

Philanthropic research funders should help shield science from Trump's cuts

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The incoming Republican administration has signaled it will [profoundly change](#) scientific funding in the United States, with implications for researchers worldwide. The nominee to lead the Department of Health and Human Services has [said](#) that he will “give infectious disease a break for about eight years”; Project 2025 [states](#) that “climate fanaticism will need a whole-of-government unwinding” and argues for reducing “policies and procedures that are used to advance radical gender, racial, and equity initiatives under the banner of science.” More broadly, the incoming administration has [laid out plans to](#) dramatically alter priorities or cut funding for major research funding institutions including the National Institutes of Health, the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research, and the National Science Foundation. This raises concerns about the continued support of research into infectious diseases, inequality, and climate science, among other areas.

We are sisters watching these proposed changes to research funding develop through complementary lenses: Leah, having researched how scientific funders should set priorities, and Emma, as a professor whose research lab receives federal funding. We have both heard from colleagues who are frightened for their jobs, their funding streams, and their ability to continue research that benefits people worldwide.

Here we argue that one priority for philanthropic scientific funders should be closing unjustified funding gaps the incoming administration may create through potentially rash cuts. We describe three such gaps below, but because the future is uncertain, emphasize that funders should respond to federal policy as it develops. We then discuss why addressing gaps in federal funding should be a priority for philanthropic funders, drawing both on the stated goals of major philanthropic funders, and past research on priority setting.

1. **Infectious disease research.** Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the nominee to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, has a [longstanding history of promoting](#) debunked theories linking vaccines to autism, as well as questioning whether HIV causes AIDS. His statements suggest he does not value rigorous infectious disease research. This is concerning, as research into many infectious diseases is already underfunded: private companies—who [fund most research](#)—are often [less financially incentivized](#) to research infectious diseases, which disproportionately impact poorer populations. Historically, public funders [have helped offset this](#) by conducting foundational infectious disease research, making it easier and cheaper for pharmaceutical companies to conduct more applied research into novel vaccines and treatments. For instance, the NIH, which [provides the majority](#) of public and philanthropic funding for infectious disease

research worldwide, began investing in the foundational research that paved the way for COVID vaccines—which have saved [millions of lives](#)—decades before [the pandemic](#).

2. **Research on social inequity.** Multiple documents suggest that the incoming administration may significantly [cut funding for research on societal inequities](#), including Project 2025, which mentions “equity” on more than 60 different pages. Congressional Republicans have also expressed skepticism in a [report](#) criticizing research on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Importantly, this report casts an overbroad net: for example, to identify the 3,483 grants it criticizes, it searches for those mentioning the phrases “minority”, “inequity”, or “social inequality”. Grants with these keywords include ones to [protect vulnerable people from flooding](#), [help blind and low-vision employees analyze data](#), [create AI speech systems that work for people who stutter](#), and [combat behavioral health disorders in rural East Tennessee](#). These are not radical leftist projects; they are pragmatic studies that help generate new technologies and evidence-based policies to mitigate the effects of inequality in America and worldwide.
3. **Climate science research.** Abundant evidence suggests that the incoming administration will reduce funding for climate change research. Project 2025 argues that the Energy Department’s 17 National Labs have been “too focused on climate change and renewable technologies”, calls for breaking up the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration which “has become one of the main drivers of the climate change alarm industry”, and calls for downsizing the Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research because the “preponderance of its climate-change research should be disbanded”. Similarly, congressional Republicans [expressed skepticism](#) of 362 NSF grants which mentioned phrases like “climate change” or “clean energy”. This is concerning in light the fact that climate change research is [arguably underfunded](#) in the United States relative to its large health impacts.

Philanthropic research funders have the resources to substantially mitigate these cuts. A recent [analysis](#) of philanthropic support for research institutions found that it totaled an amount rivaling the budgets of agencies like the NSF and NIH. And philanthropists need not attempt to entirely *replace* the funding budgets of these agencies, but only the areas that are unjustifiably cut.

Why should this be a philanthropic priority? Research projects across the aforementioned areas have survived the notoriously [competitive](#), and [rigorously peer-reviewed](#), federal funding process, suggesting these areas are important and promising directions to fund. But these areas are not just *important*; as we have argued, statements from the incoming administration suggest they may become *neglected*. Funding neglected areas has long been a priority for major

philanthropic funders: the [Gates Foundation](#) prioritizes neglected global health research, [Open Philanthropy](#) prioritizes the neglectedness of a cause, and [Schmidt Sciences](#) identifies under-supported or unconventional areas. Prioritizing more neglected causes tends to lead to more impactful research. This is because neglectedness is [linked closely](#) to cost-effectiveness: assuming there are [good scientific opportunities](#) in a given area, additional research funding will tend to have more impact in areas for which funding is currently more limited. In addition, neglectedness is often correlated with inequity, as more marginalized populations [have historically been overlooked](#) by the research enterprise. Dramatic cuts to long-established areas could thus serve as a useful signal to funders that funding research in these areas may be particularly impactful - especially if the cuts seem hasty, ill-considered, or opposed to scientific consensus. Funders should consider these signals of importance and neglectedness, along with their standard metrics and rigorous vetting processes, when setting funding priorities.

Philanthropic scientific funders have the opportunity and obligation to protect science from rash federal funding cuts. We hope that they will choose to do so.