

Yes, this post is about the House GOP. How did you guess?

Lamar Smith, chair of the House science committee, has opened an unprecedented investigation into five NSF research projects, demanding copies of peer reviews and other information in a [letter](#) to the NSF director. I looked up the abstracts for the five projects that Smith is investigating. They make it clear that the GOP is trying to chill certain types of research. In authoritarian regimes, researchers have to steer away from politically sensitive topics, or at least tread very carefully. That's apparently the model that the GOP has in mind for the U.S.

The projects weren't exactly chosen randomly. Instead, they share some important characteristics that have nothing to do with the quality of the peer review process, the purported subject of the investigation. These projects all involve international issues and are all in the behavioral sciences (always more politically sensitive than physics or chemistry). But even more importantly, they relate to policy domains that the GOP views as suspect: wildlife conservation, international law, and public health. It's very hard to think that Smith selected these specific projects for wholly apolitical purposes.

This investigation has a particularly severe chilling effect, given that Republicans just succeeded in cutting off the entire discipline of political science from NSF funding. The idea that the House is going to assess the methodological merits of these projects is a joke. The message to NSF seems clear - steer away from investigating international issues (of no interest to increasingly isolationist Republicans) and from domains like environmental protection or food safety. (And how long before their counterparts in state legislatures start investigating research at state universities?) In short, as the acting NSF director said in response to Smith's letter, "This is the first step on a path that would destroy the merit-based review process at NSF and intrudes political pressure into what is widely regarded as the most effective and creative process for awarding research funds in the world." It's also a disturbing effort to steer researchers away from topics like the environment.

Here's a quick tour of the five studies:

1. A [study](#) of animal pictures in *National Geographic*, with "the goal of connecting National Geographic representations of animals to broad historical shifts in science, culture, politics and media convention." This isn't the kind of research that interests me the most, but the magazine has played a significant role in shaping American attitudes toward nature. So this doesn't strike me as a trivial topic.
2. A [historical project](#) using "the long twentieth century (1870s to present) to chart the contours of scientifically-informed conservation through attention to six park groups in

Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Peru.” It seems to me that it would be worthwhile to know more about how different societies and institutions deal with similar conservation problems. But I guess Rep. Smith thinks otherwise.

3. A [study](#) of the International Criminal Court and an African Union Commission “to test three major hypotheses concerning (1) the globalization of human rights and the cooperation of AU leaders; (2) the factors affecting the nature and form of struggles over the meanings of justice; (3) the structures of affect that shape AU cooperation with the ICC.” I would naively think that even people who hate the ICC would like to know what it’s up to and how it’s influencing other countries.
4. A really interesting sounding [study](#) of how social media networks differ in the U.S., China, and elsewhere. Social networks helped cause revolutions in a number of countries, and the study also points to potential applications to public health and economic development.
5. Another [China-related study](#), this time “on the effects of the melamine poisoning scandal in China’s dairy industry in 2008, focusing on the scandal’s aftermath in order to understand how industry actors, regulatory agencies, transnational organizations, and food safety advocates have attempted to implement regulatory and transparency norms.” Perhaps Congress hasn’t noticed that we import a lot of food of dubious safety from China?