

Senator, what is your policy on . . . “Other”?

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J Clin Invest. 2008;118(9):2988-2988. <https://doi.org/10.1172/JCI37035>.

Editorial

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In the midst of the monumentally important 2008 presidential election, information about the candidates’ proposals for biomedical research is notably absent. Why is this the case, and more importantly, what can be done about it?

The 2008 US presidential election campaign has been underway for so long, it’s hard to believe that of this writing (early August 2008), the two major parties have not even nominated their candidates yet. That being said, it will surely only be a formality when John McCain and Barack Obama don these mantles. The economy and Iraq are the issues that almost certainly will dominate the election, but given the sad state of funding for biomedical research and training, I thought it worthwhile to explore the candidates’ policies on this topic.

First stop — the Obama and McCain websites. But which one — their senatorial or presidential campaign sites? I started with the former. If you want to find out what either senator thinks about an issue, both the Obama and McCain sites ask you to choose from the standard drop-down menu listing about 15–25 topics in alphabetical order. Let’s see, I thought. “Biomedical Research” should come after “Arctic National Wildlife Refuge” but before “Budget”; alas, nothing there. OK, maybe it comes under “Science”; that would be after “Reproductive Issues” but before “Small Business” on the Obama site or between “Pork Barrel Spending” and “Technology and Telecommunications” on the McCain site. Again, I struck out. Both McCain and Obama do have an issue titled “Healthcare,” but on both sites, the issues explored deal with Medicare and tort reform and prescription drug costs, not research. Neither website provided me with any information on biomedical research.

So I thought I would e-mail the senators to ask them what their biomedical research policies were. Not quite so simple, because to send an e-mail you must first choose the topic — back to the drop-

down menu, although now one has the option of “Other.” Dutifully selecting this important topic, I e-mailed both Senator McCain and Senator Obama, identifying myself as the editor of the *JCI*, briefly describing the journal and the ASCI, and asking them for information about their policies on biomedical research. That was several weeks ago, and I have not heard back yet. I am certain the editors of the *New York Times* and *Time* would not have been similarly ignored, but I suppose they both have higher impact and potentially larger readership.

My ego quickly recovered from the slight, but I have given a lot of thought to what this says about the biomedical research community’s standing, or lack thereof, on the political scene. Although we might wish to believe otherwise, perhaps only scientists really care about science, and moreover, we are neither a large voting bloc nor an uncommitted one (I personally know of only three colleagues who are registered Republicans).

I suspect that virtually all of you reading this editorial believe that spending money on biomedical research is a worthwhile investment. Yet no matter how healthy the economy becomes, funds will always be limiting. If we wish to move up the list of economic priorities, we have to be on the list in the first place. The many advances in medical research that have been translated into improved health care will continue only if we keep invested in science and, as importantly, into the support and training of young investigators, who are our future. However, to be on the political funding radar screen, we need to develop a concise and convincing message that will persuade politicians and the public that we can provide value for their money. In addition, we have to develop strategies and

approaches to disseminating that message in the appropriate venues. Those of us in academia are accustomed to writing grants designed to persuade either our scientific colleagues or lay donors about the feasibility and importance of our work. Those in industry similarly have to convince their peers, scientific advisory boards, and corporate investors about the value of their ideas. Surely if we can succeed at this, we can make our case to the public and the politicians as well.

Our professional organizations are the place to start. Many of them already have public policy committees and employ advocates to lobby politicians in Washington, DC.

The most successful and visible members of our community (Nobel laureates, Lasker Prize recipients, members of the Institute of Medicine, the National Academy of Sciences, the Association of American Physicians, and the ASCI . . . this means you) need to devote some of their time and energy to this cause. Whether this involves going to Washington, DC, to meet with politicians or their staffs or local community efforts, we can only expect others to help us if we help ourselves by articulating a convincing case.

Most recently, I have looked at Obama’s and McCain’s presidential campaign websites. McCain’s has nothing that I could find on the topic of biomedical research, while Obama, under the title “Additional Issues,” has a downloadable PDF file titled “FactSheetScience” that states “Obama strongly supports investments in biomedical research, as well as medical education and training in health-related fields . . .” I am sure he strongly supports world peace and eliminating hunger and poverty as well, but that does not a plan make. But I suppose I can take some solace in the fact that at least the topic is on his list, even if it’s not the A-list.

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