Election 2012: Implications for Geography

With the 2012 election season concluded, I’m sure many of you are as glad as I am about the end of relentless political advertising. Perhaps the most-amazing thing about the 2012 campaign is that $6 billion was spent in an attempt to influence voters, yet we basically ended up with status quo: President Obama has won a second term and the Democrats held onto their Senate majority, while the House of Representatives stayed in GOP hands.

So what does it all mean for geography? In the immediate present, Washington will be consumed with budget negotiations because of the so-called “fiscal cliff” – the expiration of the Bush-era tax rate cuts, the end of temporary payroll tax cuts, shifts in the alternative minimum tax that would affect millions of Americans, and the imposition of deep spending cuts (known as sequestration) agreed to in 2011 as part of a deal to increase the federal debt ceiling.

The spending cuts are a real concern for advocates of research funding. Under the terms of last year’s deal, non-defense discretionary spending – the category that includes the budgets of the National Science Foundation (NSF) and other research agencies – is facing an automatic 8.2 percent cut. That would equal a decrease of $576.7 million for NSF, based on the Foundation’s FY 2012 funding level (the most-recently approved amount) of just over $7 billion.

A budget cut of that size would obviously be devastating to NSF’s ability to fund the best cutting-edge research. It is still somewhat unclear how federal agency heads would have to apply the sequestration cuts, but it is most likely that the pain will be felt evenly across varied funding accounts. So the Foundation’s Geography and Spatial Sciences program would probably lose 8.2 percent of its budget.

We at the AAG are working through organizations and coalitions we belong to, including the Consortium of Social Science Associations and the Coalition for National Science Funding, to promote the message that science funding is critical for innovation and spurs economic development, and that deep cuts to research accounts would cause serious harm. There is a sense in Washington that sequestration will be averted, but it will take genuine compromise between the White House and Republican leaders in Congress.

Key Appointments

Despite his victory, the President is expected to reshuffle much of his Cabinet for the second term. Secretaries Hillary Clinton, Leon Panetta, and Tim Geithner will be the high-profile departures in late 2012 or early 2013, but other offices are of greater importance to the geography community. Here’s a quick rundown on what we can expect:

Department of Commerce: The Census Bureau and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration are both part of Commerce. Former Secretary John Bryson resigned in June following a health concern and the Department has been run by an acting official since then. The early rumor is that Mr. Obama is trying to recruit a Fortune 500 CEO to serve as Commerce Secretary, but if that falls through, U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk and Export-Import Bank President Fred Hochberg are candidates.

Department of the Interior: The U.S. Geological Survey, the Park Service, and other agencies of interest to geographers fall under Interior’s rubric and Secretary Ken Salazar is likely to resign to return home to Colorado. The job has typically been held by western state politicians and former U.S. Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND), former Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal (D), and outgoing Washington Governor Christine Gregoire (D) are thought of as candidates.

Department of Education: Arne Duncan is almost certain to stay in his role as Secretary as we move into 2013. He and the President are close friends and Duncan would like to spearhead the Administration’s involvement in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Duncan will also be focused on implementing the President’s policy goals for higher education (see the March Washington Monitor for greater detail).

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): Administrator Lisa Jackson has indicated that she is likely to leave Washington before Inauguration Day and possible successors include current EPA officials Robert Perciasepe and Gina McCarthy. If the President wants to look outside for Jackson’s successor, he could target Ian Bowles, who worked in the Clinton White House and headed the state environmental agency in Massachusetts.

ESEA Reauthorization Likely in 2013 – AAG Resolution Gains Additional Endorsements

Based on conversations I’ve had with Administration officials, it appears increasingly likely that Congress will work towards a reauthorization of the ESEA in 2013. With that in mind, we have continued to promote the “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education.” The document explains the value and importance of geography education and urges policymakers to include funding for geography education as part of a reauthorized ESEA, to include geography and geospatial education in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) proposals; and to enhance geography teacher training.

In recent weeks, the resolution has been endorsed by:

- Governor Brian Sandoval (R-NV): Governor Sandoval took office in 2011 and was the first Hispanic candidate elected to statewide office in Nevada. He also served as a federal judge and as the state’s attorney general.
- American Rivers: AR is the leading organization working to protect and restore the nation’s rivers and streams.
- National Wildlife Federation: NWF promotes balanced, common-sense solutions to environmental problems that work for wildlife and people.
- Northrop Grumman: Northrop Grumman employs over 75,000 people worldwide and is the largest builder of naval vessels.
- Ocean Conservancy: Founded in 1972, the Conservancy helps formulate ocean policy based on peer-reviewed science.

We are grateful to Governor Sandoval, Northrop Grumman, and these leading environmental groups for their support. The full text of the resolution and the full list of endorsers can be accessed at www.aag.org/AAGEDucationResolution.

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