2006 Midterm Election Results: 
Implications for the Research Community
Report courtesy of Lewis-Burke Associates

Election Results
The November 7 midterm Congressional elections proved to be a turning point in Washington politics, as Democrats returned to power after years as an opposition party.

As many pollsters predicted, Democrats took control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1994, when a similar Republican “wave” election ended decades of Democratic dominance. As of this writing, Democrats have captured 227 House seats, nine more than the 218 required to control the 435-member body. Fourteen more seats remain undecided.

Pollsters were less certain about Democrats’ chances of taking over the Senate. Democrats needed a six-seat pickup out of seven Republican seats which were considered “in play,” and while results in two key races are not final, this goal now looks to be within reach. Republicans successfully retained the vacant Senate seat of retiring Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee (Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker scored a victory over Democratic House Member Harold Ford), but have lost four seats outright (Mike DeWine in Ohio, Rick Santorum in Pennsylvania, Lincoln Chaffee in Rhode Island, and Jim Talent in Missouri). That means control of the Senate comes down to two tightly contested races, where incumbents George Allen of Virginia and Conrad Burns of Montana both trail their Democratic challengers by tiny margins as vote-counting continues. A recount is likely in at least the Virginia race and possibly in Montana as well, meaning control of the Senate may not be decided for days or even weeks.

Regardless of what the Democratic margin in the House turns out to be, or where control of the Senate lies when all is said and done, the central fact of this election is clear: after an era of widespread support for the GOP which grew even stronger following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, American voters have chosen a new direction. While conventional wisdom points to the dwindling popularity of the Iraq war as the primary reason for this decision, other factors have played a part as well: an unpopular Republican President, highly negative perceptions of the federal government’s handling of Hurricane Katrina, numerous ethics scandals which mostly involved Republicans, a perceived failure by Republicans to practice fiscal discipline, the unpopular and largely abandoned 2005 effort to reform Social Security, and others.

General Implications
Regardless of whether Democrats take control of the Senate, control of the House even by a slim margin brings with it considerable power. Current Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California is expected to become Speaker of the House, which will give her a great deal of control over what the House does and does not consider. Unlike the Senate, where individual Senators wield more power in setting the agenda, the House has a top-down structure wherein the Speaker and other party leaders control the agenda.
Democratic control of the House and possibly the Senate also means that committee makeup will change. Democrats will now constitute a majority in each committee generally in proportion to their majority in the larger House, and Democrats will take over the chairs of each committee. In most if not all cases, the current Ranking Minority Members will be awarded the gavels in their respective committees and subcommittees.

**What Does It Mean for Research?**

Before the 110th Congress takes control in January, the first matter to consider is the 109th Congress’ final “lame duck” session, which will begin November 13. Though other issues may be considered, the primary task for both the House and Senate in these sessions will be to deal with the outstanding FY 2007 appropriations bills. It is unclear how the Democratic victory will influence this process. Some believe that Republicans may simply extend a continuing resolution funding agencies and programs into early next year. Except for programs funded within the Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations bill, funding would continue at the lower of the House-passed or current (FY 2006) levels. For programs within the Labor-HHS-Education bill, which has passed neither the House nor the Senate, funding would be maintained at the FY 2006 level. Such a continuing resolution would effectively shift the responsibility for dealing with these difficult bills to the more Democratic 110th Congress. If this does happen, Democrats could rewrite the pending bills, or may decide to keep their political fingerprints off of the FY 2007 budget altogether so they can start fresh with FY 2008. If this is the case, the first year of the President’s American Competitiveness Initiative, which expands funding for agencies important to the research community, may be in danger despite broad bipartisan support. Furthermore, the special projects (commonly called earmarks) contained in the current FY 2007 bills would go unfunded.

Moving into calendar year 2007 and the 110th Congress, the research and higher education communities may be encouraged by early signs that a Democratic-controlled Congress will support their issues. The House Democrats’ plan entitled “A New Direction For America” includes proposals to expand research and development funding, among other things. Democrats are also generally more in line with the views of the research community on such hot-button issues as stem cell research and climate change.

There are a number of factors which should temper the optimism, however. First and foremost, there are the macro-politics of divided government, a phenomenon Washington has not seen since the 2000 election. While Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Chairman Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-IL) reiterated last night that Democrats will not attempt to impeach President Bush, it is fairly certain that there will be an increase in oversight and investigations of the Executive Branch and perhaps of ethics in Congress as well. This type of activity could very well crowd out the policy discourse in Washington over the next two years. Tied into this, of course, will be questions surrounding the Bush Administration’s conduct of the war in Iraq, and the debate over future war plans.
For his part, President Bush still wields his veto power, which he used for the first time this year to strike down an embryonic stem cell research bill favored by the scientific community (H.R. 810). Democrats have not attained the 2/3 majority needed in both Houses to overturn a veto. If moderate Republicans vote the same way, as they did on the stem cell issue, it becomes a possibility, but many Republicans who voted in favor of H.R. 810 chose not to vote to override the President’s veto. So while a successful ballot initiative in Missouri underscored American public support for embryonic stem cell research, the political calculus on this issue in Washington may be basically unchanged. President Bush is also likely to utilize his veto more often now that Democrats control at least part of the legislative process.

Additionally, Democrats will face the same budget constraints that Republicans currently face. While budget forecasts have improved over the last year or so, federal deficits remain very large. Growing entitlement spending and continued overseas military commitments will continue to squeeze domestic discretionary spending, such as funding for research agencies. While scaling back or eliminating the Bush tax cuts may provide some additional revenue, Democrats also have plans for a series of other tax breaks and credits designed to relieve the tax burden on the middle class.

To return to the macro-political picture, the 2008 elections already loom large for the 110th Congress. Each party will make every decision with an eye towards their party’s prospects to control the White House and Congress in those elections. It is likely that the aforementioned hot-button science issues like stem cells and climate change will only become hotter as 2008 approaches.

**What Strategy Should the Research Community Adopt?**
While the elections are certainly a net victory for the Democrats, it would be an error to assume that Republicans no longer matter in Washington. It is now more important than ever for research organizations and universities to play the role of nonpartisan honest brokers.

Twelve years of Republican dominance in Congress and six years of a Republican White House have forced the research community to rethink its messages and reach out to Republican audiences. In looking at the larger picture, one can see that these efforts have paid real dividends. The doubling of the National Institutes of Health, a massive federal investment begun under the Clinton Administration, was supported by a Republican Congress and continued by a Republican President. Now, a critical mass of Republicans has heard the research community’s message that more investment is needed in the physical sciences. This has resulted in proposed budget increases for the National Science Foundation and Department of Energy Office of Science as part of the President’s American Competitiveness Initiative, which Congress is poised to enact if the normal FY 2007 budget process is completed.

It would be a mistake to forget the lessons which made these inroads to a Republican audience possible. Some of the greatest champions of science in Congress have been
Republicans. This is one area where bipartisan cooperation appears most likely, even as the general political climate becomes more contentious.