Proposed Bill Would Impact Census Director, NSF Board

Widespread agreement in Washington is a rare commodity. Few Beltway insiders, however, would disagree with the assertion that too many federal jobs require Senate confirmation or that the confirmation process slows efforts to fill certain executive branch positions that are important to a number of agencies but probably do not merit the scrutiny required by Senate review. To this end, Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) has introduced a bill with a bipartisan group of colleagues the stated goal of which is “to reduce the number of executive positions subject to Senate confirmation.”

The bill, S. 679, is of note to geographers for two primary reasons. First, it would exempt presidential appointments to the National Science Foundation’s board from Senate confirmation. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the legislation would create a fixed five-year term for the director of the U.S. Census Bureau. This provision was not included in the original version of the bill, but it was added in an amendment in the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee by Senator Tom Carper (D-DE).

In requesting the addition, Carper noted, “The Census Bureau Director is the only presidentially-appointed position at a statistical agency that does not have a fixed term.” He also argued that, “My amendment establishes continuity across administrations in order to get the best Census count for less money. Moreover, it would rightly treat the Census directorship as a scientific, rather than political position.”

The bill has been reported favorably by the Governmental Affairs panel and is awaiting action on the Senate floor. Given the large group of bipartisan sponsors, S. 679 will likely be approved at some point in the coming months. Stay tuned for updates on the bill’s progress.

House Passes First ESEA Bill as Duncan Urges Action

On May 25, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce passed the first major bill dealing with reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind. The legislation, “The Setting New Priorities in Education Spending Act” (H.R. 1891), would streamline spending under the ESEA by cutting over 40 federal K-12 programs. The bill passed the Committee on a party-line vote of 23-16.

The full House will probably pass the legislation on another party-line vote, after which its future is cloudy at best. The united opposition of Democrats on the House Education panel is a strong signal that the bill faces a rough road in the Democratically-controlled Senate. It is quite possible that the bill may not even have the support of some GOP Senators, including Lamar Alexander (R-TN) and other moderates. One of the programs cut under H.R. 1891 is the Teaching American History grants, which are well known to be a favorite of Alexander, who served as U.S. Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush.

With a Congressional stalemate brewing on how to move ahead on the reauthorization of the ESEA, incumbent Education Secretary Arne Duncan urged Congressional leaders to move ahead on a rewrite of the law by this fall. Failing that, Duncan asserted that he would use his executive authority to grant waivers to states from some of the signature requirements of NCLB, which was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002.

The waivers, first and foremost, would free states from the requirement that they bring all students to proficiency in reading and math by 2014 or face sanctions. Duncan has argued previously that this mandate would jeopardize the standing of a large percentage of the nation’s schools. In accepting a waiver, individual states would have to agree to participate in significant aspects of the Obama Administration’s Race to the Top K-12 reform program, which has already prompted 48 states to adopt common educational standards in math and reading.

It is unclear what impact Duncan’s announcement will have on Congressional reauthorization efforts, but House and Senate leaders seem quite divided on how to revamp the ESEA. Even if a breakthrough occurs, most attention on the Hill is focused on budget and fiscal issues and it is unclear whether there would be time to make sweeping changes to ESEA this fall – or the political will to do so.

The AAG continues to respond to requests for information about the importance of geography and geography education by government leaders, and we will continue to support the inclusion of dedicated funding for the teaching of geography in any reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. As part of these efforts, we were delighted that on May 4, Congressman Dutch Ruppersberger (D-MD) introduced a House resolution based on the “AAG Resolution Supporting K-12 Geography Education.” Ruppersberger also introduced the resolution last year, and his leadership is a sign of growing political support for K-12 geography education.

Obama Announces Commerce Nominee

On May 31, President Obama announced his intention to nominate John Bryson as U.S. Secretary of Commerce. Bryson is the former Chairman, CEO, and President of Edison International, a large public utility holding company based in Southern California. He would replace Gary Locke, who has been tapped to serve as the next U.S. Ambassador to China.

The Secretary post is significant to geography in that the Commerce Department is the parent agency for the U.S. Census Bureau. Bryson, who helped found the National Resources Defense Council, was attacked by some far-right critics as “a radical green activist,” but his nomination has been supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. A few Republican Senators have threatened to hold up the nomination, but Bryson will most likely be confirmed with widespread bipartisan support.

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