

Politicizing Science, Sixties-Style

Questions of science rarely become major issues in presidential campaigns. But there it was: Senator Kerry stumped on stem cells and promised to be “a president for science.” The context was a year of controversy relating to the Bush administration’s purported “politicization of science,” including a February 2004 report by the Union of Concerned Scientists accusing the Bush administration of suppressing, misrepresenting, and manipulating science, and an accompanying statement signed by a bevy of Nobel laureates accusing the administration of “distortion of scientific knowledge for partisan political ends.”

There is nothing unprecedented about scientists criticizing presidents or campaigning against politicians. But this year’s controversy was bigger and shriller than any since 1964, when many prominent scientists and engineers mobilized against Barry Goldwater, helping to brand the Arizona Senator as intellectually and temperamentally unfit for the presidency. Launched by a member of President Lyndon Johnson’s family and organized under the banner “Scientists and Engineers for Johnson-Humphrey,” the group raised half a million dollars and registered 50,000 members. They opened an office in Washington, paid for thousands of radio ads, and published a booklet called *The Alternative is Frightening*. The group, which included several scientists and engineers involved in the development of nuclear weapons, emphasized Goldwater’s supposedly itchy nuclear trigger finger.

But after Goldwater’s landslide defeat, some of the scientists involved were left with “serious misgivings,” as recounted by Daniel S. Greenberg in his 2001 book *Science, Money, and Politics*:

Even among scientists alarmed by Goldwater’s nuclear rhetoric, science’s turn to overt partisan politics was troublesome and unacceptable.... After the Johnson-Goldwater contest, science’s reversion to its apolitical tradition in national elections can be attributed, in part, to the absence of a serious candidate with the fearsome qualities of Barry Goldwater. But another factor was at work, too: misgivings among scientists about the propriety of science engaging in partisan politics. Was it right to entangle science, an enterprise dedicated to truth-seeking, in the messy business of politics?

In the past few years, many scientists have again mobilized politically, both to oppose President Bush’s policies and to endorse John Kerry. Their campaign was not as large or effective as that of 1964, but “Scientists for Kerry” tried to make the race a battle between science and its enemies, and the mainstream press sometimes followed their lead in framing election-year stories about science policy. Now that President Bush has been reelected, we can only wonder whether these new activist-scientists will shrink away from high-stakes partisan politics, or whether the recent battles have merely whetted their appetites for more.