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Science as a Model for Rational, Legitimate Government

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Before WWII science was largely dependent on support through teaching, and a few foundations. In the last half century, thanks to the contribution of applied science to winning the second world war, government became a deep-pockets source of support for science. While many academic scientists were deeply suspicious of government as a sponsor, the research universities saw an opportunity to build their institutions around government support. Government saw science as a means for sustaining its military primacy. Thus a marriage was consummated by partners – science and politics – who needed each other, but for quite different and to some degree conflicting motives. In the U.S. democracy, the relationship between science and politics has never been easy. The search for truth in science and for legitimacy in politics both require systems for generating public trust, but these systems are not the same, and indeed they are often incompatible. The most profound area of mismatch between science and politics is found not in conflicts over what kinds of research are deserving of public funding, but rather in conflicts over the advice government receives from scientific and technical experts. It is no accident that democratic America fostered progress in science and technology. Both American democracy and modern science are products of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason and openness rather than on prejudice and traditional authority. American democracy has always benefited from a pragmatic willingness to learn from experience, very much as science relies on experiment. Progress in science is based transparency and accountability; these are also basic principles of democratic government. If science is corrupted by government, government itself is in danger of becoming corrupt. In recent years we seemed to be going down that path. It is no accident that President Obama and media commentators speak often of the “new pragmatism,” or that he appointed exceptionally well-qualified scientists to top posts in his government. Both democracy and science stand to benefit enormously when our political leaders understand that the ethos of science and ethics of democracy have common roots.