Editor's LETTER

ACS chemical biology

Bringing Science into the Debate

With the primary season in full swing, the candidates have been working furiously to hone their stump speeches, differentiate their opinions from their competitors, and lay out proposals for their potential tenure in the White House. It seems like there is a debate every few days during which the candidates try to explain exactly why their vision represents what is best for the country, yet it is often difficult to find substance in these descriptions. While the stance of most candidates is explicit on certain topics—for example, the war in Iraq—their views on the future of science in the U.S. are often obscure.

A review of the transcripts from the Democratic and Republican primary debates that directly preceded the writing of this Letter (January 5 and 30, respectively) showed that the word "science" was spoken only four times: three times by Gov. Bill Richardson and once by Sen. Hillary Clinton, who claimed that the Republican candidates "are not talking about science and innovation. They're not talking about what really is going to face the next president." She is correct, but this deficit crosses party boundaries.

Science- and technology-related fields will present numerous critical issues for our next president. Studies of global warming, and our response to these findings, hold vast implications for the health of the planet, and efforts to create new alternative fuels will impact environmental, economic, and international policy matters. Inadequate funding of basic research limits creativity and drives talent into other professions. The insertion of cronyism and religious doctrine into scientific policy and education threatens to stymie innovation and undermine the very structure that has made the U.S. a world leader in these areas. The reality of these concerns was highlighted last month when the National Science Board, the oversight agency for the National Science Foundation, noted in its biennial report that America's status as the world leader in science and technology innovation is at risk (www.nsf.gov/statistics/indicators).

Regardless of one's stance on these issues, their importance is undeniable, making it essential that we have a full grasp of the candidates' positions. In order to move beyond talking points and carefully crafted policy sheets, the best way to do this is to hold a debate focused on issues of science and technology. That is the goal of a grassroots organization named Science Debate 2008 (www.sciencedebate2008.com), whose signatories number >10,000 and include government, industry, and religious leaders, along with a host of preeminent scientists. Along with advocating such a debate, the Web site also provides a forum for submitting questions on a range of topics. Perhaps through this initiative, the issues of science and technology will be afforded the attention they deserve as we select the country's next leader.

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