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Political Science

MEGAN DEBRANSKI KELHART

Whether in response to the "politicization" of science, or simply to ensure that public policy is informed by science, many scientists are mobilizing and becoming more active in the public policy arena. Whatever the reason, science is more prominent in the 2008 race for the presidency than it has been in other races. In December 2007, a grassroots group called Science Debate 2008 issued a public call for a presidential debate on science.

Supporters of Science Debate 2008 argue that science should be a central theme in the presidential election because the important scientific challenges facing the United States call for precise, unbiased scientific data to support policy decisions, and because the country needs to encourage scientific and technological innovation to stay competitive in the global marketplace. Others maintain that although presidential nominees should discuss climate change and energy policy, those issues are more political than scientific.

In an interview on 11 January with Ira Flatow on National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation: Science Friday,* Shawn Lawrence Otto, chief executive officer of Science Debate 2008, said, "Science and technology lie at the center of almost every major policy issue that we're facing, that we feel it deserves a debate of its own, especially since many of the candidates have not been able to articulate any kind of position about science policy."

Science Debate 2008 started with a petition signed by 11 Nobel laureates and a handful of university presidents, business leaders, and politicians. Since December, the number of signatories has grown to more than 150 American universities and organizations, representing more than 125 million people. Representatives Rush Holt (D–NJ) and Vernon Ehlers (R–MI), both of whom have advanced degrees in physics, agreed to cochair the science debate. National and international media have also taken note: Radio New Zealand, MSNBC, and *Time* magazine, to name just a few, have all reported on Science Debate 2008.

Gaining momentum, by February, Science Debate 2008 had established an online collection of video statements by scientists, politicians, and several former White House staff. Dozens of organizations, including AIBS, have endorsed the effort. Neal Lane, Rice University professor and science advisor to President Clinton, said in a video statement that "science and technology really do underpin everything that is important.... Science and technology research and development and innovation lead to a bright economy for the future, protecting the environment, producing the energy we're going to need, and protecting our families and children from disease." Oregon State University Distinguished Professor of Zoology Jane Lubchenco agrees: "Science affects so many aspects of our lives, it really is the key to much of our future."

Not everyone thinks that a presidential debate on science is a good idea. David J. Goldston, former staff director for the House Committee on Science under Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R–NY) and visiting lecturer at Harvard University, argues that having a science debate could have some unintended consequences. In the 7 February issue of *Nature,* he stated, "There is no reason to assume that a presidential debate on science matters would be instructive for the public or helpful to scientists." Goldston holds that candidates should discuss climate change and energy policy, but he questions whether these issues are primarily science issues, noting the "increasing tendency to conflate science questions... with policy questions." He also asks whether a political debate is the best venue for a discussion about the politicization of science.

Roger Pielke Jr., of the Center for Science and Technology Policy Research at the University of Colorado, agrees with Goldston: "Politicians debate politics." Perhaps supporters of the science debate should focus their attention on influencing the nomination of the next presidential science adviser, or, as Goldston suggests, scientists might spend time "lobbying Capitol Hill and talking to candidates—the kind of political activity often seen as 'dirty work'—rather than leaping into the showy realm of presidential debates." Additionally, they may want to consider their next step: redirecting their fervor toward developing a list of highly qualified scientists for the position of presidential science adviser. Influencing that process may prove more advantageous than holding a science debate.

Regardless of whether there should be or will be a science debate, both sides of the argument might agree that world-renowned scientists, scientific organizations, businesses, universities, and government leaders should continue to mobilize in support of science and science policy.

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