Science Policy News

It’s Time for a Science Debate

Nuclear weapons, Planned Parenthood, climate change, digital surveillance. While I’m sure it’s clear that these are hot topics in the political world, what might not be so obvious is what else they all have in common: science and technology. In one way or another, science is connected to almost every aspect of our lives, and it’s time our presidential elections reflected that fact. That’s where Science Debate comes in.

Science Debate is a volunteer organization dedicated to elevating science and engineering questions in our national civic dialogue. This organization has the lofty goal of getting the presidential candidates to participate in a formal debate on science topics. And no that doesn’t mean the candidates would be reciting the periodic table, but instead discussing the ways science, research, and technology would influence their policymaking decisions.

Breaking Down the Science–Policy Divide

Executive Director, Sheril Kirshenbaum, has worked with Science Debate since its beginning, when it was just an idea born of frustration that science topics weren’t being discussed by candidates. She remembers a time on the Hill when science was treated as a special interest and kept separate from what are traditionally considered “policy issues.” Over the years, she has seen how scientific discoveries and research have evolved into a major driver of policy decisions. Many of the most pressing issues for our country are inextricably bound to science, research, or technology.

While science isn’t the only issue considered when making policy decisions, it plays an important role, and the organizers of Science Debate want to know what role science will play in each candidate’s administration. Take food production. We know that food, agriculture, and natural resources research impacts food production, but the economy, environment, trade, immigration, and even public opinion are all tied into what our agricultural landscape looks like. “What we want to do is really highlight those connections and show how science is very relevant to these conversations,” Kirshenbaum says.

It’s important to remember that science isn’t a partisan issue. “A lot of people expect that we’ll come down on the candidates and tell them the ‘right’ answer, but we don’t weigh in on how they respond,” Kirshenbaum says. “We simply think the American public deserves to know where the candidates stand, and having that information makes us a more informed public when we go to vote.” And it’s not about quiz-zing their scientific knowledge. She points out that we don’t expect our president to be a formally trained economist or lawyer or diplomat, but we do expect them to understand how these topics are influencing the policy decisions they’re making. The same is true with science.

More Public Attention This Election

There’s already is a lot more interest in science-related topics in the 2016 election than there ever has been before. “This time around, there’s a lot more public attention,” Kirshenbaum says. “The fact that water is a big deal, drought, storms. These issues are really impacting the way people are living across the country and around the world; it’s time to talk about them.”

For the 2016 election, Science Debate is capitalizing on this momentum and taking their effort to the next level. They’ve already secured at least one debate location, Arizona State University—host to one of the 2004 presidential debates—and are in talks with a major media company as their broadcast partner.

To sign the petition, submit a question to the candidates, and more, visit scienticdebate.org

So what can our members do to get involved? First, you can sign the petition at www.sciencedebate.org. This enrolls you to receive the Science Debate newsletter, which will keep you up-to-date on the initiative’s progress. The initiative is also planning to do some local chapter work in the future to get the word out about Science Debate. You can even submit a question for the candidates through the website. “We’re always looking for creative ideas to expand on what we’re doing,” Kirshenbaum says. “We’re trying to do something new, and if members have ideas or suggestions, we would absolutely encourage that.”

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