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Results and Discussion in an Election Year

The accusation of “negative campaigning” has been leveled by the press at the 1988 presidential candidates. That is like the boy who shot his parents and then pleaded for mercy on the grounds of being an orphan. The greater publicity given to the clever insult, the meretricious photo opportunity, and the public relations gimmick encourages candidates to use these devices instead of the dull delineation of position.

Policy statements are frequently boring, largely because everyone comes out for motherhood and virtue, and no sensible candidate dares mention the gruesome inevitabilities of taxes and budget choices. Nevertheless, policy statements have value as a glimpse at a candidate’s enthusiasms and priorities, even in the absence of desired specifics. Thus the willingness of Vice President George Bush and Governor Michael S. Dukakis to send answers to a series of questions presented by *Science* is, in itself, an extremely positive sign (*Science*, 14 October 1988, p. 173).

As expected, many of the answers were vague, but others were surprisingly specific. The candidates agreed on most matters of science policy, such as maintaining the tax credit for research and development, the need to double the National Science Foundation budget, and the need to increase scientific research and development in general. When they disagreed, it was mainly in emphasis, but there is considerable variation in the detail and commitment in the various area. Bush advocated increasing the importance of the science adviser but did not specify how much the currently weakened office would be changed. Dukakis was more specific in detailing how he would enhance the importance and prestige of that office and added that the science adviser would have direct access to him. Bush is against subsidy for commercial space ventures and Dukakis is against the “Orient Express.” Both are in favor of “big science” and “little science” and an increased space effort. Both ducked the question of how big the National Institutes of Health budget should be, but both indicated understanding of the role of biotechnology in health care and competitiveness.

Overall, one can only conclude that both candidates will be strong supporters of science, and that they and their advisers recognize the intricacies of modern science policy. Increased funding for science does not cost as much as increased defense or Social Security funding, but science as a whole has become a sizable budget factor, and the candidates’ commitments have major significance.

The candidates and this journal are also supporting a larger principle: the need to see in print the actual positions of the major candidates. The standards of science publishing require presentation of the data as well as the conclusions. Too often in this campaign we have seen the “analysis” of candidates’ positions on the front page as a substitute for news. These analyses are all too often the opinions of the writer, appropriate for the editorial page, just as authors’ opinions are appropriate in the Discussion section of a scientific paper. But the front page of a newspaper or the lead story on the television news program should be analogous to the Results section of a scientific paper.

The reader deserves to see the raw data, not just speculation on the impression that a candidate made, or whether a statement was negative campaigning or positive campaigning. Clarification of previous positions of one’s opponents should be construed as positive if it is accurate and negative only if it is inaccurate. A clear discussion of the past record is more edifying than pompous promises of future utopias. Reproducing the candidate’s actual words allows the reader to decide whether the candidate was vague or specific, evasive or responsive, appealing or repulsive. A second reason for publishing actual statements is the tendency of observers to use colorful wording that obscures the data. The favored candidate is “aggressive”; the unfavored, “negative.” The favored is “well prepared”; the opposition is “packaged.” The favored is “relaxed”; the unfavored, “bumbling.” Democracy cannot flourish any more than science if the Results sections are turned into Discussion sections.

Policy statements, budget proposals, and responses to questions are primary data. We could hope that future candidates will be more specific in these areas, but we need to build a tradition in which the candidates will prepare and the public will have access to unfiltered policy statements. Once that is done, as in a scientific paper, we can have a Discussion of the Results; then our individual Conclusions will be based on accurate evidence.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.