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Candidates Vow To Keep Politics Out Of Science

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The past eight years have brought multiple charges that the White House has politicized science — from muzzling federal climate scientists to ignoring advice on clear air and endangered species.

Both Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama say that if they are elected, things will be different. And although the two differ on how much money should be promised to basic research, they say they will restore integrity to federal science agencies.

Melody Barnes is the senior domestic policy adviser to the Obama campaign; she calls the past eight years a "war on science." Her counterpart in the McCain camp, Douglas Holtz-Eakin, agrees that science has been trampled by politics.

Each campaign says things will be different when its candidate takes office.

Holtz-Eakin says McCain's time in the Senate has made him comfortable with scientists who may have politically unwelcome views. "He [McCain] has always felt that sound science is a foundation of good public policy," he said. "He believes deeply that the science should be the science. Legislators can then learn from that science, and go forward and deliver good public policies."

As for the presumptive Democratic nominee, Barnes says an Obama administration would be much more transparent, so it would be hard to suppress or distort scientific findings. "We're talking about things like videotaping various proceedings so everyone can see it," she said. "Using technology to not only watch, but also engage with the federal government so they have a better sense of what's going on."

Candidates on Embryonic Stem Cell Research

Both candidates have repudiated the current administration's position on embryonic stem cells. (President Bush allowed federal funding for this kind of research, but placed severe limitations on it.)

Barnes says Obama would reverse those restrictions. "[Obama] believes that upon being elected president of the United States, he could sign an executive order that would overturn the Bush position on stem-cell research and open up the avenues considerably," she says.

But embryonic stem cells pose a political challenge for McCain. Although Holtz-Eakin says McCain is anti-abortion, he has broken with the anti-abortion movement on the embryonic stem cell issue and joined Democrats in supporting a bill that would expand federal funding for stem-cell research.

Holtz-Eakin says the Arizona senator still favors such legislation, but hopes new research will make it unnecessary. McCain's "hope is that we may reach the day when we no longer need to use embryonic stem cells as the foundation of this particular line of research, where we can move to the more recent advances and take away the tough decisions about life versus science," he said.

Science Funding

The Obama and McCain campaigns *do* have significant differences when it comes to funding for basic research.

Obama has reached out to a high-powered group of scientists for advice on policy. Barnes says that before the Bush administration took office, the federal government provided robust support for American science and gave American high-tech industries a competitive advantage.

"That's not where we are right now," she said. "Senator Obama believes that we have to double scientific research funding, so that we can take advantage of the enormous talent in the United States, and we can regain our global competitive edge."

But Holtz-Eakin says there just isn't enough money to make everybody happy.

"Doubling is a nice fun number for political purposes," he said. "It's clean, it's smooth. But it doesn't reflect a balancing of political priorities. There will be competing demands for funds. These are scarce taxpayer dollars; they come from American families who work hard to generate them. And good scientists should make the case for their research money, and the senator will be happy to listen to that case and fund appropriately. But to promise everybody everything is not really laying it on the line."

Maybe so, but for now, Barnes says there must be an investment in science to keep this country strong.

"We recognize science as being a tool to help solve many of the problems before us," she said. "I think that's a different perspective — and putting your money where your mouth is."

Both candidates agree that whatever money is available for science in the next four years, it will be spent with fewer political restraints.