

Let's not overthink this

For some observers, the U.S. presidential election of 2020 appeared to be about science. Outgoing President Donald Trump consistently and dishonestly played down the threats from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and climate change. President-elect Joe Biden said he would listen to scientists, a position that was mocked by Trump. Some might take Biden's victory—decisive but hardly a landslide—as feeble support for science. But was science actually on the ballot? Maybe it's best not to overthink this.

Science and political communication scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the University of Pennsylvania believes that it is wrong to construe the election in such simple terms. "Science was not on the ballot," she said in a recent conversation. When viewed in the heat of the battle, she says, the 73 million people who voted for Trump may seem to have been rejecting science, but many of them live in areas of the country that had, until recently, barely experienced the COVID-19 outbreak. Now they are getting it full blast. Others simply believed that the health of the economy should not be jeopardized by what they saw as a draconian pandemic response. As for the fight against climate change, many people feared that their livelihoods would be threatened by calls for a major move away from fossil fuels. Add to that the millions of people whose religious beliefs enjoin them from appreciating the beauty and power of the theory of evolution. There is not one great horde of Americans (many of whom happen to be Trump supporters) who are anti-science. It is a mixture of people who, for personal reasons, resist facts that challenge their thinking.

If you stand back and look at the big picture, science seems to be in no different a place now than it has been in the past. Except for the scientists themselves and members of the public who avidly consume science documentaries, books, and magazines, most Americans care only about the products of science that directly affect their personal lives. And this caring doesn't usually cut very deep. Most people don't think about the biology of the promised coronavirus

vaccine any more than they marvel at how the theory of general relativity is used by satellites to guide them as they navigate with Google Maps.

The periods of high American enthusiasm for science have all coincided with great triumphs for science such as the Moon landing or the polio vaccine. But after all this excitement, science moved off center stage, and the scientists could quietly go back to work. We're on the cusp of a similar cycle. The putative vaccines will hopefully end the pandemic in the late spring, and although there will be a round of celebration for the scientific quest, it's unlikely that there will be an enduring appreciation for the people and processes that got us there.

The scientific community in the United States should do as much as it can to improve science education and science communication, but not to suddenly get all Americans to wake up to scientists' ideas about climate change or evolution. There are plenty of students—potential scientists—who don't have equitable access to high-quality science teaching, and the focus should be on bringing in as many scientists as possible. The scientific community shouldn't beat itself up over the fact that there is probably little it can do to induce many of the 73 million people who voted for Donald Trump to abruptly decide that they were wrong about climate

change and COVID-19.

With the election behind us all, it's time for science to do what it has always done. Double down on its best practices of inductive reasoning and quantitative analysis. Question everything. Do things no one has done before. In other words, to do the best science imaginable.

And about that ubiquitous climate-denying uncle that apparently nearly every scientist has to interact with on the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States—this year, the gathering will hopefully take place virtually, so, maybe just sit back and smile, knowing that science will produce the vaccine that will let his life get back to normal. And let him enjoy his turkey.

—H. Holden Thorp



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Science

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