



LISTEN & FOLLOW

Sen. Ted Cruz's list of 'woke' science includes self-driving cars and solar eclipses

FEBRUARY 13, 2025 · 7:48 AM ET

By

[Jonathan Lambert](#)



The diamond ring effect as well as Bailey's Beads are seen as the moon eclipses the sun on April 8, 2024, in Fort Worth, Texas.

Ron Jenkins/Getty Images

There is nothing like being in the path of totality during a total solar eclipse.



TECHNOLOGY

'Unprecedented': White House moves to control science funding worry researchers

"For just a few minutes, it feels like the whole world stands still and yet everything changes," says Corinne Brevik, a physicist at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. The sky darkens, stars come out as the blaze of the sun's corona becomes visible. "It reminds me that we are all part of something so much bigger than

ourselves."

But only a sliver of the country gets this firsthand view. For the 2024 eclipse, Brevik used money from a National Science Foundation grant to help middle schoolers host a live, interactive broadcast that brought together kids within the path of totality with those around the country outside the path. It meant thousands of students could share the experience.

"You can literally watch the kids watching the eclipse and hear that moment of 'Whoa!' " she says. "It got a lot of kids who wouldn't necessarily have had a chance to see it out to observe."

On Tuesday, Brevik was surprised to learn that her grant was one of over 3,400 NSF grants labeled by Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, as "woke DEI" research that may be advancing "neo-Marxist class warfare propaganda."

HEALTH

Abrupt changes to NIH funding rules could disrupt cancer research clinical trials

A database released by Cruz this week formed the basis of an [October report](#) claiming over \$2 billion of NSF's \$9 billion budget went to "left-wing ideological crusades masked as 'academic research.'" The report also includes an appendix containing hundreds of DEI-related words. Parts of that appendix are [currently being used](#) by NSF staff to screen thousands of their active grants for compliance with President Trump's executive orders targeting diversity, equity and inclusion measures across the government.

"It's frustrating," says Brevik. "The sole goal was to share what's happening with everybody. It's not propaganda; there's no background agenda. Our goal is to help educate our youth."

Brevik was one of many scientists expressing dismay at how their basic research was being labeled.

The [database](#) included research grants from all corners of the country, large research institutions and small colleges. The list included projects aimed at finding better ways of synthesizing new medications; studying how to make self-driving vehicles safer; investigating how military service could help more women pursue science careers;

figuring out why some proteins start to malfunction in ways that can lead to cancer.

"It's ludicrous," says Joshua Weitz, a biologist at the University of Maryland whose research was not flagged but who has received NSF grants. "[Cruz] is using his position as a senator to make a big noise about fundamental research and mis-categorizing what's going on in the research and technology sector in this country. If one looks at this list, you find things that we should absolutely be proud of funding."

Many of the research proposals that seem wholly unrelated to DEI were likely flagged because they included language about broadening the participation of women and underrepresented groups in science, Weitz says, something that Congress has mandated NSF consider in its grantmaking since the 1990s.

Cruz's office has not responded to multiple requests for comment. A [press release](#) accompanying the database says "DEI initiatives have poisoned research efforts, eroded confidence in the scientific community, and fueled division among Americans ... Congress must end the politicization of NSF funding and restore integrity to scientific research."

Broader impacts

Tammie Visintainer, a professor of science education at San Jose State University, was one of three researchers [explicitly called out](#) by Cruz for her work aiming to engage underrepresented students in community-based science.

"I found out via a text from my dean, who said 'Let me know if you're receiving any threats,' " she says. "It was chilling and alarming ... I actually took my name off my office door. It felt like I don't need people to know where I am."

All NSF grants have to address how the research will impact society, including how they'll broaden participation in science. "It's one of the two main criteria the National Science Foundation uses to review grants," says Visintainer. "In order to be competitive, you need to attend to those things — and should attend to those things — because there are massive issues of inequity, and to pretend those aren't real is not based on evidence."

Her NSF grant supports a project aimed at helping teachers and students develop community-based science research on the causes and effects of extreme heat and urban heat islands in racially and ethnically diverse communities, which are [hit harder](#) than suburban communities, which tend to be whiter and more affluent.

"The radical work that is being attacked is students walking around in their community, collecting temperature data or looking at maps and identifying a local issue of heat," she says. The overarching goal of her work is to try to understand "how do we get students to see themselves as scientists or science type people?"

Kylea Garces, an ecologist at Miami University, has a similar goal. Her grant is also on Cruz's list.

Garces was a first-generation college student. "I come from a blue collar family, my parents are farmers and construction workers," she says. At times, she struggled to see a place for herself in science.

She later won an NSF postdoctoral fellowship to study how fungi interact with plants in ways that can boost resilience under stress. That grant also supports her efforts to develop ways of evaluating students in collegiate science classes that broaden participation.

In an environmental studies class for nonmajors, for example, her students could pick the topic for their final project. One student decided to put together a visual presentation on climate change that she projected behind her punk band as it played.

"I think there's a lot of mischaracterization done right now with throwing around of 'DEI' or social justice," she says. "There's nothing political about wanting students to learn. That's not social justice. That is simply giving all students an opportunity to get a good grade and be able to succeed in their future career."

The release of Cruz's database is just the latest in a flurry of actions from Republicans in Congress and [the Trump administration](#) targeting the very foundations of American science. Those behind these moves, including freezing grants, slashing funding and [scrubbing websites](#), argue that they're reining in science that's become ideologically extreme.

While NSF says they [can't stop payments](#) on existing grants because of noncompliance with those orders, the [freeze on grants](#) in late January has many scientists worried that funding could still be pulled.

Many within the scientific community argue it's a direct attack on science that will ultimately hurt Americans. "What worries me is that the intent is to dismantle U.S. scientific leadership," says Weitz. "If you stop this kind of work, how are you going to get the next advanced materials or quantum computing or the next cancer drug or treatment for heart disease?"

[research](#)[science funding](#)[basic research](#)[medical research](#)

READ & LISTEN

[Home](#)[News](#)[Culture](#)[Music](#)[Podcasts & Shows](#)

CONNECT

[Newsletters](#)[Facebook](#)[Instagram](#)[Press](#)[Public Editor](#)[Corrections](#)[Contact & Help](#)

ABOUT NPR

[Overview](#)[Diversity](#)

[NPR Network](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Ethics](#)

[Finances](#)

[GET INVOLVED](#)

[Support Public Radio](#)

[Sponsor NPR](#)

[NPR Careers](#)

[NPR Shop](#)

[NPR Events](#)

[NPR Extra](#)

[terms of use](#)

[privacy](#)

[your privacy choices](#)

[text only](#)