Agencies pull "political interference" protections from scientific-integrity policies

By Lindsay McKenzie

Agencies across the federal government are revising their scientific-integrity policies covering taxpayer-funded research and removing language that bars "political interference."

NSF's new scientific-integrity policy, published on 1 September, notably drops prominent language found in its predecessor. Whereas the previous version stated that it is the agency's policy to "prohibit political interference or inappropriate influence on scientific activities and the use of scientific information," the latest does not mention "political" influence and instead refers only to "inappropriate" influence. The Department of Commerce, which oversees both NOAA and NIST, similarly removed its political-interference protections in August.

The revisions follow President Trump's May 2025 executive order "Restoring Gold Standard Science," which directed agencies to update their scientific-integrity policies around principles such as transparency, reproducibility, and unbiased peer review.

Both NSF's old and new policies include language barring suppression, alteration, and delay of scientific activities and products, but unlike the old policy, the new policy doesn't explicitly reference "political purposes" or the influence of "special interests" as reasons for those potential occurrences. "Political interference" has also been removed from the policy's glossary, as has a statement saying that agency staff should be able to "communicate their scientific activities objectively" without it.

The Department of Commerce's new scientific-integrity policy retains references to objectivity, transparency, and scientific standards but does not include the 2025 policy's language specifically intended to shield science from political interference.

Other science agencies updated their scientific-integrity policies last year. In July 2025, the Department of Energy replaced its Biden-era scientific-integrity policy and largely reverted to the language and structure of the department's 2017 policy. In the reversion, language specifically barring "political purposes" from being a reason that findings should not be altered or censored was removed. The Environmental Protection Agency took a similar step in August 2025, rescinding the policy it issued in January 2025 and reinstating its 2012 scientific-integrity policy. The move rolled back more-detailed safeguards against interference. NIH rescinded its agency-specific scientific-integrity policy in March last year, saying it would instead adhere to the Department of Health and Human Services' organization-wide policy. The HHS policy, updated in March 2026, uses the phrase "political interference" once, in its definition of "interference"—down from seven explicit instances in the 2024 version.

Court temporarily blocks rule ending "duration of status" system

By Lindsay McKenzie

A federal judge temporarily blocked a Department of Homeland Security rule that would have ended the decades-old duration-of-status system for international students and scholars; as *Physics Today* went to press, the existing framework remained in place.

District Judge F. Dennis Saylor IV of Massachusetts issued a preliminary injunction on 14 September, putting the DHS rule on hold one day before it was scheduled to take effect. The rule eliminates the current duration-of-status system, which allows students on F-1 visas and exchange visitors on J-1 visas to stay in the US for the duration of their programs. Under the new rule, admission periods are limited to a maximum of four years, and students and researchers who need more time to complete their studies must apply for an extension of stay or leave the country to apply for a new visa. The new rule also imposes restrictions on transferring institutions, changing educational objectives, and pursuing additional degrees.

The injunction stems from a lawsuit filed by several higher education and labor groups seeking to overturn DHS's rule. Saylor found that the plaintiffs were likely to succeed on their claims that DHS had not fulfilled its statutory obligations when it promulgated the final rule; he noted that the Administrative Procedure Act requires DHS to assess the rule's costs and benefits, consider less burdensome alternatives, respond meaningfully to significant public comments, and show a rational connection between the rule and its stated fraud and national security objectives. Saylor highlighted several areas where he thought that DHS fell short of meeting these requirements.

Saylor opted not to permanently strike down the rule as the plaintiffs requested. His more cautious approach bars DHS from implementing the rule while the litigation proceeds. Saylor did, however, leave open the possibility for the plaintiffs to ask for that remedy again, stating in his opinion that vacating the rule "may ultimately prove to be appropriate."

Michael Clemens, a professor of economics in the School of Government and Policy at Johns Hopkins University, said that the injunction may not undo the damage the rule has already done. "This ruling by itself will do little to reassure international students," Clemens said, noting that the rule "could be reinstated by later court decisions."

Clemens and two coauthors examined the potential effect of immigration restrictions on the US STEM workforce in a working paper commissioned by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine for a summit this past July. In a survey of around 1000 international PhD students and postdoctoral researchers in the US, around half of respondents said that they would not have come to the US if they knew they might need to apply for another visa to finish their PhD. PT