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Just about everything we do in society depends in part on research by the federal government. Congress can and must protect scientific integrity with legislation

By Chuck Hagel on October 12, 2019



Credit: Getty Images

For much of my time in public service, there were some things government officials did just because they were the right things to do—and that included respecting the research done by government scientists. That respect has faded over recent presidencies. Sharpie-gate may have been its death knell. Our ability to keep the public safe and move the country forward economically rests, in large part, on government science and research. That foundational work is endangered by manipulation for political ends, and the ramifications are vast and should concern all Americans. Congress can protect scientific integrity with legislation, and it must do so.

During my years in the Senate and the Pentagon, the need to shore up the integrity of government science and research has been clear. Our military

depends on reliable data from the government to keep our defenses at the ready. Those data include information about climate change. Altered weather patterns and the increasing severity of storms because of climate change have caused serious damage to our military bases and installations, in some cases decimating them. This is a real and present threat to our national security that will most likely get worse.

Military bases in storms' paths might be rebuilt over time, but we will never regain the lost training and readiness. Earlier this year, General Robert Neller, then commandant of the Marine Corps, wrote to the Secretary of the Navy about the damage from storms: "The combat readiness of II Marine Expeditionary Force—1/3 the combat power of the Marine Corps—is degraded and will continue to degrade," he asserted. We have to be better prepared for the impacts of climate change. But that goal will be impossible if political officials act in bad faith by distorting or suppressing government research on climate science.

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To help rebuild ethics, integrity and trust in government—including trust in its research and data—I joined a nonpartisan task force of former government officials concerned about the executive branch's growing disregard for norms and unwritten rules that had formerly kept its power in check. Recently, our group, the National Task Force on Rule of Law & Democracy—a project of the Brennan Center for Justice—published a report proposing legislation that would effectively respond to the numerous

instances we catalogued of federal officials censoring scientific information, changing scientific findings to suit political agendas and retaliating against government scientists because their research was politically inconvenient.

We identified at least 60 instances over the past three presidential administrations of officials taking actions that threaten scientific integrity—including an episode during the Obama presidency when the National Institutes of Health allowed alcohol industry representatives to give input on the design of a study to look at the benefits of moderate drinking.

Take climate science: In 2017 the ranking climate change policy expert in the Department of the Interior was reassigned to an accounting job days after he spoke at the United Nations about dangers that such global alterations pose to Alaska Native communities. And this year the U.S. Department of Agriculture did not publicize a groundbreaking study showing that rice loses vitamins because of rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—a potentially serious health concern for the 600 million people worldwide whose diets consist mostly of rice.

Congress should respond to these abuses to protect science. Our task force urges it to prohibit politically motivated manipulation and suppression of government research in the executive branch, as well as discrimination and retaliation against government researchers when their scientific conclusions are politically inconvenient. Further, we propose requiring federal agencies to create and implement scientific integrity policies, which would codify an executive branch policy created during the Obama administration. These policies would establish standards and procedures to uphold the principle that the scientific process at federal agencies should be free from politics, ideology and financial conflicts of interest.

We also recommend that Congress require agencies to articulate clear standards for how political officials may interact with career researchers during the technical stages of regulatory development, as well as during the preparation of scientific reports to Congress and the public. And Congress should require agencies to log these contacts and make them available to the legislature and to independent agency watchdogs to ensure accountability.

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Additionally, Congress should pass legislation to ensure the proper functioning of science advisory committees, which provide a valuable source of expertise to government policy makers. The safeguards we propose would better ensure that advisory panels are created in good faith and consider the weight of scientific evidence. Such mechanisms would ensure that the National Security Council's planned panel to review established science on climate change—now shelved—would recognize present-day realities and confirm what I and other national security leaders have found: climate change is a real and present threat to our national security that will most likely get worse.

Sunlight is also a good disinfectant. Congress should ensure the public has timely access to taxpayer-funded research, so political officials can't hide the facts they find inconvenient. It should do so by requiring the disclosure of completed, peer-reviewed government research and data, and it should create safeguards to prevent delays in disclosure and removal from public access.

With these and the other narrowly tailored reforms we lay out in our report, Congress has a road map for bipartisan action. The need for protecting government science goes beyond climate science and national security. Just about everything we do in society depends in some way on research and data coming out of the federal government. We must rebuild scientific integrity in government. Inaction puts us all at risk.



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