



Across the Ideological Universe

Republicans and Democrats agree about one thing: very expensive space flight.

By [Boer Deng](#)

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Rockets, satellites, and spaceships on display at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., are a testament to American achievements in space. But in an exhibit on the heady days of the 1960s and '70s, one note on a timeline placard stands out. In 1969, it explains, a government task force suggested that NASA should build a permanently manned space station, and perhaps go to Mars. This did not happen. Political support for the ideas evaporated while people worried about the Vietnam War, social upheavals, and the money already spent on the Apollo program. The country must “define new goals which make sense for the seventies,” President [Richard Nixon declared](#). A year after the moon landing, [56 percent of the public said it hadn't been worth the price](#).

You would think that funding [Orion](#), NASA's first new type of crewed spaceship in three decades, and the Space Launch System, the powerful rocket Orion will eventually be attached to, would give politicians pause. The projects are meant to finally fulfill grand ambitions to go to Mars, but launching SLS [would cost \\$17 billion](#), NASA has estimated. (And that's an estimate for a 2017 launch; the launch date has since been pushed back to 2018, with costs that presumably have mounted apace.) The Government Accountability Office says that the total to develop and run Orion and SLS through 2021 will be \$22 billion and that NASA is already several million dollars short on what it needs. President Obama's entire proposed budget for NASA in 2015 was \$17.46 billion, and space exploration is only supposed to be [22 percent of all projects](#). But on Tuesday, Congress [cut a new deal that would boost NASA spending to \\$18 billion](#).

This might seem odd, given an environment of tight-fistedness and frequent [fretting over “wasteful spending”](#). But politicians of all stripes are keen on the project. Rep. Lamar Smith, a Republican crusader against [“ill-spent” public science funds](#), says SLS and Orion exemplify [“our greatest breakthroughs and demonstrate American ingenuity”](#). A Democrat, Sen. Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, [sponsored the legislation](#) that created SLS. It “has the distinction of being the first rocket designed by a committee of politicians,” [quips the Economist](#). The 2010 bill specifies that the SLS must be capable of [“lifting payloads weighing between 70 tons and 100 tons into low-Earth orbit”](#) and that it is robust “in areas as related to solid and liquid engines.” When did senators and representatives become so well versed in rocketry?

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Not everyone is convinced this is the right way to go to Mars. *Slate*'s Phil Plait points out that it's unclear whether a government-funded project can [outperform commercial enterprise](#). Others have argued that there should be a more cost-efficient way to fund the project. Two private firms, SpaceX and Boeing, are also building deep-space capsules. SpaceX's Dragon might sit atop a rocket it's developing for interplanetary journeys. The company claims it can successfully launch these for \$2.5 billion, a fraction of SLS's cost. This could very well be hot air. But it does raise the question: Shouldn't it be cheaper to build SLS?

It should be. Earlier this year, a report from the Government Accountability Office stated that more private contracts [could reduce its cost](#). "GAO believes NASA's responses do not fully address the concerns about the program's cost estimates," it said. "There are opportunities, however, to improve long-term affordability through competition ... contracting is a key factor in controlling cost."

But there is political, if not economic, advantage to keeping the hefty price tag for the project. Congress may have officially banned pork barreling in 2010, but SLS seems like a good way for wily lawmakers to find some cracklings. Republican Reps. [Mo Brooks of Alabama](#) and [Steven Palazzo of Mississippi](#) have each sung its praises, for example. They have good reason to: Stennis Space Center, NASA's primary facility for testing rocket propulsion, is in Palazzo's district and employs 300 people. Marshall Space Flight Center is in Brooks' and carries out rocket development for NASA. In 2013, Mississippi received [\\$381 million in contracts](#) from the agency. In the Senate, Alabama Republican Richard Shelby and Maryland Democrat Barbara Mikulski are both fans of SLS. They are on the appropriations committee and might be thanked for a [proposed additional \\$100 million for the project](#).

Of course, space exploration has always had to do with jobs and money and politics. Houston is "Space City, USA" thanks to enthusiasm from powerful Texas Democrats serving in 1961, when the Manned Spacecraft Center—now Johnson Space Center—was announced. Lyndon B. Johnson was vice president; Sam Rayburn served as speaker of the house. "Albert L. Thomas represented the area adjacent to Clear Lake and chaired the House Appropriations Committee," [notes a NASA history of Houston](#), and "Olin E. Teague served on the House Committee on Science and Astronautics and headed the Subcommittee on Manned Space Flight"—Texan space supporters one and all.

If keeping costs high sounds like a dubious bipartisan cause, fear not: SLS's political critics span the ideological universe, too. "There is definitely division over NASA among the liberty-minded Republicans," says Chris Edwards of the libertarian Cato Institute. More private enterprise in developing space exploration should be encouraged, he says, and he thinks President Obama has made some moves in the right direction. In 2011, the Tea Party in Space, a lobby group, [sent a letter in support of Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer's](#) pleas that NASA open up its SLS procurement process to cheaper private enterprise. (It doesn't take a gambler to bet on [which state has the largest private space industry](#): the two senators' own state of California.) It seems that SLS proves two age-old truths about Washington: Politics makes for strange bedfellows indeed, and even where a trip to Mars is concerned, there is nothing new under the sun.

