Amidst Great Fanfare, Democrats Take Control

On January 4, in a scene reminiscent of a presidential inauguration, the Democrats took control of Capitol Hill for the first time in 12 years, and Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) became the nation’s first- ever female Speaker of the House. In handing over the gavel to Pelosi, House Republican Leader John Boehner (R-OH) acknowledged the historical significance of the moment when he announced to colleagues, “Today is a cause for celebration.”

In the upper house, Senator Harry Reid (D-NV) took the chair as the new Majority Leader while Vice President Dick Cheney swore in both new and re-elected Senators. Former President Bill Clinton watched proudly from the balcony as Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) was sworn in for a second term.

Placing the pomp and circumstance behind them, the Democrats have embarked on a set of ambitious goals. These include passing six pieces of priority legislation that would accomplish the following: 1) institute recommendations of the 9/11 Commission; 2) initiate a staged increase in the federal minimum wage from $5.15 up to $7.25; 3) make it easier to purchase prescription drugs from other countries; 4) ease restrictions on federal support of embryonic stem cell research; 5) initiate lobbying reform; and 6) cut college loan interest rates for students.

While the bills will likely all pass the House, their fate is less certain in the Senate, a body with rules that ensure minority rights. It is also likely that President Bush will veto the stem cell bill, and potentially other bills, even should they pass both Houses of Congress.

AAG Urges Additional Funding for Research Agencies

One other piece of housekeeping facing the new majority is to finish the FY 2007 appropriations bills that the 109th Congress failed to complete on time. Rep. David Obey (D-WI) and Sen. Robert Byrd (D-WV), the new appropriations committee chairs, have already indicated that they plan to pass a year-long continuing resolution that will fund most federal programs in the continued bills at the FY 2006 levels. Obey and Byrd may be open to increasing funding for some programs, including various research agencies.

Accordingly, AAG Executive Director Doug Richardson wrote to Pelosi, Reid, Obey, and Byrd on the day Congress opened to encourage them to increase the accounts that most directly support geography research, including funding provided by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the United States Geological Survey (USGS). He asserted: “The NSF’s Geography and Regional Science Program and USGS geography grants encourage research into the nature, causes, and consequences of human activity and natural environmental processes across a range of scales. These agencies also support cutting-edge research in the geographic information sciences, which the Department of Labor recently designated one of the three most important emerging and evolving high growth industries in the United States…As Science Committee Chairman Bart Gordon has made clear, Federal spending on scientific research is critical to America’s standing as a world leader. It is our hope, and that of many of our colleagues in the scientific community, that you will consider revising the CR to allow for additional funding for the research agencies.” Look for an update on these important funding issues here next month.

New USGS Policy on Peer Review of Science

A new set of rules still being implemented by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) would require staff scientists to submit drafts of reports and upcoming speeches to their managers for internal review. Scientists would also be required to notify the agency’s press office of any research that could potentially generate controversy.

The policy would specifically call for a peer review process for any scientific document potentially involving either internal or external scientists. Managers will serve to ensure the process is appropriately handled and that the review is scientifically rigorous, but USGS officials have conceded that the requirements could delay the publication of some complex studies by months.

P. Patrick Leahy, the Survey’s associate director for geology and former acting director, said in a December Washington Post article that the agency spent more than two years drafting the rules to ensure all of its scientists are subject to the same sort of rigorous scientific review before they send their work to be published. Peer review of science at USGS could indeed be useful in ensuring the quality of scientific research within the agency. However, it is unclear what role, if any, politically-appointed officials will play in the process. The only USGS staff member appointed by the Administration is the agency’s director, but the Survey does report to political appointees inside the Department of the Interior.

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