

Science and Science Policy in the New Obama Administration

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During the recent presidential campaign, Senator Barack Obama (now President-elect Obama) sent some very positive signals to the scientific community concerning how he would treat science and the policies that impact it if he were elected President. Several of his positions on major science policy matters were outlined in the responses he provided to the 14 questions posed by ScienceDebate 2008 (<http://www.sciencedebate2008.com>).

Now that Senator Obama has been elected, the question will be “does he follow through?”

Some early tests that will indicate how President Obama will treat science are: 1) how quickly he appoints his Science Advisor and the status he assigns to this position; 2) what actions he takes to loosen current restrictions on stem cell research; and 3) what commitment he shows to science funding for key research agencies in his FY 2010 budget proposal.

The Presidential Science Advisor – Regarding the presidential Science Advisor, the research community will be watching very closely to see who President-elect Obama appoints, how quickly he appoints him or her, and the title and authority he assigns to this position. In a recent letter (<http://www.aau.edu/policy/article.aspx?id=7660>), nearly 180 business, university and science groups called upon the President-elect Obama to appoint a science advisor by January 20. They also called upon the new President to elevate the Science Advisor’s title to Assistant to the President and assign the position a Cabinet rank. Obama campaign officials and other official communications from the campaign indicated that Senator Obama recognized the importance of the science advisor post and that he would appoint someone to this position very early in his administration. How this plays out now that Senator Obama has been elected will be an important first litmus test concerning the role that science might be assigned by the new President in helping to address major national challenges such as energy, climate change and healthcare.

Stem Cell Research – A second major test for the new President with regard to science will be if he and the new Congress act quickly to push back limitations imposed by President Bush on public funding for stem cell research. These limitations restricted the stem cell lines that can be utilized by researchers using federal research funding to only those that existed prior to August 9, 2001. It is expected that this might be one of the first major science policy related actions the new President and Congress take. Certainly, positive action on this front will be welcomed by the scientific community.

Funding for Science in the FY 2010 Budget Proposal – Finally, the scientific community will be closely watching how President-elect Obama treats funding for science in his FY2010 budget proposal. Will he continue to push for increases proposed by the Bush Administration for key physical science agencies such as the National

Science Foundation, the Department of Energy's Office of Science, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology? Will his budget proposal contain the funding required to implement the new programs authorized by the Congress in the American COMPETES Act of 2007? Will he propose increases in budget for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) which has seen a 13 percent decline in its purchasing power since the doubling of funding for this agency was completed in FY2003?

During the campaign, President-elect Obama indicated that he would double funding for scientific research over the next 10 years. With the growing pressures on the budget imposed by the nation's current financial crisis, the scientific community will be very interested to see if Senator Obama is able to fulfill this promise and if he views science funding as an investment that is required to help to ensure future economic growth or as an expenditure which we can not afford in light of current budget pressures.

Other Science Policy Issues to Watch in the Obama Administration – Other issues the scientific community will no doubt be watching closely is how President-elect Obama acts to address current concerns regarding climate change and also the role he assigns to science in helping to address the nation's current energy challenges.

Increased Stability in Science Funding – Resulting from the elimination of divided government, one likely positive outcome of the recent election for the science community is that the budget stalemates that have occurred in recent years which prevented Congress and the President from reaching agreement on domestic spending bills are likely to disappear. With Congress and the President now being from the same party, it is more likely that they will be able to reach an agreement on how much overall should be spent on domestic discretionary spending. As a result, some additional stability and continuity might be brought back to funding for key science agencies which in recent years have suffered because of the failure of Congress and the President to complete their appropriations bills on time and the enactment of numerous continuing resolutions which have been very disruptive to U.S. science.

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