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If All You Do Is Vote ...

ELECTIONS HAVE A WAY OF SORTING THINGS OUT. ALREADY, THE MOST FASCINATING U.S. presidential and congressional election process of my life has sorted out some things that we can celebrate. We know that the country's next president won't favor teaching intelligent design in our schools and will respect scientific integrity and evidence-based research. But we still don't know whether he will truly put science at the table—that is, whether research will be high on the president's priority list and reflected strongly in his budgets, speeches, and policies.

So what can U.S. scientists do to substantially increase the probability that we will have elected officials who will make research a very high priority? I'm talking about much more than voting on Election Day, paying dues to a professional society, or making a contribution to a voluntary health association. And here's why.

For the past 7 years, the United States has had a presidential administration where science has had little place at the table. We have had a president opposed to embryonic stem cell research and in favor of teaching intelligent design. We have had an administration that at times has suppressed, rewritten, ignored, or abused scientific research. At a time when scientific opportunity has never been greater, we have had five straight years of inadequate increases for U.S. research agencies, which for some like the National Institutes of Health (NIH) means decreases after inflation.

All of this has been devastating for the scientific community; has undermined the future of our economy, which depends on innovation; and has slowed progress toward better health and greater longevity for people around the world. So if you are a U.S. scientist, what should you do now?

First, help identify candidates for the next president's science appointments. They range across a variety of agencies and departments, and the U.S. National Academies have listed those viewed as most important.* Urge your distinguished colleagues to serve our nation in this way, and help the scientific community to support them.

Second, in choosing candidates who are running for Congress or even state office (often, state officials will later run for federal office), volunteer to advise those candidates on science matters and issues. They'll love it! Offer to serve on their science advisory committee. If they don't have one, tell them you'll create one. Chair it yourself and recruit suitable colleagues. Once your candidate has won the election, offer to continue in your role as a science adviser. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all candidates had science advisers or science advisory committees? They will, if individual scientists step up to the plate.

Third, school yourself on the candidates and their positions on science issues. Visit science voter education resources, like YourCandidatesYourHealth.org, which asks all federal candidates to answer questions about their positions on science and health. If your candidates have not responded, call their campaigns and ask them to do so. You have a right to know where they stand.

Fourth, encourage debates about science among those who seek public office. Go to their debates and raise science questions. Sign onto ScienceDebate2008.com, which urges the presidential candidates to have a debate dedicated to science issues. Even though this won't happen now, support for this initiative will send a message to the media and the candidates that science is important to the electorate and that the questioners should include science in the debates.

And last but not least, next time run for office yourself! It's disheartening to see so many public officials with little knowledge of science. Bill Foster, a physicist, recently won the House seat of former Speaker Dennis Hastert. You can do it, too.

Your country needs you. If all you do is vote, you're definitely not doing enough. Get off your chair, do something outside your comfort zone, and make a difference for science. All of us must be creative about what we can do to make a difference for the things we believe in. Now is the time.

— John Edward Porter

10.1126/science.1163096

**Science and Technology for America's Progress: Ensuring the Best Presidential Appointments in the New Administration*, www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12481.



Science

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Science **321** (5897), 1741.
DOI: 10.1126/science.1163096

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