

Running from science

Even though the 2012 presidential election is more than a year away, campaigning

is well underway and many voters already have opinions regarding who should, and who will, win the election. Most often, winners and losers are viewed in terms of individual candidates. Harry Truman edged out John Dewey in 1952. John F. Kennedy beat Nixon in 1960. Barack Obama defeated John McCain in the last election.

Yet, presidential elections may also be viewed in terms of ideological winners and losers.

Lincoln's victory over John Breckinridge and Stephen Douglas in the presidential election of 1860 may be viewed as victory for the anti-slavery platform adopted by the newly formed Republican Party. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's landslide victory over Alfred Landon in 1936 was a referendum on New Deal policies and an expanded role for government. Ronald Reagan's victory over Jimmy Carter in 1980 constituted the ascendance of a long list of conservatives who had been holding to their principles since Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign.

The 2012 presidential election will certainly include the standard debates on foreign policy, national security, and domestic economic policy. However, the next election is likely to focus upon some ideological issues which are unique to the 2012 campaign. Interestingly, science and the scientific method are emerging as early flashpoints in the 2012 campaign.

During the Sept. 7 debate, Jon Huntsman warned that "in order to for the Republican Party to win, we can't run from science." Unfortunately, Huntsman's admonition was quickly disregarded.

Just a week later, Michele Bachmann turned her back on science. She initially criticized Texas Governor Rick Perry for promoting the vaccine to protect women against the HPV virus. Then, Bachmann went further by asserting that the HPV vaccine causes mental retardation.

When challenged with the facts that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had never found a link between the HPV vaccine and mental retardation, and the vaccine is effective

in preventing a disease that strikes twelve thousand women each year, Bachmann defended her remarks by saying that an unnamed woman had told her the vaccine caused retardation and that was sufficient for her to accept the assertion. The press

had a field day at Bachmann's expense.

The fact that the press can fill air time by lampooning the scientific ignorance of political candidates would be amusing if it were not profoundly sad. It is sad that some voters embrace candidates who are hostile toward science. It is sad that more than 400 years after the birth of Galileo, scientists are still being criticized for research findings that don't conveniently conform to religious tenets.

Huntsman's remark about running from science was initially aimed at Governor Perry, yet his advice has far more relevance. Ignoring scientific truths does not change the facts. Yet, turning your back on science can lead to dysfunctional policies. This is critically important for policy decisions regarding climate change, education, economics and public health. For this reason, Huntsman's admonition should taken very seriously.

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Commentary

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