

DATE: December 11, 2014  
TO: American Economic Association, Executive Committee  
FROM: Jonathan Skinner, Chair  
American Economic Association Committee on Government Relations  
RE: Annual Report for 2014

The current members of the American Economic Association Committee on Government Relations (CGR) are Jonathan Skinner (Dartmouth, Chair), Katherine Baicker (Harvard), Maureen Cropper (Maryland), Mark Duggan (Stanford), Dana Goldman (USC), Maurine Haver (Haver Analytics), Susan Houseman (UpJohn), Anne Krueger (Johns Hopkins), David Laibson (Harvard), Charles Plott (California Institute of Technology), Phillip Swagel (Maryland), and John Taylor (Stanford).

The CGR was established in 2009 to represent the interests of the economics profession in Washington, D.C. and other locations around the country. A description of the Committee's primary activities may be found on its [website](#). As is true of the AEA, the Committee does not take positions on questions of economic policy or on any partisan matter.

There are no Action Items for the Executive Committee this year.

Over this past year, the Committee met roughly once every four weeks by phone with Dan Newlon, the AEA Washington representative. Newlon also met frequently with representatives of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) and other organizations whose interests overlap with those of the AEA and with the relevant staffs at the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Census and the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA).

Last year economic research continued to be threatened with cutbacks in funding for research grants and economic data. This report will describe its major activities in support of economic research.

National Institutes of Health: Some influential members of the House continued to pressure NIH to fund biomedical research instead of economics (or social sciences more generally). In the negotiations over the Fiscal 2014 Consolidated Appropriations Bill, Republican House negotiators tried to prohibit NIH from funding any economic research. Senator Barbara Mikulski, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, rejected this proposal. At the request of the CGR, the chairs of the economics departments at the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University sent letters to Senator Mikulski thanking her for her support of economic research at NIH and NSF. The CGR alerted sixty-six chairs of economics departments in the states with Senators on the Senate Appropriations Committee that they might receive time-sensitive requests to contact their Senators if potential threats to economics at NIH, NSF and the statistical agencies became more concrete.

The CGR remains concerned that, in response to this pressure from some members of Congress, NIH might redefine its mission so as to exclude social science research and economic research from its mandate. The CGR worked with economists in the White House to signal White House

support for health economics in the NIH mission. In 2013 the CGR helped to organize a successful campaign culminating in a letter signed by eighty-three members of the House and sent to Francis Collins, the Director of NIH, stressing the value of social science and behavioral research. At the 2014 Congressional hearings on NIH, Labor, Health and Human Services Appropriations subcommittee, Congresswoman Roybal-Allard (D, CA) asked Francis Collins a pointed question about the "Dear Colleague" letter and Francis Collins said NIH's commitment to the social and behavioral sciences, including health economics, remains strong. All signers of the letter supporting economics in the NIH came from Democrats in the House. To counter concerns that funded research was partisan and supportive of (e.g.) the Affordable Care Act, Dan Newlon sent examples of NIH funded research with bipartisan findings to leading Republican staffers in the House. Committee members Kate Baicker and Dana Goldman have both offered to meet with House leadership regarding the importance of economic research. Dan Newlon also met with other staffers on the Senate and House appropriations committees responsible for NIH's budget.

National Science Foundation: The House Science & Technology Committee passed legislation that would reallocate almost half of the 2014 budget for the Social, Behavioral, and Economic (SBE) Directorate, the source of almost all funding for economics at NSF, to other science and engineering Directorates. The SBE community responded with letters to members of Congress and meetings with key Congressional staffers responsible for NSF. The AEA sponsored an exhibit by Charlie Brown of the University of Michigan on "Panel Study of Income Dynamics: Continuity and Change in American Economic and Social Life" at a Congressional reception organized by the Coalition of National Science Funding. Newlon served on the selection committee that gave a "Golden Goose" award to Preston McAfee, Paul Milgrom and Robert Wilson for their research on auctions. The award is used to publicize the benefits of research to members of Congress. Newlon meets regularly with NSF staff and has met several times with France Córdova, the new NSF Director, and Fay Lomax Cook, the new head of the SBE Directorate.

Death Records: The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 limits timely access to Death Master File (DMF) data to those with "a legitimate fraud prevention or a legitimate business purpose pursuant to a law, governmental rule, regulation, or fiduciary duty" and directs the Secretary of Commerce to establish a certification program for access to the publicly available DMF.

The CGR wrote a letter to the Senate Finance Committee highlighting the adverse effects of this legislation on surveys and research. Newlon teamed up with representatives of genealogical associations to get key Senators and Representatives to send a "Dear Colleague" letter to OMB stating that research and updating surveys were legitimate uses of death records. Newlon testified in public hearings at the Department of Commerce on the importance of continued DMF access. Currently, the CGR is working with the Federation of Genealogical Societies to amend the Bipartisan Budget Act to recognize research as a legitimate use of the data.

Human Subject Protection Regulations: The National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academies of Science published its report "Proposed Revisions to the Common Rule for the Protection of Human Subjects in the Behavioral and Social Sciences." The recommended

changes would benefit economic research by reducing the burden and improving the quality of oversight over federally funded research provided by Independent Review Boards (IRBs). CGR helped finance the report, suggested the names of three economists on the panel that prepared the report, and helped disseminate its findings. OMB expressed appreciation for the report, and the Common Rule Modernization Group, the interagency task force responsible for the next phase in revising the Common Rule, is relying on the report.

Statistical Agencies: At its January 2014 meeting, the AEA Executive Committee, following a proposal by William Nordhaus, redefined the charge for the AEA Stat to become more closely involved with statistical agencies and work in consultation with the CGR to ensure that outreach and educational activities in support of economic statistics are coordinated between the two committees. Robert Moffitt, a past chair of the CGR, became the chair of AEA Stat, with Dan Newlon taking on added responsibility as its key staff member. John Haltiwanger, an expert in economic statistics, moved from the CGR to the AEA Stat. In addition, CGR members Maureen Cooper and Susan Houseman participated in several AEA Stat conference calls where their expertise was needed.

Early in 2014 before these changes took place, the CGR learned that BLS had decided to eliminate its export prices program, one of its core programs and a key source of data for the national income accounts and research in international economics. The CGR contacted influential economists within the government and economists outside the government and the Department Secretaries of Labor and Commerce came up with a solution that preserved the export prices program. Newlon helped found Friends of BLS, a new voluntary organization whose members support BLS.

In October 2014 the Census Bureau solicited comments in the Federal Register about a proposal to eliminate “low benefit” questions from the American Community Survey (ACS) based on a first-stage content review of the ACS. One of these questions, the Field of Degree (FOD) question, is used by the National Science Foundation to survey college graduates in science and engineering. The elimination of this question would affect economic research on education, business and the participation of women and minorities in science and engineering. Four AEA Committees, AEA Stat, CGR, CSWEP and CSMGEP, urged economists doing research in these areas to send comments to Census and the Committees also agreed to send separate comments to Census suggesting that the FOD question is valuable.

Public Administrative Data: The CGR and AEA Stat are working closely with the Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics (COPAFS) on a project to inventory and prioritize federal government data. CGR member Maurine Haver and AEA Stat member John Haltiwanger are serving on this project’s advisory board. Committee members helped design a questionnaire to survey economists to determine which administrative data sets have the highest priority for economic research. The results of the survey of 6,000 AEA members will be presented at the Boston ASSA meetings in a session on administrative data sponsored by COPAFS. The CGR continues to work closely with COPAFS to support government statistics. Dan Newlon and CGR member Maurine Haver are members of the COPAFS Board.

Data Synchronization: Data synchronization would improve the quality of economic data with little or no cost. Dan Newlon and CGR members met with economists within the Administration and with Congressional staff about inserting language in pending legislation that would allow Census, BLS and BEA to coordinate their collection of business data. The CGR signed a letter to members of Congress urging passage of data synchronization legislation.

Activities not undertaken by the CGR. To give a sense for the type of activities deemed beyond our authority, we list several that failed to gain support from CGR.

1. The CGR turned down a request by the Population Association of America that the AEA co-fund a “trans-organization effort to ensure NIH support of health economics research remains intact and viable.”
2. The CGR did not sign letters supporting Administration 2015 budget requests from the Census Project for the Census Bureau; the Coalition of National Science Funding for the National Science Foundation; and for the National Institutes of Health from the Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research because it would be inappropriate for an AEA Committee to support requests for government spending.
3. Although the CGR opposes legislation in the House targeting the SBE Directorate for disproportionate budget cuts, it declined requests from the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) to forward “Action Alerts” to AEA members urging them to write their Congressmen to oppose this legislation.
4. The CGR also declined requests to sign letters to members of Congress advocating other positions that most economists would support because some AEA members might strongly object to parts of these letters. These include
  - a letter from COPAFS to House and Senate Appropriators and to the DOL Secretary opposing the elimination of BLS’ export prices program because it asked for an increase in the BLS budget;
  - a letter of agreement in which the AEA would provide contacts for Department of Interior Strategic Sciences Groups (SSG) because the AEA would be listed as a collaborating society in SSG reports; and
  - a letter from the Coalition to Promote Research (CPR) expressing “continued and strong support for the competitive peer review process used by the National Institutes of Health (NIH)” and strongly opposing “allowing politics to interfere with the scientific review process.”