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Let's Talk

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BioScience

Organisms from Molecules to the Environment

American Institute of Biological Sciences

Let's Talk

Even as calls grow for a presidential debate on science and technology—see the Washington Watch column on p. 296—advocates of scientific realpolitik are warning the debate's champions (among which are *BioScience* and AIBS) to be careful what they wish for. A politically inspired boost in federal largesse for an agency can be used later to justify tight funding—a dubious net benefit, as David Goldston reminded his readers in *Nature* (7 February, p. 621). In any case, "More attention doesn't always translate into more money," Goldston noted, and as for concerns about scientific integrity in government, a debate under TV lights could easily leave the public "even more confused about how a president should use scientific advice." Daniel Sarewitz (who reviews a book on the commercialization of science on p. 360 of this issue of *BioScience*) wrote to *Nature* to argue that "science continues to enjoy a protected and privileged status in American politics, in no small part because of its absence from the national political stage."

The skeptics' points have some validity. Yes, ill-informed observers of a science debate might indeed leap to unfortunate opinions, and any watching scientists hoping for validation of their specialties, or for specific commitments to funding, would most likely be disappointed. But ill-informed observers of any debate risk being muddled rather than enlightened, and few scientists are so naive as to expect that presidential candidates would make commitments going beyond malleable generalities. Other considerations weigh more heavily in the debate's favor.

The value of such a debate would not be in its potential to elucidate differences between the candidates on delicate issues of scientific objectivity in policymaking. Nor could we expect the debate to extract pledges of funding beyond, perhaps, broad targets. Yet it could play an important role by rehearsing before a large audience one readily appreciated argument for basic research—its ability to spawn solutions to present and future problems, not to mention technologies that the public holds dear. Merely having research discussed in a context emphasizing its national importance would surely help science's image problem. Fears that such a public discussion could paradoxically undermine support for research seem overblown. In any event, for its long-term sustainability, science ought to justify itself openly, not just hope to escape attention.

A debate could also provide opportunities to ask candidates to justify some of the statements from their campaigns. Senator Clinton, who has put forward research-friendly proposals on science policy, could be asked to explain "evidence-based decisionmaking." Senator McCain might be invited to explain his ads that ridicule federally funded research on the size of grizzly bear populations, as reported in the *Washington Post.* If, as reported, his objection is to the manner of its funding, not the research itself, the senator will presumably be glad to correct the misimpression, and so demonstrate that wildlife biology is no joke. Senator Obama might be asked to clarify his thinking about basic research and its importance for combating climate change.

Granted, there's room for doubt about whether the candidates will see enough advantage to participate. But *BioScience* and AIBS still think a science debate would be useful—and fun.

TIMOTHY M. BEARDSLEY
Editor in Chief

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