

# Ballots and Budgets

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Can the care and feeding of science win support and votes for a politician?

From the record of recent presidential campaigns, including the current marathon, the candidates don't think so. None among the platoon of hard-running hopefuls has paid much attention, if any, to the cries of financial need coming ever louder from researchers, particularly those dependent on the National Institutes of Health. Senator Hillary Clinton pledged all good things for science in a speech in October observing the 50th anniversary of Sputnik. Technology is endorsed on Mitt Romney's campaign website. But, these are exception to the customary campaign fare — rare exceptions.

From its earliest days, the Bush administration's cynical manipulation of scientific data has dismayed many scientists. They've protested in aggrieved public statements loaded with Nobel signatories, but they haven't organized a ballot-box response or recruited serious Congressional support. Physicians, trial lawyers, real-estate agents, and other professionals take the political route to promote their interests. They collectively raise money and give it to favored candidates, which is what counts in electoral politics, and thereby gain politicians' attention.

But for scientists, that's out of character. They did it once on a big scale, in 1964, when Republican Barry Goldwater's nuclear saber rattling created alarm among the physicist alumni of the World War II A-bomb project and many other researchers. They raised significant sums and sent leading scientists barnstorming around the country to denounce Goldwater and boost Democratic candidate Lyndon Johnson. But after that, they swore off organized politics as inappropriate for the scientific community. Since that political mobilization, nothing more than token electoral efforts have been mounted by scientists organized under the banner of science. And it's not for lack of numbers or a major stake in the political system.

Roland Schmitt, then president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, astutely pointed out in 1991 that scientists and engineers outnumbered farmers, five million to three million, whereas government spending on science totaled \$70 billion, compared to \$17 billion in farm subsidies. "So, by objective measures," Schmitt noted, "the R&D community is bigger and the federal government has a bigger stake in it than in agriculture. But by any measure, the farm community is orders of magnitude more influential politically." The same is true today. The farm lobby is a potent force on Capitol Hill. A science lobby doesn't exist, except as a small subsidiary of the big and active university lobby.

It can be argued that Schmitt's hefty dollar balance in favor of science shows it's doing just fine as a nonpartisan bystander in politics, friends to all and hostile to none. Why change a winning formula that's prevailed since the end of World War II? In the 2004 presidential election, Republican Bob Walker, former Chairman of the House Science Committee, reincarnated as a Washington lobbyist, cautioned scientists against going political. He meant that organizing against President Bush's reelection might bring retaliation.

Maybe. But it should also be considered that the non-political formula isn't working as well as it used to. For the past four years, a nearly static NIH budget has lost ground to inflation. Federal restrictions on support of stem cell research represent an unusual, if not unique, political intrusion into the conduct of research. And the ideological bashing of science continues, even if it has somewhat abated in embarrassed response to often getting caught.

The needs of research can't compete for attention with the fundamental issues of American politics: war, terrorism, taxes, health care, education, and the environment. Right now, it's lost in the din arising from these issues. Remaining apolitical may be beneficial for the self-righteous spirit that flourishes in science. But what the research community needs is more money from the U.S. government. To get money, it helps to have friends in politics. ?

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