

Turning Off the Tap: New Strategies Undermining Science for Public Health

Tuesday, March 31st |

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Conducted via Zoom:

<https://berkeley.zoom.us/j/655109168>

Dial: 877 853 5247 US Toll-free Meeting ID: 655 109 168



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Social Scientists have documented multiple strategies used to weaken scientific research especially where such research supports public health oriented regulation. These include “bending science” to generate a literature that finds fewer public health harms, sowing doubt about any studies that do find harm, and shifting the membership of federal science advisory boards to increase the number of industry-funded scientists serving in those roles. A more recent strategy--discontinuing federal funding for scientific research altogether--has been added to the mix and offers a much less expensive way to achieve similar policy ends. To establish the significance of what I call “turning off the tap,” I explore the longstanding partnership between the federal government and academic science and show how progressives and conservatives, even though they disagreed on policy outcomes, tended to approach conflicts over science in ways that bolstered the state-science partnership. Beginning in 1996, however, a new pattern is emerging. While it may look like only an incremental change in a persistent ideological debate, I argue it represents a fundamental break with a long-standing consensus about the role of science in policymaking. I include a discussion of why progressives, who hold, anti-science views, have not similarly tried to halt funding for research they find objectionable.

Ann Keller is Associate Professor of Health Politics at the University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health. Keller holds a PhD in political science and studies the role of expertise in public decision-making, focusing on how expert systems are designed in the public sector and how expertise is maintained in contested political domains. Before joining the UC Berkeley faculty, Keller completed a postdoctoral fellowship with the Robert Wood Johnson Scholars in Health Policy Research Program. Keller is currently working on a book that examines a new phase in partisanship over funding and application of scientific research to guide federal regulations to protect health. In addition, she is principal investigator of an NSF-funded study of how regulatory agencies are responding to CRISPR/Cas-9 and automated vehicle technologies.