The International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957-58 helped to lay the foundations of the 1959 Antarctica Treaty in part by diminishing expectations about the mineral potential of the Southern Continent. Despite 18 months of extensive scientific activity, nothing was found of any economic value. Shortly after the IGY, the 12 nations involved in Antarctic IGY research met in Washington D.C. to negotiate the Antarctic Treaty, which suspended sovereignty claims to Antarctica and created a “continent for peace and science.”

Over the course of the three decades that followed the ratification of the Antarctic Treaty in 1961, scientific developments continued to contribute to changing perceptions of Antarctica’s environment, which in turn shaped the politics of the Southern Continent. The general tendency in this 30-year period was a renewed growth in speculation about Antarctica’s mineral potential, partially caused by the widespread acceptance of the theory of plate tectonics. Geological connections between Antarctica and geologically better-known parts of the world heightened the belief that valuable minerals might be found in Antarctica. But as members of the Antarctic Treaty System sought to negotiate a minerals regime for Antarctica, these plans met with stringent opposition from environmental groups opposing any economic minerals activity in the Antarctic continent.

This paper will examine the interaction between Antarctic politics and the developing scientific understanding of the Antarctic continent between 1961-91. It will argue that while political stability has helped to encourage science, scientific developments have continued to shape the political history of Antarctica, sometimes in a destabilizing manner.