Science Policy News

What the Mid-Term Election Could Mean for Science

Mid-term elections are like the distant cousin of the political world: easy to forget unless they determine control of Congress. While presidential elections generally get more attention, there’s still plenty of action with the mid-term election.

This year, the big question is whether or not Republicans will gain control of the Senate, giving them a majority in both chambers. Republicans need a net gain of six seats to win the majority, and there are at least that many close races to be decided.

The congressional inactivity we’ve seen over the past few years has been due, in part, to the power split in Congress. With Republicans in control of the House and Democrats in control of the Senate, the two chambers have often found themselves working from two very different playbooks.

The 2014 appropriations process is one example of the fallout from this divide. The House wanted to keep sequestration, while the Senate and the administration ignored it, putting the budget from the two chambers $90 billion apart before the appropriations process even started. This wide difference made negotiations extremely difficult and contributed to the government shutdown last October.

So what would it mean if the Republicans gain control of the Senate? Having the two chambers of Congress under different control has led to very few bills being passed and even fewer passed under normal order. In theory, it would be easier to pass Republican-supported legislation with both the House and Senate under Republican leadership. However, if Democrats do lose control of the Senate, they still have the power to filibuster and hold up bills from coming to a vote—the modern Senate requires a supermajority (60 votes) for most action. The president also has his veto power, which he could use more frequently.

Fortunately, agriculture and research have historically had bipartisan support, and we think that will continue irrespective of which party controls Congress. Appropriators from both sides of the aisle have been supportive of research funding. While there may be some differences in research priorities, both the House and Senate have largely protected research agencies from cuts during this time of fiscal austerity. In some cases, research budgets have even made modest gains.

FY 2015 Appropriations

One of the first issues that could be affected by the mid-term election is the fiscal year (FY) 2015 appropriations. If the appropriations process is running as it should (which, granted, rarely happens), all 12 appropriations bills would have passed before the start of the new fiscal year on 1 October. During an election year, members of Congress return to their home states and districts for the normal August recess, but then they also go home to campaign during the month of October. That gave Congress only a few weeks in September to finalize the appropriations bills. With the short timetable, Congress moved forward with a continuing resolution (CR) that holds appropriations at the same level from FY2014 until 11 December.

Congress will now have to finalize the FY2015 appropriations after the election during the “lame duck” session. The results of the election could dramatically affect that process. While Appropriations Committee leadership in both chambers have expressed their intent to pass an omnibus bill before the start of the next Congress, if Republicans win the Senate, they might move to delay the appropriate...