

# 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 Political Science Program with two new programs: the Security and Preparedness Program and the Accountable Institutions and Behavior Program. This article evaluates the likely impact of the reform by way of original survey data. The NSF Program Change Survey asked past recipients of the Political Science Program Standard Grant to evaluate their own previously funded proposals according to the new NSF program descriptions. Respondents were asked whether they would apply for the same research project under the new thematic programs and, if they would, whether they believed it would be necessary to change the framing or substance of their proposal. Data from the survey suggest that the new NSF program themes are likely to discourage some political scientists from applying, while encouraging many more applicants to shift the framing or substance of their research to accommodate the new call for proposals. In particular, the new Security and Preparedness Program carries significant consequences for new knowledge production.

On September 24, 2019, the National Science Foundation (NSF) assistant director for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences (SBE) issued a “Dear Colleague Letter” announcing the “repositioning” of the NSF Political Science Program (National Science Foundation 2019a). After decades of funding, the Political Science Program would be replaced by two new thematic programs, the Security and Preparedness Program and the Accountable Institutions and Behavior Program. Whereas other social science disciplines such as anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology remained unchanged, political science alone was removed as a named discipline. The assistant director for SBE assured the leadership of the American Political Science Association (APSA) that the NSF would continue to fund the same political science research that it had always championed. The program change was only a matter of packaging, intended to sustain support by making NSF-funded research less a target for combative members of Congress (APSA 2020; NSF 2019b).

This rationale was not without basis. The NSF Political Science Program had served as a punching bag for conservative Congress members since its inception, and attacks on the NSF had been

gaining traction. In 2013, Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma successfully inserted language into an omnibus spending bill to prevent the NSF from “wasting federal resources on political science projects.” The Coburn amendment required the NSF director to certify NSF-funded political science research as “promoting national security or the economic interests of the United States” (US Senate 111th Congress 2013).<sup>1</sup> Following the amendment’s passage, the NSF suspended the Political Science Program for the fall 2013 cycle. Funding was restored in the next fiscal year, but periodic probes by members of Congress into the details of NSF-supported research continued to serve as reminders that the Political Science Program was a liability for the overall NSF budget.

Six years after the Coburn amendment, the decision was made to shutter the Political Science Program with the express aim of avoiding further congressional scrutiny (National Science Foundation 2019b). The announcement raised alarm among the APSA leadership (*Political Science Now* 2019). At the Fall Council Business Meeting of APSA, council members expressed concern that the Security and Preparedness Program was a step toward the “securitization” of the discipline (APSA 2020, 622). Other council members voiced apprehension that abandoning political science as a named discipline could set a precedent for defunding political science research and teaching in the United States and abroad. Yet others expressed concern that the new themes were politically

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doi:10.1017/S1049096521001487 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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.

Perhaps the most urgent questions are as follows. Will the new NSF program themes sideline research that would otherwise be funded under the broader rubric afforded by the Political Science Program? For those preparing proposals, will the new themes narrow the questions asked, the agendas pursued, and the overall framing of research projects? At the other end of the table, will these new themes constrain the ability of NSF selection panels to support the research that they would otherwise deem worthy of funding? Finally, and most consequentially, what implications might the reform have for new knowledge production?

## *Will the new NSF program themes sideline research that would otherwise be funded under the broader rubric afforded by the Political Science Program?*

I address these questions with original data from the NSF Program Change Survey (Moustafa 2021). The survey identified past principal investigators of the NSF Political Science Program and asked them to assess their own previously funded research proposals in light of the new NSF program themes. The survey provides important insights into the likely impact of the program change on NSF-sponsored political science research going forward.

### THE NSF PROGRAM CHANGE SURVEY

An invitation to participate in an anonymous online survey was sent to each of the 189 principal investigators who had secured an NSF Political Science Standard Grant in the last 10 years of the NSF Political Science Program.<sup>2</sup> After obtaining consent to participate via the Qualtrics platform, respondents were presented with the new program descriptions for the Security and Preparedness Program and the Accountable Institutions and Behavior Program, as follows:<sup>3</sup>

The Security and Preparedness Program supports basic scientific research that advances knowledge and understanding of issues broadly related to global and national security.... Substantive areas include (but are not limited to) international relations, global and national security, human security, political violence, state stability, conflict processes, regime transition, international and comparative political economy, and peace science.

The Accountable Institutions and Behavior Program supports basic scientific research that advances knowledge and understanding of issues broadly related to attitudes, behavior, and institutions connected to public policy and the provision of public services.... Substantive areas include (but are not limited to) the study of individual and group decision making, political institutions (appointed or elected), attitude and preference formation and expression, electoral processes and voting, public administration, and public policy.

Respondents were then asked to suppose that they were seeking support for the same research project that had already been funded through the NSF Political Science Program: “If you were seeking support for your previously funded research today,

would you apply through one of the new programs described above?” This question was asked to assess whether past award recipients believed that the new program descriptions would accommodate their previously funded research. Of the respondents, 24.7% indicated they would apply through the Security and Preparedness Program, 62.4% suggested that they would apply through the Accountable Institutions and Behaviors Program, and 12.9% answered that they would not apply through either NSF program.

Respondents who indicated that they would apply through one of the new thematic programs were subsequently asked whether they believed it would be necessary to alter the framing or the substance of their previously funded proposal to accommodate the new program descriptions. This question was asked to evaluate

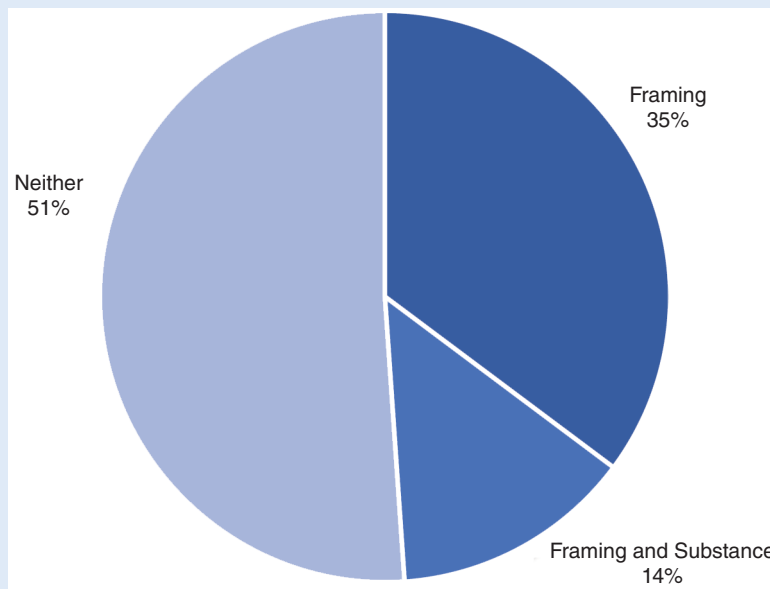
whether the new program themes will shape NSF-sponsored political science research going forward. As illustrated in figure 1, 35.2% responded that they would need to alter the framing of their previously funded proposal if they were applying under the new program descriptions. An additional 13.7% believed that they would need to alter both the framing and the substance of their previously funded proposals based on the new program descriptions. Slightly more than half (51.1%) indicated that it would not be necessary to alter the framing or the substance of their previously funded proposals.

Among those respondents who indicated that they would apply under one of the new NSF programs, the next question probed further: “If your previously funded proposal was submitted through the new Program *with no modifications*, do you believe it would have the same or similar likelihood of securing funding as when you applied under the Political Science Program?” This question was asked to assess further whether past award holders believed their research fit with the new program themes. As the results in figure 2 show, 38.6% of respondents indicated that they believed their previously funded proposal would have the same or similar likelihood of securing funding. Another 25% believed that they would not have the same or similar chance of securing funding. Finally, 36.4% of respondents were not sure.

A final question asked all respondents to consider whether, more generally, they believed the new program themes are likely to shift the focus of political science research funded through the NSF. This question was designed to understand general perceptions of the likely impact of the program change, apart from their specific research program. Here, 30.7% of respondents selected the affirmative option: “Yes, I think the program change will shift the focus of political science research that is funded through the NSF, *but it will be subtle*.” Another 44.5% selected the stronger statement: “Yes, I think the program change will shift the focus of political science research that is funded through the NSF, *and it may be significant*.” Less than one quarter (24.8%) of respondents believed that the new program themes would not shift the focus of political science research funded through the NSF (figure 3).

Figure 1

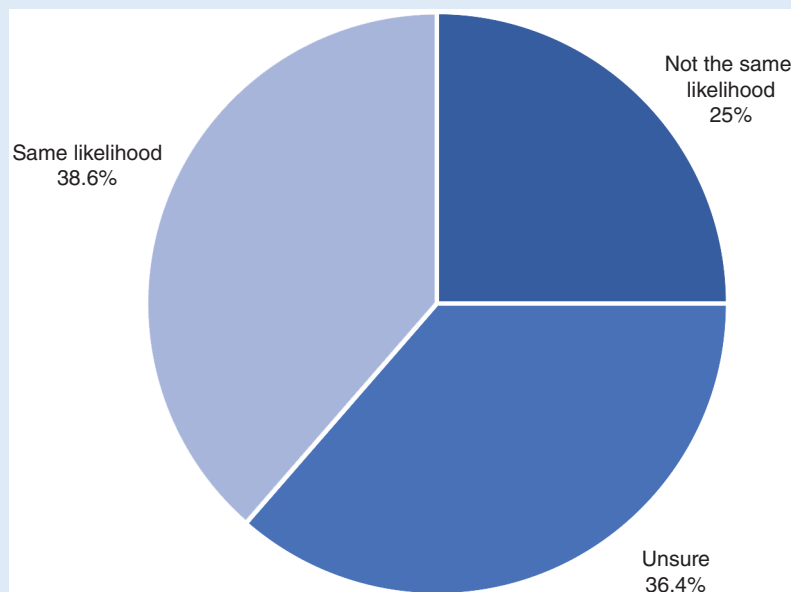
## Perceptions of Need to Alter the Framing or Substance of Proposals to Accommodate New NSF Program Descriptions



Note: Respondents were asked: "Would it be necessary to alter the framing or substance of your previously funded proposal to accommodate the new NSF program description?"

Figure 2

## Perceptions of Likelihood of Securing Funding with New NSF Program Descriptions



Note: Respondents were asked: "If your previously funded proposal was submitted with no modifications, do you believe it would have the same or similar likelihood of securing funding as when you applied under the Political Science Program?"

### DISCUSSION

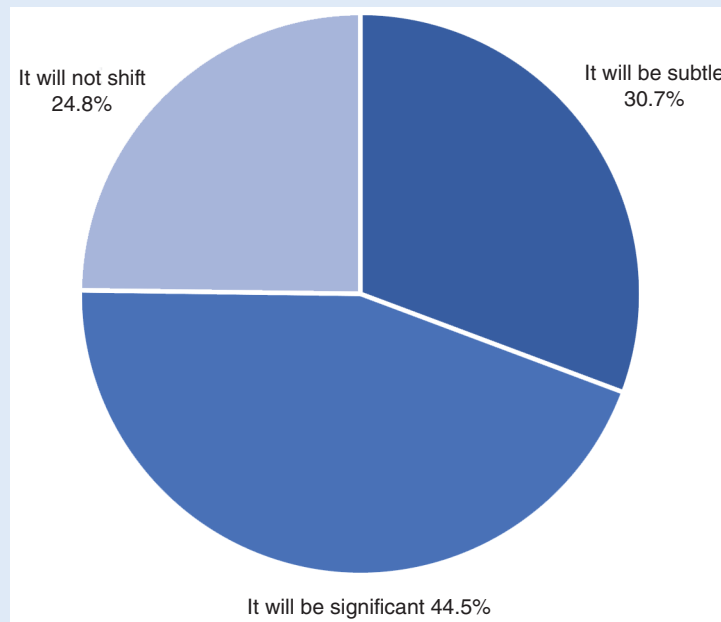
Crafting a successful funding proposal requires a significant investment of time and energy. Given finite resources and competitive pressures, researchers must make pragmatic choices about which funding avenues to pursue and which to forgo. When researchers surmise that their work is not a strong fit with a particular funding

avenue, they will look elsewhere for opportunities. Alternatively, when scholars choose to prepare an application, they must be attentive to the prompts in the call for proposals. These considerations are at work in the NSF Program Change Survey.

The NSF Program Change Survey data suggest that the new NSF program themes are likely to shape the applicant pool.

Figure 3

## Views of Whether New Program Themes Will Shift NSF-Funded Political Science Research



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

### *The Political Science Program was agnostic in terms of thematic content. By contrast, the new NSF programs are both thematic and directive.*

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. 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.

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

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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-

broader political projects. To date, however, there is a thin record of attention to these issues by the APSA leadership and the profession more broadly. A rare exception was a message from APSA to the NSF concerning US Department of Defense involvement with adjudication of Minerva Research Initiative funding through its National Security, Conflict, and Cooperation Program. In a highly deferential letter, APSA suggested that “in the interest of guaranteeing the independence of scholarly activity, our advice would be that DoD be not at all involved in either advising on the composition of review panels or reviewing the research” (Katzenstein 2008).

*Coupled with similar long-term trends across the academy, the securitization and militarization of the NSF funding stream should raise uncomfortable questions about the role of our discipline in broader political projects. To date, however, there is a thin record of attention to these issues by the APSA leadership and the profession more broadly.*

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 raise uncomfortable questions about the role of our discipline in

APSA’s hands-off approach differs from the positions taken by other academic associations. For instance, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) established a Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the US Security and Intelligence Communities in 2006. The Commission was established to advise the AAA by examining “(1) the varied roles that practitioners and scholars of anthropology currently assume within intelligence and national security entities; (2) the state of AAA’s existing guidelines and guidance on the involvement of anthropologists in intelligence/national security–related activities; (3) the key ethical, methodological, and practical/political challenges faced by the discipline and the AAA in its current and future engagement in intelligence/national security.” Among its activities, the Commission produced a detailed report of the US Army’s Human Terrain System, a program that embedded anthropologists in combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan to better understand local social and political contexts. It is worth noting that the AAA report revealed that there were more political scientists than anthropologists involved in the Army program. However, APSA raised no similar inquiry.

### CONCLUSION

More than any other social science discipline, political science is concerned with the exercise of power in all of its varied manifestations. Yet, as Oren (2003) explains, political scientists rarely consider their own position in the exercise of state power. The replacement of the NSF Political Science Program with the new Security and Preparedness Program is an action that should prompt reflection on the role of the discipline vis-à-vis state power.

The NSF Program Change Survey provides important insights into the changes that we should expect from the closure of the Political Science Program and the rollout of prescribed research themes, especially in projects that emerge through the new Security and Preparedness Program. We should anticipate that the new thematic programs will sideline some areas of inquiry and subtly shift the research questions that are asked, the agendas pursued, and the overall framing of scholarly projects. We should also expect that the new programs will constrain the ability of NSF selection panels to support the research that they would otherwise

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.”

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For suggestions on previous drafts of this article, I thank Jason Stearns, Laurel Weldon, Steve Weldon, and participants in the Simon Fraser University School for International Studies colloquium series. Any errors are my own.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data will be made available on request. However, only aggregated data may be in the public domain according to the stipulations from the Simon Fraser University research ethics board with respect to the maintenance of confidentiality. Additional published or public analyses would be permitted only with ethics approval for secondary data access and only with aggregated analyses. Requests can be sent via email to the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics at [dore@sfu.ca](mailto:dore@sfu.ca). ■

#### NOTES

1. For more details on the amendment’s passage and unsuccessful attempts that preceded it, see Plazek and Steinberg (2013).
2. NSF award information is publicly available on the NSF website. Principal investigators who had secured funding for conferences and workshops were excluded. The survey was conducted March 10–25, 2021. The response rate was 53.4%.
3. Respondents were presented with the full text of the program descriptions, which are slightly more detailed than these excerpts.

4. Although outside the scope of this study, it should be noted that analogous funding agencies outside of the United States do not broadly share these funding biases. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the primary vehicle for political science research support in Canada, provides an example of a more inclusive approach.

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