounts; and models that account for the margins of party control in the House and Senate.

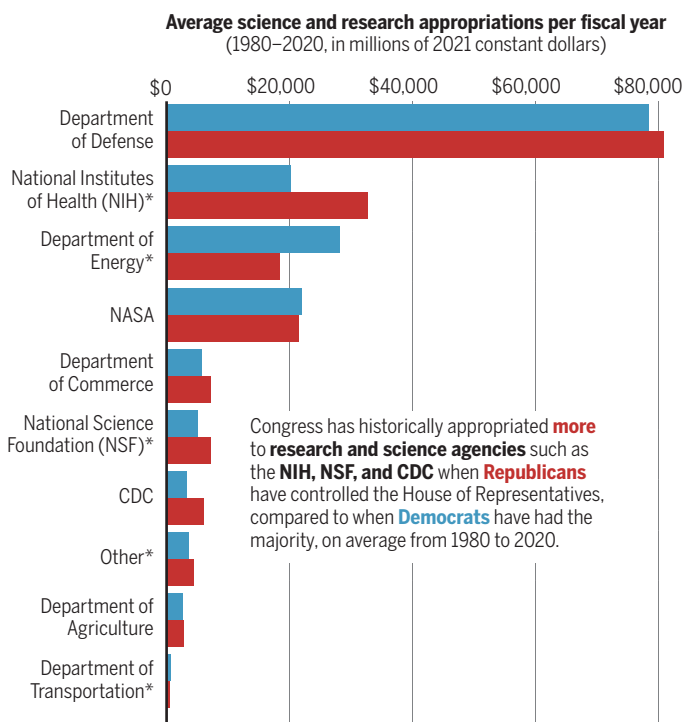
Overall, we find that conditional on the size of the federal budget, federal science and research accounts receive more funding when Republicans control the House of Representatives or the presidency (see the third figure). Although these associations are consistent in direction and magnitude when we include the expanded suite of control variables, they are not statistically significant at conventional levels. Notably, these differences are substantial: According to the simple model, the science- and research-related appropriations accounts received, on average, roughly \$150 million more per account in years when Republicans controlled appropriations in the House, and \$100 million more per account when there was a Republican president. These results

mirror the greater science funding under Republican principals that we observe in the grantmaking data, which we explore below.

Greater Republican funding of science extends beyond the DoD, which we might expect given the Republican issue ownership of national defense and their tendency to support higher defense spending than their Democratic counterparts (see supplementary materials). By reestimating our models of account-level enacted appropriations across agencies and departments, we find that Republican lawmakers in the House tend to appropriate more money for science in the DoD, CDC, NASA, NSF, and NIH, with statistically significant differences at the NIH ( $P < 0.001$ ) and a marginal association at the NSF ( $P = 0.06$ ). Con-

### House funding patterns vary by department

The allocation of federal dollars to science and research appropriation accounts over time is shown by department.



\*Indicates significant difference in funding ( $P < 0.05$ ) between Republican and Democratic control of the House of Representatives. See table S12 for a full list of programs; any of those programs that are not specified by name in this figure are included in the category "Other." NASA, National Aeronautics and Space Administration; CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

versely, appropriations to science and research in the DOE are lower when Republicans control the House ( $P = 0.071$ ), possibly because renewable energy has been a priority area for many Democrats in recent years (10), and because of the large initial outlay when the department was established under a Democratic administration (see fig. S2B). Under Republican presidents, we observe higher appropriations to science and research accounts in the CDC ( $P = 0.015$ ), DoD ( $P = 0.012$ ), and NIH ( $P < 0.001$ ). Notably, science and research accounts in the DoD received considerably greater appropriations under Republican presidents, averaging more than \$1 billion additional dollars per account. By contrast, we observe lower appropriations to science and research accounts in the Department of Commerce ( $P = 0.049$ ) when there is a Republican president. Under Republican control of the Senate, we observe lower appropriations to the CDC, NIH, and NSF, although these associations tend to be more modest in size and not statistically significant at conventional levels ( $P > 0.05$ ). There are notable differences in average yearly appropriations at the department and agency level under Republican and Democratic control of the House of Representa-

tives (see the fourth figure). The full regression results are reported in the supplementary materials (fig. S3 and table S3). Although individual agency- and department-level associations vary in strength and should not be overinterpreted in isolation, the overall pattern indicates that Republican support for science is spread across multiple agencies, rather than being concentrated solely in one department such as defense.

Moreover, the relationships that we observe—where Republican control of the House or presidency is associated with greater science appropriations—are reinforced by the results from the House and Senate committee marks. Indeed, the particular nature of our appropriations data allows us not only to examine final enacted budgets but also to explore the influence of partisan institutional control throughout the budgeting and appropriations process. We estimate the relationship between partisan institutional control and each major stage of the budgeting process, beginning with the presidential budget request, followed by the committee marks drafted by the House and Senate Appropriations Committees (see fig. S4, A to C). We re-estimate the models underlying the third figure at each stage of the budgeting process to assess institutional priorities of each negotiating party separately. Consistent with the political science literature on legislative bargaining, we expect that policy-makers are strategic and likely anticipate what other actors will do (6). For example, senators would be expected to alter their appropriations bill depending on which party controls the House because the Senate is anticipating the House's changes to their proposal. In line with this logic, at all three stages of the budgeting process, we find a positive association between Republican control of the House of Representatives and higher appropriations to science and research accounts (see fig. S4, A to C). When looking at the House bill and the Senate bill, the effect for Republican control of the House is robust to the inclusion of our full set of controls (fig. S4, B and C). We also find a significant association between Republican control of both the presidency and the Senate and science funding in the House bill (fig. S4B). Overall, the observed effects of partisan control appear to be the most robust when we examine proposed appropriations in the House committee marks, with Republican control of all three institutions associated with more proposed spending on science and research accounts (see fig. S4, A to C).

Further breaking out our analysis for different time periods, we find that Republican control of the presidency is associated with higher science and research appropriations from 2001 to 2020 compared with 1980 to 2000 (see tables S9 and S10). This is consistent with scholarship showing that the capacity of Congress has declined since the 1990s, possibly making members of Congress more reliant on the expertise of presidents and their staff. Thus, we expect that the president's influence over federal appropriations is increasing over time. This would explain why Republican presidents are associated with higher science and research funding toward the end of our period of observation.

Taken together, our results highlight how partisan control of the presidency and the House of Representatives—but not the Senate—affects funding for science and research. The large influence of partisan control in the House is consistent with the majority party having more procedural control over the agenda in the House than in the Senate (11). This is partially due to the Senate cloture rule, which requires a three-fifths majority to end debate on nearly all proposals, including appropriations bills. As one party rarely has a three-fifths majority in the Senate, the cloture rule essentially requires appropriations bills to have bipartisan support in the Senate, limiting the influence of the majority party. Likewise, the president—as a unitary actor—does not need to negotiate with the other party before making their budget proposal. This may explain why partisanship has a greater influence on the budget proposed by the president and the House of Representatives than that proposed by the Senate.

Although appropriations data provide important insights into federal allocations for science and research, grantmaking data remain of intrinsic interest to the scientific community because federal grant-

making bodies fund the majority of university-based sponsored R&D, and grant-funded science plays a central role in discovery and innovation. Further, unlike appropriations data, research grant data can be tied directly to research outputs, allowing us to explore the impact of partisan control of funding and oversight institutions on the allocation of funds by federal grant-making bodies across different fields.

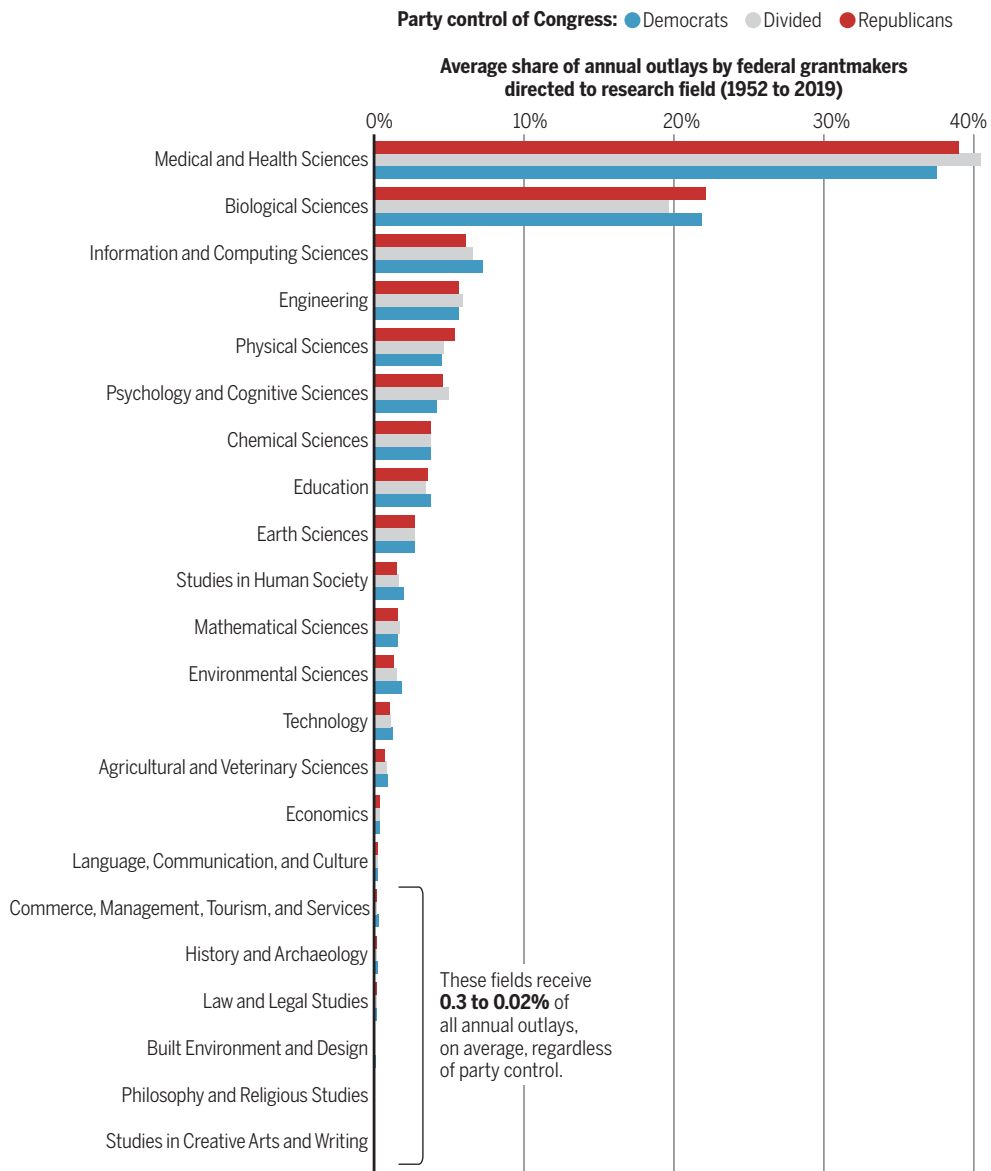
Using data from Dimensions (see supplementary materials), which capture \$1.3 trillion (in 2020 constant dollars), we analyze grants from 103 US federal funders between 1952 and 2019 and find evidence that shifts in partisan control of the political institutions overseeing the agencies and departments that disperse federal grants are associated with changes in grant outlays. Here, we address the problem of temporally associating outlays to downstream outputs by looking at party control at the start date associated with a grant. This allows us to evaluate how grantmaking institutions perform differently when the principals responsible for their oversight are controlled by different parties at the time grants are made, not how they act depending on which party is in power when their budgets were set through the appropriations process. When Republicans control the House of Representatives, the average federal science funder disburses approximately \$70 million more per year compared to when Democrats are in control. When the Senate is under Republican control, funders disburse \$45 million less per year. (These results are from regression models of the same form as those that underlie the third figure, applied to grantmaking from 1952 to 2019, controlling for the size of the

federal budget with funder fixed effects. See fig. S5A and table S2.)

These variations in grant outlays do not appear to translate to notable differences in the prioritization of research fields at a broad level. With few exceptions, the proportion of federal grants allocated to specific research fields remains roughly consistent, regardless of whether Congress is controlled by Republicans or Democrats, or is divided among both parties (see the fifth figure). Overall, we find that funding across broad fields of research appears unassociated with changes in partisan control of Congress. Using market-share models, which apply a centered log ratio transformation of the compositional dependent variable (i.e., percent of funding to each field of research), we find no substantial differences in the share of funding allocated toward research fields based on party control of government at the time of disbursement, which holds both within individual funders and at the aggregate level across all funders (see fig. S5, B and C). This result suggests that whereas the overall level of funding for science by the federal government differs depending on which party controls the levers of power, how these funds are distributed across fields does not.

## Field-level funding consistency regardless of party control

The proportion of federal grants allocated to specific research fields remains roughly consistent, regardless of which party controls Congress.



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## PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our analysis of partisan dynamics in science funding reveals striking and previously unknown patterns, which may have important implications for scholars, science communicators, advocates, and policy-makers. First, our analysis of spending data highlights that grantmaking—long a central focus of the science of science research—represents only a fraction of total outlays made from US federal science- and research-related appropriations accounts. A sizable proportion of these expenditures is directed to private firms through contracts, while federal agencies also conduct substantial in-house research. Decisions about whether and when to enter into contracts, as well as to whom to offer them, are generally made by federal agencies. The Government Accountability Office estimates that in 2023, the federal government spent \$478 billion on service contracts (12), including research. Thus, to fully understand federal spending, we need to capture government spending on contracts.

During the period 1980 to 2020, Republicans allocated more funding than their Democratic counterparts within the topline budgets, a finding that challenges prevailing narratives of Republicans as “anti-

science” (13). This robust support, observed across multiple agencies and departments, underscores the historical importance of Republican investments in science and research. These findings suggest that current advocacy strategies for science funding aimed at Republican lawmakers could emphasize how investments in research have historically aligned with conservative values, such as economic growth, technological innovation, and national security. At the same time, they highlight that both parties have important roles to play in sustaining bipartisan commitment, and that long-term support for science depends on continued engagement across the political spectrum. Highlighting shared priorities that transcend party lines may help maintain bipartisan support for science funding, especially in polarized political environments.

Although these findings should not be interpreted as implying that Democrats do not value or support research and science funding, they do suggest that appropriations have historically been more generous under Republican control. One plausible explanation for our results is that Democrats may have more competing discretionary spending priorities such as health care, education, or social insurance, leaving less funding available for science and research. Given a relatively stable size of the overall federal budget, Democrats may be faced with more challenging trade-offs. Alternatively, it could be the case that Republicans prioritize science and research funding more than their Democratic peers because a substantial portion of this funding is out-laid to private firms. Overall, more research is needed to understand the mechanisms driving these partisan disparities in science and research funding.

Our analysis also underscores the pivotal role of the president and the House of Representatives in shaping appropriations for science and research. The president’s budget request plays an important role in shaping the appropriations bill enacted by Congress. Likewise, House-led appropriations decisions appear to exert substantial influence on overall funding levels, suggesting that advocacy efforts targeting this chamber may be particularly impactful. To safeguard long-term research from the transient nature of political control, policy frameworks should emphasize continuity and bipartisan collaboration in science funding legislation. Mechanisms like multi-year appropriations or independent advisory boards could help insulate research funding from short-term political shifts, ensuring consistent support for critical scientific endeavors.

Our inability to detect differences in field-level grant allocations based on partisan control is a welcome result in today’s politically charged climate. This contrast with appropriations results suggests that while partisan dynamics shape funding across agencies, the field-level distribution of grants appears comparatively stable, perhaps reflecting the influence of internal processes such as peer review. This consistency highlights the importance of maintaining mechanisms, such as peer-review processes and advisory panels, that help depoliticize individual grant-funding decisions. Strengthening these safeguards can further protect the independence of federally funded research, particularly as subtle differences in funding priorities may emerge under different partisan control.

Appropriations data, as presented in this study, provide a powerful tool for policy-makers, researchers, and advocates to monitor and evaluate the influence of political control on science funding. By identifying trends and patterns over time, such data can guide targeted advocacy efforts and ensure funding continuity for critical long-term research areas, such as climate science, public health, and basic research. The CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, which authorized \$280 billion for science and technology research and manufacturing, illustrates that bipartisan collaboration is achievable, even in today’s polarized climate. Although the full realization of these commitments depends on subsequent appropriations, the Act nonetheless aligns with our findings, showing that science funding can attract cross-party support when framed around shared priorities.

It is important to note, however, that although appropriations data

provide a comprehensive view of federal science spending, they cannot be easily linked to specific scientific outcomes. Moreover, our ability to draw strong causal inferences is constrained by the limited variation in partisan control over the 40-year period of observation, and the endogeneity of party control. In some subperiods—particularly earlier decades—party control of the House and Senate is highly collinear, further limiting statistical leverage. As such, we caution against overinterpreting the magnitude of estimated effects. Our findings are best understood as descriptive patterns of association between partisan control and science funding—patterns that are robust across multiple specifications (see supplementary materials) and broadly consistent with institutional theories of agenda control (11). Finally, given the constraints of statistical power and the difficulty of isolating effects in more polarized recent periods (e.g., post-2010), these results should be viewed primarily as documenting historical relationships rather than fully capturing contemporary dynamics. Given recent signals of declining trust in science among Republican policy-makers (14), the past support that we observe is not a guarantee of future funding priorities. Indeed, recent executive budget proposals calling for substantial cuts to major scientific agencies illustrate how quickly shifts in political alignment can reshape the funding and scientific landscape. Policy-makers and science communicators should continue to emphasize the immense social, economic, and strategic value of bipartisan investments in science to sustain long-term support.

Overall, our findings highlight the complexity of the relationship between political control and federal science funding, challenging conventional narratives and providing a more nuanced understanding of the bipartisan dynamics at play. By illuminating these dynamics, this paper offers a foundation for more effective science advocacy and policy design. It underscores the importance of framing science funding as a bipartisan priority that advances shared societal goals, while also calling for vigilance to protect science from political interference. □

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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