

# Roll Call



## **A Republican Favorite, NASA Escapes Trump's Budget Ax**

*'A lot of the NASA facilities are in Republican states and districts'*

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Space exploration was left relatively unscathed when President Donald Trump released his first budget request in March — especially when compared with other science and technology programs.

The National Institutes of Health, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, climate change initiatives and energy research were all significantly cut in the budget outline, but NASA funding barely received a scratch with a \$19.1 billion line item for fiscal 2018.

That proposed 0.8 percent reduction compared to fiscal 2017 annualized levels is a much smaller decrease than the proposed changes to the other science programs, some of which are facing up to an 18 percent loss of federal funding.

When compared with former President Barack Obama's last budget request, which asked Congress to appropriate \$18.3 billion during fiscal 2017, the Trump request actually represents an \$800 million increase.

So, then, why?

A simple answer is that NASA enjoys strong support from key Republican appropriators as well as GOP congressional leadership, even if Trump has not said much in the past about the space agency.

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, told CQ Roll Call that while Trump gave few indications before being sworn in that he would become a strong advocate for NASA, its support among congressional Republicans and the location of its facilities in GOP-held areas may have played a role in keeping its funding safe.

“I don’t know whether it’s Trump’s personal preference ... or whether it’s because NASA is strongly defended by many Republicans,” Edwards said when asked why programs such as the NIH, which also has broad GOP support, were cut far more than NASA. “A lot of the NASA facilities are in Republican states and districts — Texas, Alabama and elsewhere.”

Trump did not mention NASA more than a handful of times while campaigning for the Oval Office. When he did, the businessman seemed more interested in spending money to bolster the nation’s military, and rebuild its roads, bridges and airports than advocating funding for satellite programs and research aboard the International Space Station.

“You know, in the old days, it was great,” Trump said in November 2015 when a boy at a campaign event in New Hampshire asked for his thoughts on NASA. “Right now, we have bigger problems — you understand that? We’ve got to fix our potholes. You know, we don’t exactly have a lot of money.”

### **NASA clout**

NASA has 20 facilities throughout the country and is represented by several powerful Republican lawmakers — as well as Democratic ones.

The Johnson Space Flight Center in Houston is represented by two Senate Republicans, Majority Whip John Cornyn and Sen. Ted Cruz, and GOP Rep. Brian Babin.

The Kennedy Space Flight Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, is represented by Republican Sen. Marco Rubio, former astronaut and Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson, and GOP Rep. Bill Posey. There are also two facilities in Mississippi and one in Alabama — all of which are represented by Republican senators, including Appropriations Chairman Thad Cochran and senior appropriator Richard C. Shelby.

The Armstrong Flight Research Center in California is just inside House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy’s district.

William Hoagland, senior vice president at the Bipartisan Policy Center, told CQ Roll Call that in addition to being a favorite of Republicans, NASA’s work is better known to the average American than other federal science programs. Many may remember beating the former Soviet Union to the moon during the space race, could hope to someday take a vacation outside Earth’s atmosphere, or want to see an American colony on Mars.

“Relative to the other agencies, it would appear NASA escaped the knife a little bit in this mini-budget,” said Hoagland, a former GOP budget staffer. “People have a better feel for what NASA does ... it shoots rockets, explores space.”

Channeling part of the ever-shrinking pot of discretionary money toward NASA also represents an enticing opportunity for Trump, a man who said “America doesn’t win anymore” frequently during his campaign.

Being president when NASA solves the challenges posed by long-term space travel or the theoretical colonization of other planets would represent an unparalleled win for Trump, who grew up during the original space race. It would also guarantee him a place in the world's history books.

### **GOP backing**

NASA has traditionally experienced support among both political parties, but during the Obama administration, it became one of the few budget areas where Republican appropriators would critique the Democratic administration when it didn't propose adequate funding.

When Obama's last budget requested \$18.3 billion in funding for fiscal 2017 — a full \$1 billion less than the \$19.3 billion Congress approved in fiscal 2016 — Republicans were not shy about rebuking him.

The House Commerce-Justice-Science Appropriations Subcommittee wrote in its fiscal 2017 spending bill that Obama's "lack of commitment to the country's space program is not shared by the Congress."

The subcommittee's current chairman, Rep. John Culberson, whose Houston district is not far from NASA's facility there, has continued to rebuke Obama, while praising the Trump budget request.

"NASA has been underfunded for far too long," Culberson said during an interview with PBS that aired in April. "They have been short-sticked by previous administrations, this past administration. And I'm very excited and pleased to see President Trump recommend enough funding for NASA as a whole."

Shelby, the chairman of the corresponding Senate panel, offered similar criticism of Obama last year during a hearing on NASA's budget. The Alabama Republican's official position on NASA says that the United States "cannot afford for other nations, such as Russia and China, to leap ahead of us in scientific research or space understanding and exploration."

Obama did propose reductions in the NASA budget during his administration. His first budget to Congress requested \$18.7 billion in funding for fiscal 2010. That number dipped to a low of \$17.5 billion in fiscal 2015 before ticking slightly back up to \$18.3 billion in his final budget request for fiscal 2017.

But Congress controls the purse strings.

The Commerce-Justice-Science appropriations bills reduced NASA's budget — sometimes below what Obama requested — before increasing its funding during the last two fiscal years. Congress approved \$18.7 billion in fiscal 2010 — the same number put forward by the Obama White House.

But during fiscal years 2011 through 2014, Congress approved less than requested. NASA's funding decreased to a low of \$16.9 billion in fiscal 2013 before increasing to \$19.3 billion in fiscal 2016.

### **NASA soars**

With the backing of the new administration and key Republicans, it's likely NASA's funding will increase again during fiscal 2018 and in subsequent years.

That could mean more chances for the GOP to tout its fondness for NASA — just like in March, when Trump hosted an Oval Office signing ceremony for NASA's authorization bill. Cornyn, Cruz, Culberson, McCarthy and Rubio all attended the event to voice their support for NASA in front of the new president.

Lawmakers also laid claim to bragging rights over the work and accomplishments at NASA facilities in their states.

"I'm happy to see that Florida is going to continue to do more than Texas is," Rubio said, according to a pool report.

"It's going to be a good competition," Trump said. "Right, Kevin?"

The signing ceremony was the first time since taking office that Trump went into detail about his support for NASA and gave a clear indication of where he would like to see structural changes.

"[This bill] orders NASA to ... continue transitioning activities to the commercial sector, where we have seen great progress," Trump said, according to a pool report. "It's amazing what's going on. So many people and so many companies are so into exactly what NASA stands for, so the commercial and the private sector will get to use these facilities, and I hope they're going to be paying us a lot of money."

What he said was in line with the changes proposed in his budget.

The skinny budget would have NASA expand "public-private partnerships as the foundation of future U.S. civilian space efforts," including work on space station operations, deep-space habitation and the development of commercialized space technology.

It would also eliminate \$115 million for NASA's education office, ax the asteroid redirect mission and reorganize a "duplicative" robotic satellite refueling demonstration mission.

NASA and the Office of Management and Budget declined to comment on NASA funding. But an OMB official told CQ Roll Call in a statement that "NASA has and will continue to contribute to our nation's economy, security, and destiny. Investments in NASA can capture the public's imagination and deliver returns through inventions, innovations, and economic growth."