

Nothing Average about Change

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Nothing Average about Change

ROBERT GROPP

On 4 November 2008, a long, expensive, and unprecedented general election finally concluded. By the next morning, one would have been hard-pressed to find a field biologist even in the most remote locale who had not learned of the historically significant election result: Barack Obama had been elected the nation's 44th president. Yet the outcome of the presidential race was only part of the November news. A steadily worsening economy and significant election wins for Democratic candidates for the US House and Senate garnered headlines and refocused the nation's political and public policy priorities.

As the economy continued its downturn after the November election, historians, political analysts, and other professional and amateur Washington, DC, pundits drew parallels between the conditions facing Barack Obama and those of the Great Depression era that occupied Franklin D. Roosevelt. Clearly, the combination of geopolitical instability (i.e., wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) and an economic recession presents great challenges to President-elect Obama and to the new 111th Congress, which must work to reach compromise on significant legislative initiatives while holding together a Democratic majority that is untested and susceptible to fragmentation on some issues.

Within this context, science policy advocates are waiting to see the extent to which the Obama administration will reverse the unpopular science policies of the Bush administration, and the degree to which scientific research and workforce issues will be wrapped into policy proposals intended to stop the nation's economic hemorrhaging and stimulate economic recovery.

Although most policy analysts concede that stabilizing the economy must be a core priority for the next president

and Congress, other science, environmental, and health policy advocates remain hopeful that a litany of what are now less-headline-grabbing issues will receive prompt attention.

As George Daley, a past president of the International Society for Stem Cell Research, told Dan Childs of *ABC News*, "We are hopeful that removing restrictions on funding for stem cells will be one of the first acts of the Obama presidency." David Bookbinder, a Sierra Club attorney involved with the group's legal case on global warming, said that he likes what he sees in the appointments Obama made to his transition team for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). "These [appointments] are very promising signs of what the next EPA will look like," Bookbinder commented.

Applied science policy is not the only area in which policy wonks are awaiting action. As reported in the October 2008 "Washington Watch" column, a long, distinguished, bipartisan list of former presidential science advisers and senior administration officials issued a pre-election report to the candidates, calling for them to restore the role and influence of the presidential science adviser. From the campaign trail, candidate Obama pledged to return the post to cabinet rank and designate the adviser's title "assistant to the president for science and technology," which is comparable to a department secretary or the national security adviser—a status and rank last held by President Clinton's science adviser Neal Lane.

"I think it's a new day for science in America," said Shawn Otto, chief executive officer of Science Debate 2008. "At last we're going to see a return to policy that's crafted on evidence."

Filling senior science posts sooner rather than later may be instrumental to solving myriad major policy issues, including economic stimulus packages, government-backed investments in in-

dustrial sectors, investments in our infrastructure, and environmental and health policy—the counsel of scientists, engineers, and mathematicians would be useful in all of these areas.

"Investments in infrastructure seem like a very good idea, and that could mean physical infrastructure," said former Clinton adviser Lane. "But it could also mean human infrastructure, scientific and technological infrastructure. You'd like someone in the White House who's thinking through all this, and a science adviser could be very helpful if he or she were on tap—even between now and Inauguration Day."

This election cycle drew the participation of the scientific community and led to the establishment of high-profile strategic organizations, such as Science Debate 2008 and Scientists and Engineers for America, that pressed for a national discussion of science policy. Moreover, there are now a significant number of scientists—at least people whose prepolitics professions were in some way grounded in science—in the halls of Congress. A rough tally by Scientists and Engineers for America found 49 members of the House and Senate with an undergraduate or graduate degree in a STEM (science, technology, engineering, or mathematics) or STEM-related field.

Arguably, the newly organized scientific community and these members of Congress are now positioned to work to ensure that this and future presidential administrations have proper mechanisms to secure timely and reliable scientific advice.

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