Secret 'Research' Behind Policies

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Conventional wisdom tells us "you get what you pay for." But the Clinton Administration doesn't want that maxim to apply to the taxpayers. When it comes to research about global warming, other environmental issues, gun control, vaccine mandates, and social programs, Clinton does not want the public to get the data we have paid for. By blocking access to that research, the Clinton bureaucrats can mold and distort the conclusions any way they want.

The Clinton spinmeisters have figured out that announcing policies, rules and recommendations without providing the research backup that allegedly justifies them is a neat way to advance liberal goals. They force the taxpayers to fund a study about some social issue, and then spin the results to favor liberal programs.

The pollsters learned this trick long ago. By slanting their choice of questions or the wording of the questions, pollsters can produce virtually any answers their clients want. Research data are not very different from polling data. For a conclusion to be credible, the backup data must be available for review by others, including who asked what, when, where and how.

The federal budget every year includes the expenditure of billions of taxpayer dollars for studies and research. The data are analyzed and reported by persons who may have undisclosed conflicts of interest or ideological biases, so it is foolish to put blind faith in their conclusions.

Yet for years, taxpayers have been prevented from seeing certain research data that we financed and, instead, what we get is a report on data that we are not allowed to examine for ourselves. Concealing mistakes and fraud is, therefore, no problem, and biasing the conclusions in favor of a liberal result is a process without penalty.

Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL) tried to end this travesty by inserting the following provision into last

year's omnibus appropriations bill (P.L. 105-277): "all data produced under an award will be made available to the public through the procedures established under the Freedom of Information Act" (FOIA). In other words, if taxpayers paid for the research through a federal grant or award, then taxpayers can see what they paid for, except for limited FOIA exemptions to protect legitimate privacy and commercial interests.

The Clinton Administration is fighting the Shelby law tooth and nail. The Office of Management and Budget has proposed two regulations (amending OMB Circular A-110) that would completely gut the Shelby provision.

The first proposed regulation, issued early this year, would limit public access to data relating to research findings that are actually published, and also force the public to pay substantial charges in order to access such data. But lots of federally-funded research does not result in published findings, and sometimes the unpublished findings are more important than what is published.

As bad as this first proposed regulation was, the Clinton Administration is now trying to gut the Shelby provision even further.

The second proposed regulation would block the public from accessing data we paid for unless the data relate to findings "used by the Federal Government in developing a regulation." This proposal then defines "regulation" to include only regulations that are subject to the formal notice and comment procedure. This second proposal would exclude from public scrutiny the underlying data that allegedly justify the big majority of government policies and rules. It would exclude vaccine recommendations and many policies about the environment and guns.

Adding insult to injury, this second proposed regulation even suggests completely disregarding the Shelby provision for regulations that have an alleged impact of less than $100 million. Many of the most harmful government regulations have a monetary impact that is arguably less than $100 million.

Supporters of the Clinton regulations argue that the research process would be compromised if the public can compare the researchers' conclusions with their data. In fact, it's only the mistakes and distortions in the researchers' conclusions that would be threatened.

Public identifications of bureaucratic and even scholarly errors are frequent. It was two private citizens, not government investigators, who exposed the FBI lies about inflammable gas used at Waco. It was the

public, not the experts, who had to tell a new TV game show that it erred in insisting that Lake Michigan is the second largest Great Lake rather than Lake Huron.

Less than a year ago, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) cited unpublished data in recommending that virtually all infants should receive the rotavirus vaccine. Then recently, the CDC reversed itself and said that no one should receive this harmful vaccine, citing reasons that may have been evident in the unpublished data all along.