There has been much ado about political influence over science appointments in the Bush administration, and we have been responsible for some of it here at Science. Our News pages have reported on advisory committee and study section appointments that seem to have been made on grounds that were at least partly ideological. And in several editorials, Science has called attention to claims—many of them from readers—that they had experienced political loyalty tests in connection with their own proposed appointments.

The problem has really had three parts. The first involves the dismissal and then reconstitution of committees advisory to various scientific bodies that are part of government agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (see, for example, Science, 28 February 2003, p. 1313). A second concerns the questioning of individual appointees to such committees with respect to their personal political loyalty and even their voting record in the last presidential election (Science, 15 November 2002, p. 1334, and 31 January 2003, p. 625). The third centers on changes made in the advice various agencies post on the Web to guide consumers about choices they make in the interests of their own health or safety. Last year, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) Web site altered a scientifically based statement that there was no relationship between abortion history and the risk of breast cancer, in order to eliminate that reassurance.

We have criticized the Bush administration on all three counts, and we offer no apologies for that. The difficulty, though, is that this kind of criticism invites a speedy counterclaim: “This sort of thing has been going on all the time; what’s so different now?” That leads to an unproductive argument; without an unbiased historical study (and how could we ever get one?) it’s just a shouting match. It would be better to see whether agreements could be reached on how to manage the appointment process for scientists.

A useful beginning would be to develop a hierarchy of types of scientific appointments and then establish criteria for standards that could be applied to each. At one end of a possible spectrum would be a category (call it A) of senior appointments, for which the president and members of the Cabinet should be free to include, along with scientific merit, tests of political support for the president’s policies. A second category, B, would apply to committees and panels advising science agencies; appointments to these would be based primarily on scientific merit, allowing relevant policy considerations (though surely not past voting behavior!) to play some role. Appointments of type C, for individuals whose role is to evaluate the quality of research proposals or findings, should be selected on scientific merit alone.

How could the public be assured that such a system would work? One way would be through a group of outside scientists and others, mandated by Congress, who would monitor the development of the criteria and their use in making appointments. It would probably be too risky to involve them in case-by-case review, but such a group could investigate and evaluate complaints and issue judgments about overall performance. What about the government’s guidance to the public about scientific issues? In response to recent legislation, the Office of Management and Budget is requiring agencies to develop guidelines for guaranteeing the quality of data used in information disseminated to citizens. So far they have been used primarily by industry and industry-supported organizations to challenge data that might support adverse regulatory actions. But they could also be used to challenge changes of the kind made in that NCI Web site, and the new committee could evaluate or even originate data-quality challenges of that kind.

Of course, such suggestions invite a charge of political naïveté. But Congress did once invent a scientific advisory structure of its own. The Office of Technology Assessment led an interesting and largely successful life before it was terminated in what was billed as an “economy move.” The structure proposed here would have more limited scope, but it would provide important checks and balances against any future administration that seemed to prefer ideology or political conviction to scientific excellence. It is a notion that should be debated on its merits, not discarded on the ground that it would be politically difficult to achieve. And it is a challenge that the scientific community should be eager to meet.

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Editor's Summary

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