Science & Politics: They’re Not Independent Variables

by Diana Crow

Despite the myriad of settings and audiences, virtually every speech this election year has centered on one topic: government spending. Each side has unleashed a barrage of relentlessly repetitious arguments, each side trying to convince the other one to cure the economy’s ills and how the opposing side’s plan will sink us deeper into the slump. Yet, paradoxically, one of the most crucial areas of federal spending has been barely mentioned: scientific research.

And it’s easy to see why that’s been the case. To most Americans, science is a remote and abstract field, one that is vital because of its role in the development of technology, but far too immediate less than job loss. Still, I find it disturbing that neither major party has said much about scientific research. The official Democratic Party Platform boldly declares, “Democrats are committed to preparing math and science teachers and training workers with skills for the future, and doubling funding for key basic research agencies” without elaborating on what research they will fund or where the money will come from. Claims about the direction of each party’s scientific spending policy have been spread across sections on environmental issues, cyber-security, and Internet freedom, but neither party has explicitly laid out their plan for directing scientific research.

However, in reading through the Republican Party’s official platform, it becomes clear that they want to steer publicly funded research away from topics like environmental sustainability and toward topics like profit and the arts rather than the sciences and private industry. Both sides emphasize cybersecurity and the development of competitive computer technology as a priority. However, the Romney camp argues that many of the Obama administration’s policies have hindered intellectual freedom and innovation, which has slowed the rate of scientific progress.

In a statement published in the October/November 2012 Volume 2, No.110 of the Bard Science Journal, by Diana Crow, it states that: “The most powerful political agenda is liberty, the central organizing principle of the American Republic and its people. Liberty alone fosters scientific inquiry, technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and information exchange.”

This is simply not true. While intellectual liberty is vital to sustaining productive scientific inquiry, science is expensive. Even fairly basic scientific accoutrements cost a lot of money. A set of 96 Quisigen DNA-extraction kits (which a Bard-sized bio lab would easily go through in less than a semester) costs $1,102. Large but essential pieces of equipment like GenBankers and MRI machines cost hundreds of thousands of dollars apiece. Science costs money, and pure research is no cheaper than anything else. The Romney camp argues that many of the Obama administration’s policies have hindered intellectual freedom and innovation, which has slowed the rate of scientific progress.

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