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**Resources, Community, and  
Economic Development Division**

B-278177

March 16, 1998

The Honorable William L. Clay  
The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson  
House of RepresentativesSubject: Federal Research: Two Political Science Grants Awarded by the  
National Science Foundation

The National Science Foundation (NSF) is an independent federal agency that promotes and supports research and education in science and engineering primarily through financial assistance to educational institutions, businesses, and other research institutions. NSF funds about 20,000 research and education projects in science and engineering a year. NSF's fiscal year 1997 budget was about \$3.3 billion, of which \$5.3 million was for political science research.

You were concerned about the appropriateness of using federal funds to study why individuals choose not to run in U.S. House of Representatives elections (referred to as the Candidate Emergence Study). Because of your concern, you asked us to determine whether (1) two grants that NSF awarded for the Candidate Emergence Study were within its mission and (2) the awards complied with NSF's grant procedures.

**RESULTS IN BRIEF**

We found that the two grants awarded for the study, which were funded under NSF's Political Science Program, are within NSF's mission. NSF's authorizing legislation directs it to, among other things, initiate and support basic scientific research and programs, including the social sciences—of which political science is a subfield. NSF's Political Science Program, created in 1965, supports basic research on political behavior, processes, and institutions.

The two grant proposals were submitted, reviewed, and processed according to NSF's grant policies and procedures. Prior to approval, the grant proposals

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were subjected to external peer reviews as required by NSF's guidance. The external reviews provide NSF officials with advisory information on the merit of the proposals and ensure reasonable competition in the award process.

### BACKGROUND

The Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Circular A-110 provides guidance to federal agencies in awarding and administering grants to institutions of higher education.<sup>1</sup> The circular sets forth standards for obtaining consistency and uniformity in the administration of grants and contains preaward requirements. NSF has established implementing policies and procedures that address grant awards. These policies and procedures are contained in NSF's Grant Proposal Guide and the Grant Policy Manual. In addition, NSF has a Proposal and Award Manual, which is a compendium of its internal proposal and award policies and procedures and supplements the other existing guidance.

In January 1996, NSF awarded a \$94,675 grant to Colby College and a \$80,325 grant to the University of Colorado at Boulder to conduct "Collaborative Research on Candidate Emergence in U.S. House Elections." The researchers are investigating why individuals choose not to run for office. On the basis of their prior research and the research of other political scientists, the researchers know that a decision to run is based, (1) in general, on a strong interest in public policy outcomes, a sense that the House is an attractive and desirable institution in which to serve, and a private ambition to hold public office and, (2) specifically, on the perceived chance of winning the party's nomination and the general election. What the researchers do not know is why some people who might be viable candidates choose not to run for the House.

The research project is to be conducted jointly by the two schools over a 42-month period, from February 1, 1996, through July 31, 1999. The research is being conducted in 200 randomly selected congressional districts and will be based on questionnaire responses from thousands of individuals with

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<sup>1</sup>A grant is a legal instrument used to transfer money or other things of value to a grant recipient to accomplish a public purpose when no substantial involvement is anticipated between the agency and the grant recipient during the performance of the activity.

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knowledge about the districts from both major political parties. We did not examine the merit of the research projects.

#### RESEARCH ON POLITICAL SCIENCE IS WITHIN NSF'S MISSION

The funding for political science research such as the Candidate Emergence Study is within NSF's mission. The authorizing legislation, the National Science Foundation Act of 1950, as amended, 42 U.S.C. § § 1861 *et seq.*, directs NSF to, among other things, initiate and support basic scientific research and programs in the mathematical, physical, medical, biological, engineering, and other sciences. The act also gives NSF, in consultation with the National Science Board, the authority to establish divisions within the Foundation. One of the divisions, the Division of Social, Behavioral and Economic Research, includes the Political Science Program.

The division supports research in a broad range of disciplines and interdisciplinary areas. The division's goals are to advance fundamental scientific knowledge about (1) cognitive and psychological capacities of human beings; (2) cultural, social, political, spatial, environmental, and biological factors related to human beings; (3) human behavior, interaction, and decision-making; (4) social, political, legal, and economic systems, organizations, and institutions; and (5) the intellectual, value, process, and impact contexts that govern the development and use of science and technology. Specifically, the Political Science Program, which was created in 1965, promotes basic scientific research on politics and political behavior, processes, and institutions.

#### GRANT AWARD PROCEDURES WERE FOLLOWED

The two grants for the Candidate Emergence Study were awarded in accordance with NSF's policies and procedures for reviewing and processing grants. NSF has policies and procedures that address the entire grant award process, from the initial program announcement to the actual approval and awarding of the grant.

#### Program Announcement

The proposals for the candidate emergence research were made in response to the Division of Social, Behavioral and Economic Research's program announcement NSF-94-4. The announcement identified 16 specific programs, including the Political Science Program, that are supported by the Division,

and provided a summary of some research topics previously funded under the programs. The announcement stated that the Political Science Program supports social science research to improve the understanding of politics, political behavior, and political institutions and processes. The announcement also identified some research topics, such as information on issues in voting and congressional elections and campaigns, that the program supported. NSF's Political Science Program received 94 research proposals in response to the announcement.

### Grant Proposals

The two grant proposals for the candidate emergence research were prepared and submitted according to NSF's proposal guidance. The guidance requires a cover sheet, which includes the proposal certifications; a project summary; a table of contents; a project description, including results from prior support by NSF; references; biographical sketches; budgetary data for each year of the proposed research grant; and information on current and pending support.

The proposals included (1) the objectives and significance of the proposed work; (2) the methods to be employed in conducting the research; (3) the qualifications of the individuals who would perform the research, including biographical data and previous NSF research grants; and (4) a description of the items requiring funding and the amount of funding required. Also, the proposals included the cover sheets signed by the institutions' representatives certifying the accuracy and completeness of statements in the proposal and the institutions' agreement to comply with the terms and conditions of the proposed grant award.

For the Candidate Emergence Study, the bulk of the research data will be obtained from human subjects through questionnaires. Under NSF's procedures, before an NSF award is issued, projects involving research with human subjects must either (1) have approval from the sponsoring educational institution's Institutional Review Board or (2) identify the applicable subsection in the federal policy for protecting human subjects, 45 C.F.R. § 690, exempting the proposal from the Board's review. Neither of the proposals for the study noted on their cover sheets that human subjects would be involved. However, in June 1997, the University of Colorado certified that the activity was exempt from its Board's review, and Colby College provided its Board's approval.

The Peer Review Process

NSF obtained evaluations on the scientific impact or relevance of the candidate emergence research from experts through written mail and panel reviews. NSF generally requires a minimum of three written reviews or a panel of no less than three external peer reviewers to evaluate research grant proposals; however, NSF prefers reviews by four to eight external reviewers, when possible. The reviewers selected by the program officers should, among other things, have special knowledge of the science and engineering field involved and reflect a balance among various characteristics such as geography, type of institutions, and minority status to provide a balanced evaluation. In addition, the program officers should avoid reviewers who have certain types of relationships with the applicants, such as collaborator or consultant, and who are from the same institution or have a family relationship with the applicant involved in the research.

The Director for the Political Science Program selected the reviewers from the database NSF maintains on individuals with expertise in various disciplines. The Director told us that he tries to ensure diversity in the reviewers. The reviewers were selected from large and small, geographically diverse universities and included women and minorities. None of the reviewers were from the institutions making the proposals.

NSF requires that the reviewers evaluate the merit of proposals based on four selection criteria (1) the performance competence of the researchers, (2) the merit of the research or likelihood that the research will lead to new discoveries or advances, (3) the relevance of the research or the likelihood that it will contribute to the achievement of NSF' major goal-oriented activities directed at improving the knowledge base underlying science and technology policy, and (4) the effect of the research on the infrastructure of science and engineering in terms of the potential to contribute to a better understanding or improvement of science and engineering resources.

The Political Science Program received 94 proposals in response to its announcement for second round proposals due in August 1995. The proposals were reviewed by a panel of seven external experts. NSF relies on the reviewers to report any conflicts of interest; therefore, one of the members of the panel, who had previously worked with the researcher from the University of Colorado, did not participate in the review of the proposals for the Candidate Emergence Study. The panel reviews were carried out over a 2-day

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period, and the panel recommended 22 proposals for funding, including the ones for the Candidate Emergence Study.

In addition, the proposals for the Candidate Emergence Study were mailed to six external reviewers with expertise in the subject area for evaluation. Each of the reviewers evaluated the proposals and submitted a written evaluation and rating on the proposals' merit. All of the external reviewers supported funding the proposals; five reviewers rated the proposals "excellent," and one reviewer rated them "very good." The review panel considered these reviews in preparing the overall proposal evaluation and recommendation for funding, which was forwarded to the program director. The program director, in turn, recommended the proposals to the division director.

#### Internal Program Approval

The program and division directors are responsible for certifying that NSF's review requirements have been met and that funding is properly documented. The proposals for the Candidate Emergence Study were reviewed and approved by the Director of the Political Science Program and the Director of the Division of Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research. After these approvals, the Division of Grants and Agreements prepared and sent the grant award letter and grant conditions to the two educational institutions.

#### AGENCY COMMENTS

We sent a draft of this report to the Director of NSF for review and comment. NSF's written comments appear in enclosure I. NSF said that our report accurately describes the Political Science Program's grant review and award process that was followed in processing the Candidate Emergence Study. In addition, NSF suggested two technical corrections that have been incorporated in the report.

#### SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To determine whether the two grants that NSF awarded for the Candidate Emergence Study were within its mission, we reviewed NSF's authorizing legislation, as amended, and its legislative history. We also reviewed a "white paper" on the history of social behavioral sciences at NSF, which includes a discussion on the origin of political science research at the agency. We discussed the authority for the grants with officials in the Division of Social,

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Behavioral and Economic Research; Office of Inspector General; and Office of Legislative and Public Affairs. We did not examine the merit of the grants.

To determine whether the grant awards complied with NSF's policies and procedures, we reviewed NSF's grant award policies and procedures. We also reviewed the documentation supporting the awards. We discussed the grant award policies and procedures with officials in the Division of Social, Behavioral and Economic Research and the Division of Grants and Agreements. We performed our review from September 1997 through February 1998 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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As arranged with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 15 days after the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies to the Director, National Science Foundation; the Director, Office of Management and Budget; and other interested parties. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

Please call me at (202) 512-3841 if you or your staff have any questions about this report. Major contributors to this report include Robin M. Nazzaro, Carrie M. Stevens, and Mindi G. Weisenbloom.

  
Susan D. Kladiva  
Associate Director, Energy,  
Resources and Science Issues

COMMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION  
4201 WILSON BOULEVARD  
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA 22230

**nsf**

March 11, 1998

OFFICE OF THE  
DIRECTOR

Ms. Susan D. Kladiva  
Associate Director, Energy, Resources,  
and Science Issues  
United States General Accounting Office  
Resources, Community, and Economic  
Development Division  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Kladiva:

Thank you for providing us the opportunity to comment on your proposed report entitled "Federal Research: Two Political Science Grants Awarded by the National Science Foundation" (GAO/RCED-98-91R).

We find the report an accurate description of the National Science Foundation's review and award process for the Political Science Program and for the grants awarded for the "Candidate Emergence Study." We appreciate the care with which the investigation was undertaken and the opportunity to comment on the report. We have only two minor editorial changes to suggest. In two places in the report, to make it accurate, add Political Science Program and not National Science Foundation or Social, Behavioral and Economic Research Division where you refer to the number of proposals received in response to the announcement (page 5 line 3; page 7 line 12; i.e., the Political Science Program received 94 proposals . . .).

Thank you again for providing us this opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,



Neal Lane  
Director

(141099)



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