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Trends. Science is Apolitical as Political

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the nature of science from a political psychological perspective.

The President of the American Psychological Association (APA) has recently supported criticism of various federal scientific advisory boards for being politically influenced. A legitimate aspect of this criticism touches on (1) selecting board members who are supporters of specific political office holders or who support a political viewpoint but lack relevant scientific or technical expertise and (2) shaping board deliberations and activities to attempt to ensure a preordained conclusion.

A less legitimate aspect of criticism is exemplified by the APA President being quoted by Benson (2003) that "Science is apolitical; scientific appointments should be as well."

In actuality, science is as political as any other human endeavor. For example, given the construct of politics as the art and science of governing people, federal scientific advisory boards that are developed and usually funded by a formally constituted government are one vehicle to support governance. They are intended to be political. The notion that science as evaluated or recommended by an advisory board can somehow be torn asunder from this political context belies the very intention of its constitution.

In addition, that science--whether or not related to a scientific advisory board--is a pure process that only can be contaminated by politics must contend with the myriad political conditioning contingencies affecting its practitioners and the what, why, how, where, and when of what is practiced. These include topics and practices that are highly and lowly valued in terms of attracting funding, credibility, and so on. And the variations in what is valued arise at times continuously, at times in sudden sea changes of perspective.

For homo sapiens, the political animal, to deny the politics of science is tantamount to denying the self. (See Benson, E. (March 2003). Political science. *Monitor on psychology*. pp. 20-21; Jiang, C. (1998). Why some theories fail to describe, explain and predict: Reconstructing the future. *Social Science Journal*, 35, 645-656; Nicholson, I. (1997). The politics of scientific social reform, 1936-1960: Goodwin Watson and the society for the psychological study of social Issues. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 33, 39-60; Rose, N. (1996). Psychiatry as a political science: Advanced liberalism and the administration of risk. *History of the Human Sciences*, 9, 1-23.) (Keywords: American Psychological Association, Politics, Science.)