

# HOW DO SCIENTISTS REACT TO CONTROVERSY?

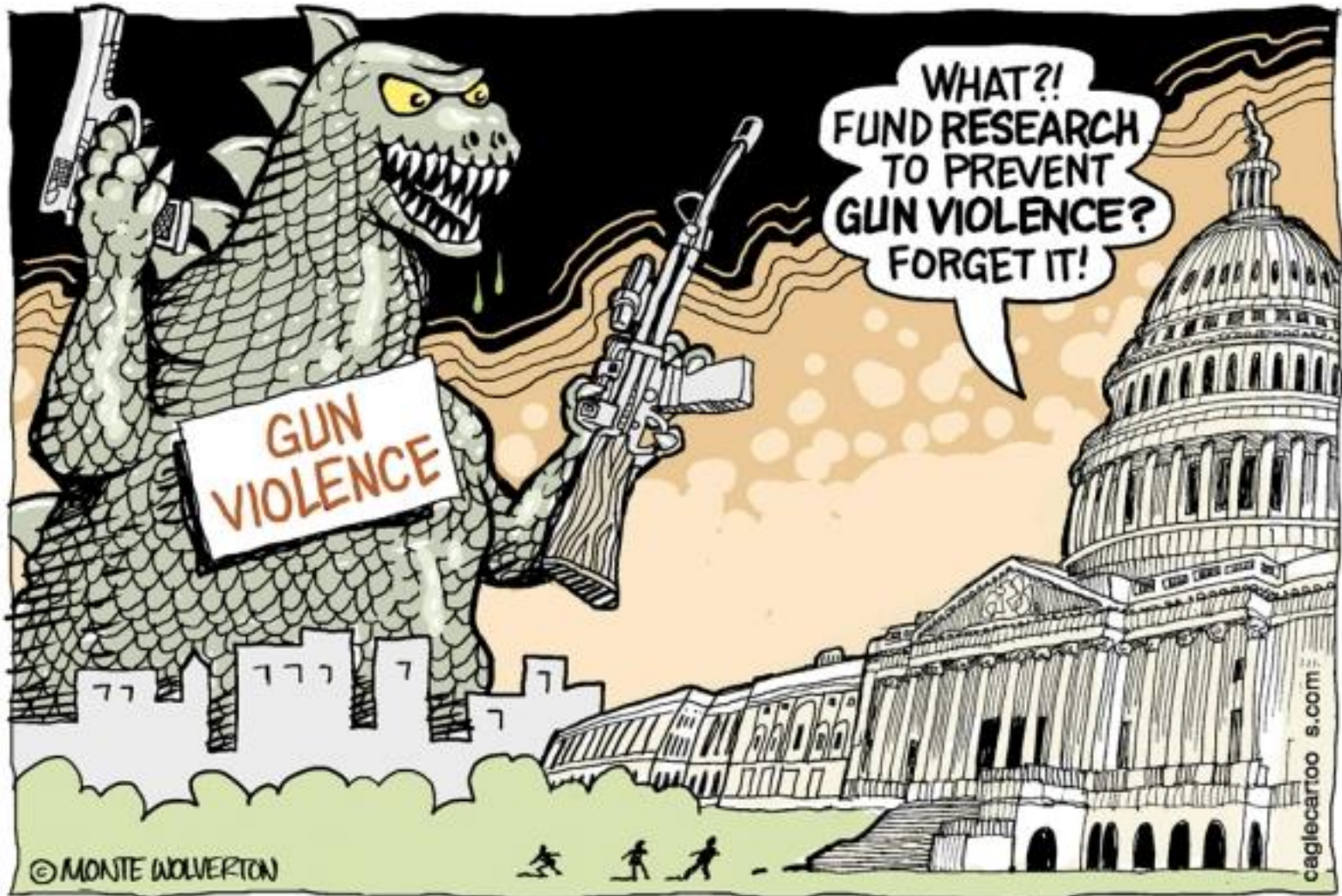
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# The Toomey Amendment



“There are so many far more important very real diseases that are affecting ‘real people’ and that is what this kind of money could be used for.”

- July 10, 2003



NIH Director Elias Zerhouni asked to explain the “medical benefit” of the five NIH grants included in the original Toomey Amendment, plus an additional five grants.

October 2003

# Traditional Values Coalition



“Nameless, faceless bureaucrats are doling out money like a federal ATM” on “smarmy projects” that don’t “pass the straight-face test.”

-Andrea Lafferty

## Don't Let Ideology Trump Science

**T**he moralizers are trying to muck with U.S. science again. A flurry of activity over the past few weeks has followed the effort of a right-wing religious group to call into question almost 200 National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants focusing on behavioral and social aspects of issues such as sexuality, HIV/AIDS transmission, and drug abuse (*Science*, 31 October 2003, p. 758). This incident could have been written off as noise by a fringe group had it not come almost on the heels of the near-passage in the House of Representatives last July of what came to be known as the "Toomey Amendment," after its author Rep. Patrick Toomey (R-PA). By a vote of 212 to 210, the House just missed defunding four NIH research grants on sexual behavior that had already been through rigorous scientific peer review and approval by NIH Institute National Advisory Councils (*Science*, 18 July 2003, p. 289).

This is not the first time that the scientific enterprise has been threatened by political or ideological intervention, nor will it be the last. Many of us recall, for example, Sen. William Proxmire's grandstanding "Golden Fleece Awards" in the 1970s and 1980s. They were passed out with much media fanfare to research projects with titles Proxmire considered silly, and which were therefore ridiculed as a frivolous waste of the taxpayer's money. Of course, the Golden Fleece "awardees" often turned out later to be important and useful projects. One example is the study of the physical characteristics of flight attendants that ultimately led to the development of life-saving safety belt configurations for them.

We are not concerned that Congress wishes to exert oversight over the U.S. research agenda and research priorities. That is their job, and we want our representatives to do it well. We also believe that the scientific community should be fully accountable to the public, because much science is publicly funded and the public is the ultimate beneficiary of our work. By nature, science is an open enterprise that invites examination and criticism—and more often than not, it is actually strengthened by public scrutiny. Oversight bolsters public confidence in the scientific enterprise and provides incentives for scientists to interact with the public, explain the importance of their research, and spread an ethic of intellectual curiosity and critical thinking that helps make our society more innovative and dynamic.

On occasions like the present one, however, healthy scrutiny gives way to irresponsible attack. The recent assaults on science were not directed at broad research questions or national research priorities. Instead, they were aimed at imposing ideology and religious doctrine on the awarding of individual research grants, intervening in and thereby subverting the scientific peer review system that has served both science and national needs so well.

The moral judges who are doing this don't like the fact that HIV is spread through sexual contact, and they believe that drug addicts have made bad personal choices that have led to addiction. Is their disapproval of these behaviors a justification for stifling research on the diseases that result? Do they suppose that some form of national denial will make these problems go away? Regardless of personal feelings about the etiology of these illnesses, we need to understand their causes and transmission patterns if we are ever to get a handle on some of society's most pervasive public health problems.

Whenever science is attacked on ideological grounds, its integrity and usefulness are threatened. Society cannot afford for moralistic dogma to replace scientific judgment when the public's welfare is at stake. We have all been heartened in the past few weeks by the responses of many scientific and academic organizations [including the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)] and by the protests of many people who have written to defend science in the popular press. But rising up in protest as a community after the fact can only protect us for a while. Retaining control of the integrity of our enterprise requires that we engage more regularly and broadly with the public. Our objectives and strategies should be made more transparent to our fellow citizens, and we must expand our efforts to educate both policy-makers and the broader public about how science

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# Coalition to Protect Research (CPR)



## Member Organizations

- ◆ [AAAS \(American Association for the Advancement of Science\)](#)
- ◆ [AIDS Action](#)
- ◆ [AIDS Alliance for Children, Youth and Families](#)
- ◆ [Alliance for Aging Research](#)
- ◆ [American Academy for HIV Medicine](#)
- ◆ [American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists](#)
- ◆ [American College of Nurse-Midwives](#)
- ◆ [The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists](#)
- ◆ [American Foundation for AIDS Research](#)
- ◆ [American Heart Association](#)
- ◆ [American Psychological Association](#)
- ◆ [American Psychological Society](#)
- ◆ [American Social Health Association](#)
- ◆ [American Society for Reproductive Medicine](#)
- ◆ [American Sociological Association](#)
- ◆ [Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy](#)
- ◆ [Association of Academic Health Centers](#)
- ◆ [Association of American Medical Colleges](#)
- ◆ [Association of Population Centers](#)
- ◆ [Association of Reproductive Health Professionals](#)
- ◆ [Association of Teachers of Preventive Medicine](#)







Did this controversy create such an unfriendly environment that sex researchers are now self-censoring?

If so, what kinds of research are no longer being conducted as a result?

# Data Collection

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## The Population

157 researchers on “hit-list”

10 researchers on congressional floor

Total population = 162 researchers

# Stage 1: Interviews

Principal Investigators: N=30

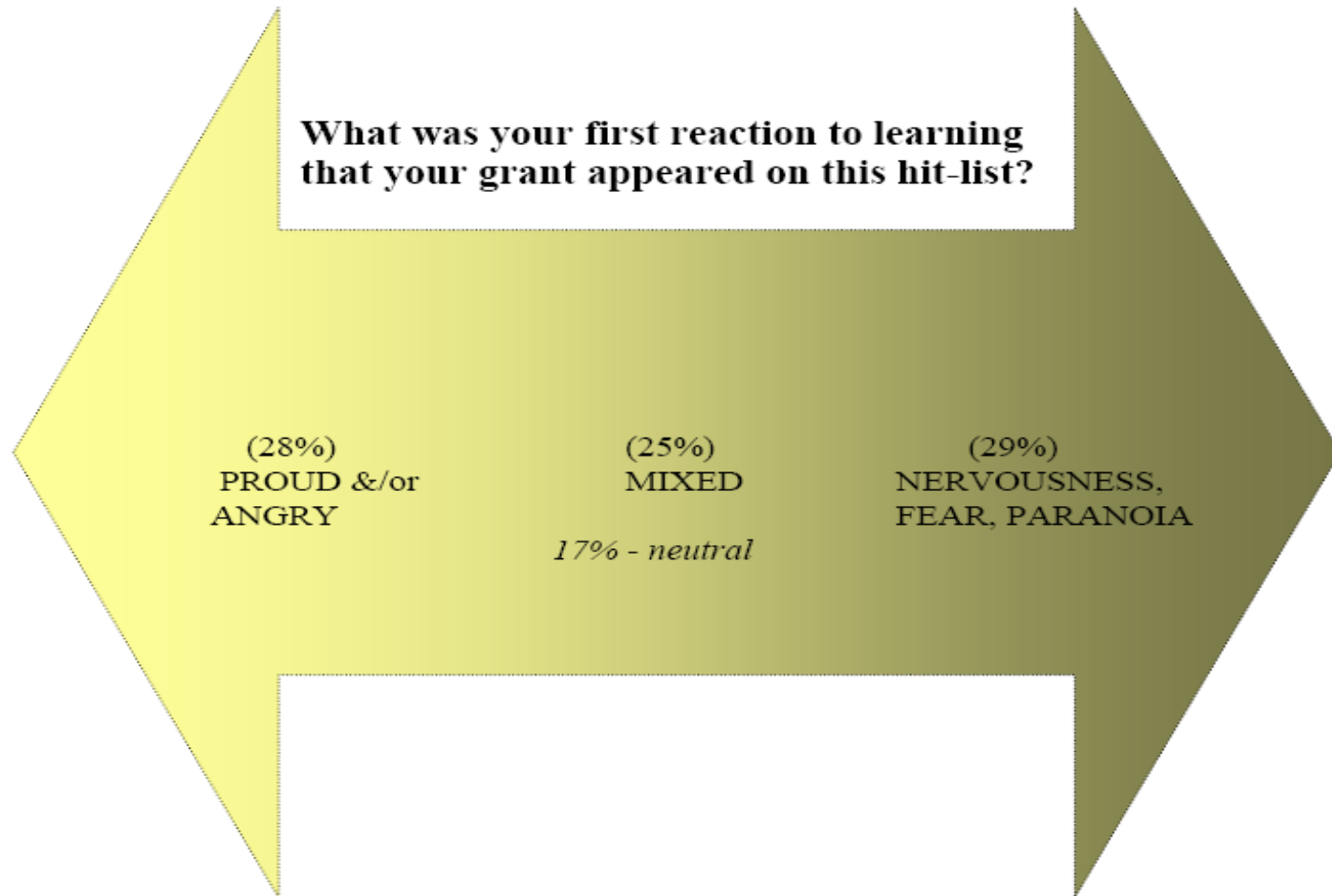
- List stratified for researcher status, and proximity to controversy
  - 8 assistant professors
  - 5 associate professors
  - 10 full professors
  - 7 non-academic researchers
- Response rate = 67%
- Four researchers wouldn't participate because they feared my data would be subpoenaed.

# Stage 2: Survey

## Survey Monkey, n=82

- ▣ Administered online,  
~10 minutes to complete
- ▣ Entire population recruited
- ▣ Response rate = 51%
- ▣ Asked: basic information, how learned about list, reaction, behaviors changed, and adaptive strategies

# Reactions



# Nervousness, fear or paranoia

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“It made me feel singled out...like there was this ... red flag next to my name and my research. It makes one nervous about one's potential to get funded in the future...whether ... something ... they want to research is going to get politically targeted and therefore be unfundable or have the funding taken away.”

# Pride

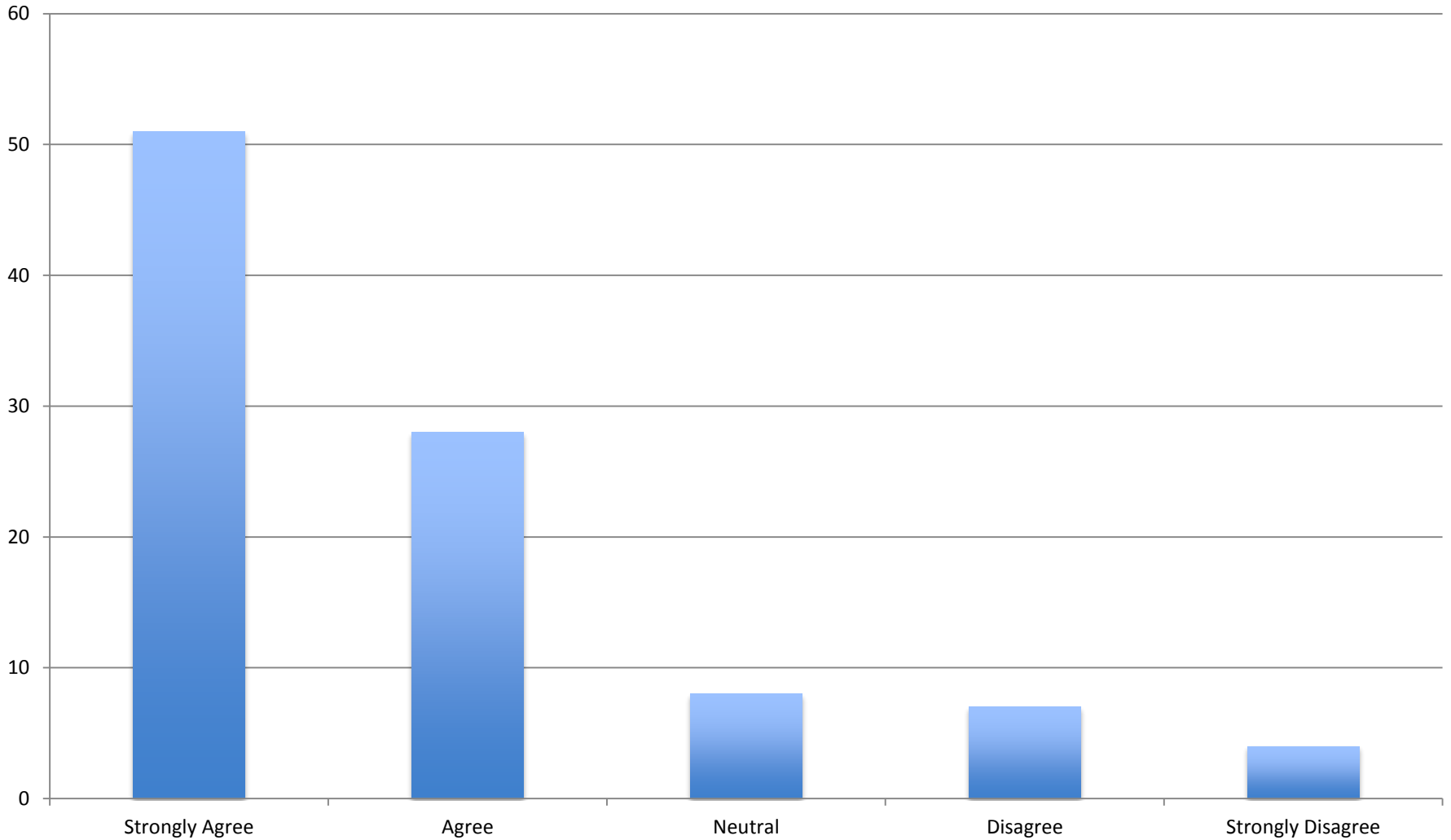
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“That the right wing had chosen to single my work out was sort of a **badge of honor** in some ways.”

“I sent like emails to all my friends. “Ooh, I’m on a black list.” “Ooh, aren’t you cool.””



# "No amount of political controversy could dissuade me from conducting HIV or sex-related research"



# Strategies

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Lowering profile/disguising research

- ▣ Reported by 46%

I do not study “sex workers,” I study  
“women at risk.”

# Strategies

- Seeking other funds
  - ▣ 25% say more likely to seek other funds


“I have decided not to go in on a 3rd round of resubmissions because I feel that I am being unfairly judged because of this prior experience; I am seeking funding elsewhere.”

# Strategies

- Avoiding/Reframing/Excluding topics

“We had written a proposal [on men who have sex with men] and it had gotten reviewed ... was waiting to be revised and resubmitted. But we kind of sat on that ...

[T]hat was very much affected by what was going on because ... that population of MSM, for example, was not something that...that should be funded.”



No longer submitting grants on: abortion, emergency contraception, sexual health of adolescents, bisexual, gay/lesbian youth, condom use, anal sex, childhood sexual abuse, HIV effects of law enforcement, men who have sex with men, and more...

# Career Changes

- Leaving soft-money positions for more secure hard-money positions.
- Leaving the country.
  - ▣ “I left the country for a more supportive science environment.”
- Leaving academia.
  - ▣ “This ended my research career.”

# Conclusions

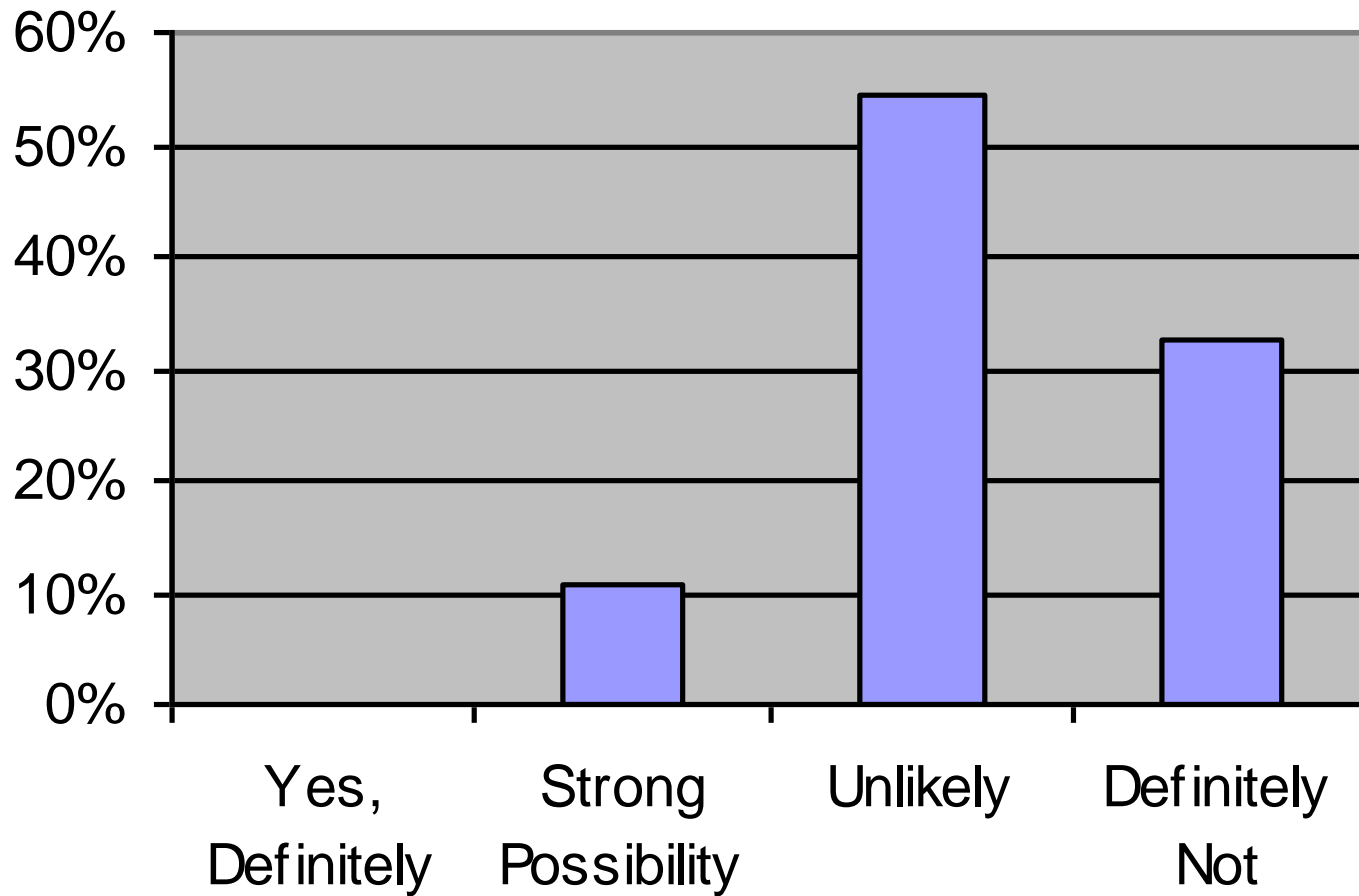
- Politicized environment can be motivating to some researchers.
- But it also provokes self-censorship in response to politicized environment.

More details here:

Kempner, Joanna. 2008. "The chilling effect: How do researchers react to controversy?" *Public Library of Science Medicine* 5(11): e222.

# Fears of funding withdrawal

"Did you think that the NIH might pull your funding?"





## Concerns Regarding Future Funding

**"I am less likely to receive funding from the NIH because of this controversy."**

