

Why Science Is A Non-Issue In The Election...Again

Talk of the Nation

July 27, 2012

In the face of a massive drought and climbing sea levels are the presidential candidates going to talk about climate change? Why is science always at the bottom of the list of campaign issues that resonate with the public? Ira Flatow and guests discuss what scientists can do to shape the national dialogue in an election year.

IRA FLATOW, HOST:

This is SCIENCE FRIDAY. I'm Ira Flatow.

A flurry of extreme weather events, including wildfires, heat waves and droughts may have convinced more Americans that the planet is warming. A poll by the Brookings Institute found that 62 percent of Americans now believe in global warming, and nearly half of them have cited warmer temperatures or change in weather patterns as the reason for their belief.

But will climate change be on the agenda during the upcoming presidential science debate? During the 2008 vice presidential debate it was, as Gwen Ifill asked Sarah Palin about it.

(SOUNDBITE OF 2008 VICE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE)

GWEN IFILL: What is true and what is false about what we have heard, read, discussed, debated about the causes of climate change?

SARAH PALIN: Yeah. Well, as the nation's only Arctic state and being the governor of that state, Alaska feels and sees impacts of climate change more so than any other state. And we know that it's real. I'm not one to attribute every man - activity of man to the changes in the climate. There is something to be said also for man's activities, but also for the cyclical temperature changes on our planet. But there are real changes going on in our climate.

FLATOW: If Sarah Palin admitted back then that global warming is real, does this mean that we'll hear more about climate change or, for that matter, science in general on the campaign trail this year? Ms. Ifill told us today that she chose to ask that question knowing that it would probably not be asked in the presidential debates, but was important enough to be discussed.

Will Barack Obama and Mitt Romney discuss and debate basic scientific issues like innovation funding of research, energy and the Internet, just to name a few? Or will it be more of the same, leaving science out of the discussion, even though a Pew survey shows that science news and discoveries ranked at the top of the list of topics that don't get enough news coverage? Forty-four percent of people said science is just isn't covered enough.

Joining me now to delve into some of those questions is - are my guests: David Gergen, a professor of Public Service and director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School. He is also a senior political analyst at CNN, and has served as advisor to four U.S. presidents. He joins us on the phone.

Good to talk with you again, David.

DAVID GERGEN: Thank you, Ira. Thank you for inviting me back.

FLATOW: You're welcome. Dr. Michael Lubell is professor of physics at City College of the City University of New York and director of Public Affairs at the American Physical Society. He joins us in our New York studios.

Welcome to SCIENCE FRIDAY.

MICHAEL LUBELL: Thank you very much, Ira. A pleasure to be here.

FLATOW: You're welcome. Shawn Otto is the CEO and co-founder of ScienceDebate.org. He is also author of "Fool Me Twice: Fighting the Assault on Science in America." He joins us from NPR in St. Paul.

Welcome back to SCIENCE FRIDAY.

SHAWN OTTO: Thank you, Ira. Glad to be here.

FLATOW: Shawn, let me begin with you. We've been trying to get presidents to debate science for four years now, since 2008, but with no success. And you haven't given up. And, in fact, you've release the 2012 version of Top American Science Questions.

OTTO: That's right. We just feel that this is a new century, and these questions are coming to dominate and affect the lives of voters everywhere. And if candidates for president can debate the economy even though they are not economists, or foreign-policy even though they're not diplomats or generals, or faith and values even though they're not pastors or priests, they ought to also think you feel comfortable debating the big science questions that effect every voter's lives.

FLATOW: David Gergen, when we talked with Gwen Ifill today about where that question came from, she said she gets, you know, hundreds of questions being an anchor for those debates. And she felt that no one would ever ask a science question in the presidential debates, so she decided she would have to ask one in the vice presidential debate.

Why won't presidential candidates participate in such a debate?

GERGEN: Well, it's a hard question. Obviously, as we just heard, they should be. But there are so many other issues that have crowded out science, and yet here we are again. Questions of jobs and deficits are clearly going to dominate these debates.

But I do think that we've just learned what the structure of the 2012 debates is going to be. They're going to be three presidential, one vice presidential. And each one of the presidential is going to have six pods, in effect, six areas that will receive 15 minutes a piece. Given that structure, the first debate will be on domestic, and then the last will be divided between domestic and foreign.

I think there - you know, that provides at least nine pods for, say, domestic-related questions. I think at least was one of those could be on climate change and related scientific issues. It might well be on technology, as well. I think there's a real possibility that the Presidential Debate Commission will do that. But it will not be a long debate. It will not be sufficient. But at least we'll get it on the table.

FLATOW: Interesting. Yeah. Dr. Lubell, are presidential candidates and the media taking their cue from the voters? What do the voter - the polls that you conduct tell you about public about attitudes about science?

LUBELL: That's a very good question, Ira. And following the 2010 congressional election, a group of organizations got together, and we decided we ought to find out what the public actually thinks. And they were - there's good news and bad news. The good news is the public does appreciate science. They actually love scientists, think they're wonderful people. And since I'm one of them, I love to hear that.

(LAUGHTER)

LUBELL: The bad news is that when you probe, they really don't know why. Their knowledge is poor. They don't know what the benefits are other than medicine, that they relate to when they see their doctor. They have no clue where all their devices, their entertainment comes from. They have no idea. And what this translates into, unfortunately, with a low - a diminishing trust in government, is a diminishing trust in the government's ability to do anything on science that will benefit the public.

FLATOW: So they love science and they love scientists, but they haven't got a clue about what scientists do.

LUBELL: We're good salesmen, I guess. No, they really don't.

FLATOW: And it crosses all parties and all political spectra?

LUBELL: It is their - we did the polling in based on four groups: Republican primary voters, Democratic primary voters, swing voters, and self-identified Tea Partiers. It cuts across all. There are differences. Democrats, because of their greater trust in government, tend to think that the government can do more for science. But the reality is when you probe, you find that the knowledge base is very, very weak.

FLATOW: Wow. David Gergen, is that a problem? Are scientists failing to effectively communicate what they do?

GERGEN: Well, Shawn Otto has been arguing for some time, as Michael Lubell, that the scientific community needs to be much more engaged in the public dialogue. It needs to be out in front far more. I would say that starts, frankly, at the White House. I think the science adviser of the White House ought to be a very prominent public figure. The current science adviser for President Obama happens to be a former colleague and a friend, John Holdren. He's first-class.

But he's been kept out of sight as a science adviser. I think he ought to be out there regularly in the public dialogue and on television on Sundays and things like that, because there are so many of these issues which are crucial. And don't know quite why the White House hasn't showcased him. But I remember, you know, and it wasn't long ago we had surgeon

generals who had enormous impact on the public by being out talking about health issues. And I think we need the same here.

But then beyond that, university scientists, you know, it's understandable they spend most of their time on their basic research. But I think we ought to be doing far more to get them out. The public does have an appetite for this. You know, The New York Times on Tuesdays runs this science section. And I've been told in the past that the Tuesday edition of The New York Times is a bestseller of the week. And I think that's partly because of the science section. Bill Broad told me that from there.

And people have curiosity. If it's presented well, people want to read about it. They're curious about it - not only about how this is affecting weather, but whether, you know, whether the Internet causes brain cancer. There are - I mean - I'm sorry, that cell phones cause brain cancer. There are all sorts of issues.

My wife, who's not a scientist, avidly reads the Tuesday science section of The New York Times, as do many of my friends, because even though we're not scientists, it's presented in such an interesting way.

FLATOW: That's what's so baffling to me about why then - you can't get a question about science in these presidential debates, or even in the congressional debates. You know, everybody's interested in it but then they're not - you know, they don't bring it up as a - do you think, David, do you think that journalists are just afraid themselves that they don't know enough about it?

GERGEN: Well, that's an interesting argument, as well. You know, it's because it's not part of the national dialogue. It's not in the news. You know, cable does not, you know, embrace this kind of thing. Fortunately, you do with this, you know, with this SCIENCE FRIDAY. An awful lot of people I know who said, oh, you're going to be on with Ira. That's really interesting. He's got a terrific show.

But I think the political journalists think that this is not what the public really wants to hear about, and they don't do it. I think - but with more encouragement from the scientific community, it frankly takes - on issues like this, it does take national leadership. You have to have a certain number of people in the culture who step forward and say: This is really important. We need to talk about it.

It starts with the president, but it includes many other people who are head of institutions. And it ought to be, you know, it ought to be the major research universities of this country have got to be out there talking about this, and how much funding we have for basic research from the government - how this ought to be allocated, and that sort of thing.

I think it's also partly helping the public to understand what huge benefits we've had from scientific research. How many people know that it was government-sponsored research that really brought us the Internet? There would have been no Steve Jobs had it not been for the government investing way back when through DARPA.

FLATOW: Mm-hmm. Shawn Otto?

OTTO: Yeah?

FLATOW: What do you think about that? I mean...

OTTO: Well, I think that that - yeah, what David was saying is absolutely right. Number one: It does take leadership. And leadership is about that kind of vision of seeing the problem, identifying it, and saying we've got to take some steps to address this. And we need a lot more of that. The scientific community in the United States has really been too quiet for a long time, and we've seen some of the results.

The other side of it I think, Ira, is the point that you made. I think that there probably is some confirmation bias there, that political reporters and news directors and editors come largely out of the humanities. Their last science class was more than likely high school chemistry, or something like that. And they're just not interested, and they assume the public isn't interested, either.

And we started getting that kind of feedback in 2007 and 2008, when we were first pushing for this. And so we decided to explore that, and we did a national poll. And we repeated it this year and found, as David said, that that's just not the case. The public is massively interested. We asked the question this time around: Should the presidential candidates participate in a debate to discuss key science-based challenges facing the United States, such as healthcare, climate change, energy, education, innovation and the economy? And we had overwhelming support for that, roughly 85 percent of likely voters.

FLATOW: All right. We're going to come back and talk about some more about this issue. Our number is one 1-800-989-8255. You can tweet us @SciFri. Also, you can go our website. That's sciencefriday.com, and our Facebook page at /SciFri. We'll come back and talk more about bringing science into the debate, into the discussion this presidential year and also a congressional election year in the Senate. So, stay with us. We'll be right back after this break.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

FLATOW: I'm Ira Flatow. This is SCIENCE FRIDAY, from NPR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

FLATOW: This is SCIENCE FRIDAY. I'm Ira Flatow.

We're talking this hour about why science is a non-issue in the presidential elections, and how you might want to get into the elections, and into your local elections, too.

My guests are David Gergen, professor of Public Service and director at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School, Michael Lubell, professor of Physics at City College of the City University of New York and director of Public Affairs at the American Physical Society. Shawn Otto, CEO and co-founder of ScienceDebate.org.

Our number: 1-800-989-8255.

David, so is the answer talking about science in a different way to get people interested - not talking about the science value, but what it does for society?

GERGEN: I think that's a large part of it, and I think it has to be done on a continuing basis. For example, I've talked in the past to the president of Caltech and other universities. I think it would be very helpful if, on an annual basis, in many states, the leading hospitals - research institutions invited members of Congress to come and spend a day to hear about the kind of breakthroughs, the investigations that are going on, so that they became more better acquainted.

We've got too many people in Congress - and, I think, frankly, a growing number of people in Congress, unfortunately, many of them coming in from the right on the Republican Party - who don't believe in science anymore. They fundamentally just question it, starting with climate change, but, you know, with many other issues, such as creationism. And I do think that that's a question of reaching out.

But I want to come back to the president of the United States showcasing science. Shawn Otto has spoken out about this in the past. President Obama came in with two issues that were very related to science. One was healthcare and the other was climate change. And he did make a decision early on to put the emphasis on healthcare. And, you know, we went from a visit to Copenhagen - which was a big climate change conference, early in his administration, where he was there - to Rio recently, where he was not.

And there was, you know, very little conversation about it - the administration. If you're really going to put climate change on the map, the president has a lead on that. He has to say this is an important issue. And I, frankly, think both parties are letting his critical, critical issue slip away from us. It's almost as if we're resigning ourselves to what - come what may.

FLATOW: Do you think that this - the weather, the climate change and what appears to be climate change with the dry weather and the rain - missing rain, might change people's minds this year?

GERGEN: Absolutely. The surveys - we were just hearing about that Brookings survey as your show opened. And I do - I think it's a very hot topic for people, as if - as the very uneven weather we've had, the droughts that we're experiencing across the United States, almost to historic proportions. Now we are learning that the heat may pierce the layers of the ozone, it was in the papers this morning.

Those are issues that are very much on peoples' minds, but somebody has to give voice to them. And at the national political level, where the president directs his focus, the press will often follow.

FLATOW: Shawn Otto, what kinds of questions would you ask if you had - give me the top two on your list in the debate, if you were able to ask them.

OTTO: Well, the first one is on innovation and the economy. And we would ask them about the role of science and technology, how it's really driven half of our economic growth since World War II, when the federal government first prioritized peacetime science mobilization. But several recent reports question our continued leadership in these vital areas. So the question would be: What policies will best ensure that America remains the world leader in innovation?

And the number two question is the existential one we've been talking about with climate change. The Earth's climate is changing, and there is concern about the potentially adverse effects of these changes on life on the planet. What is your position on Cap and Trade, carbon taxes and other policies proposed to address global climate change? And what steps can we take to improve our ability to tackle challenges like climate change that cross national boundaries? And I think that that's a very important part of the question, here.

FLATOW: Michael Lubell, what do you think?

LUBELL: I wanted to come back to something that David said just a couple of minutes ago about the leadership issue and the importance of having the president - not only the president speak out, but his advisers. Science used to be an inside-the-Beltway issue. You could get policies promulgated simply by dealing with people in government. What we're finding today, I think, is that the lack of trust in government requires a dialogue with the public. And scientists have been absent in that, for the most part.

And, in fact, it's one of the reasons that we convened a meeting early June to talk about this very issue. How do we get the scientists out in front of the public - not to talk about the science, but to talk about how the science affects people's lives? And also to get people who are actively known in the public - in the entertainment industry and elsewhere - who are passionate about science to talk about it? Because without the public dialogue, I don't think in today's world, that in Washington we're going to see very much action on very many things.

FLATOW: But the president has had two science fairs at the White House, where no one is ever had a science fair at the White House. He's gone to factories that are making renewable energy products. He's been out there trying to say we can create new jobs if we invest in these new kinds of economy. What is he not doing?

LUBELL: Well, let me say this to begin with, that I think President Obama certainly has been far more vocal on this issue. It took President Clinton, I think - David may remember this - but I think it was seven years into his administration before he actively engaged in science. And I think President Obama has a passion for it, and he has done what he can do up until now.

But I think the issue that we've seen in the public polling is that we are - we're not winning the battle. And therefore, I think any president who's sitting in the Oval Office today has to do more. It's not sufficient to do what he has done. He's done a lot, but it's got to go way beyond this, because we are facing a crisis. We face a whole set of them: economically, and also, as we've been talking about it, climate change.

But there are many, many other issues with energy-critical elements, things that we have to deal with - the Chinese government - a whole host of them. And I think that we're not - we are seen to focus on science itself, but not on the science as it applies to people's lives.

FLATOW: 1-800-989- 8255. Let's go to the phones, to Francine in Denver. Hi, Francine.

FRANCINE: Hi. I think Washington knows that the interest in science is great, and that it's a lose-lose situation for the candidates themselves to bring it up at the debates. David touched on this, but, you know, from Romney's point of view, it would be completely lose-lose. He either would appear ignorant if he catered to his base, or anger the base. I mean, I think it's a very cynical and, in that way, smart move not to touch the subject as being of no advantage as things go.

FLATOW: But what about...

FRANCINE: And, of course, for the public interest, it's crucial. But for winning an election, I think it would be a lose-lose situation.

FLATOW: Why not have the president or any other Democrats who are running, who believe that way, then bring it up themselves in a debate? Ask yourself the question. You know, if it's not going to be asked...

FRANCINE: Well, if the...

FLATOW: ...and if you think it's a political winner...

FRANCINE: I'm in favor. Get his advisers to do that. But would it even help Obama? I'm not sure.

FLATOW: David, what do you think?

GERGEN: Look, I - at a certain level, I think the reason that so many people are cynical about politics is they think that their politicians are ducking. And no more recent example, more perfect example than following up on Colorado and the shootings are out there, and both candidates would duck the question of assault weapon bans. Even though they've been for them in the past, they won't say a word about it now and say the laws are perfectly sufficient.

And in the same way, I think they're ducking climate change. And I think they're ducking some of these other issues, but especially climate change. I think President Obama has had these fairs(ph). That's for sure. But he sure hasn't been willing to stand up and say, you know, we need a gasoline tax as a way not only to help solve the federal budget deficit, but in order to get ourselves in better position on the energy front.

You know, I think at a certain level, you've got ask people to have some - to have guts and courage to stand up and do

what is right. And I don't think we're seeing that, frankly, from either party at this point. The Republican Party has turned far right and is, you know, pandering to this sense that science is a fraudulent, that it's all ideological, you know, that it's all being made up - that's what you're hearing from Tea Party and others. And on the left it's sort of, you know, running from reality.

And I - it's discouraging when you look at it. This country can be the - can once again be the great leader in manufacturing and other areas, given the prowess we have in our universities, given the kind of discoveries that are going on. But we've got to invest in it in order to get there. And the fact that we're not, that we're letting these numbers drift down in terms of how much we invest at the governmental level just makes you very despairing about where we are in politics.

Someday, somebody's going to come along and try to turn this around. But if we let it go too long, it's going to be very, very dangerous.

FLATOW: Shawn Otto, you think that science debate would be a good way for the candidates to sway undecided voters. Explain that.

OTTO: Well, I do. Yeah. I...

FLATOW: Because they're the key voters they're always looking at.

OTTO: Absolutely. And most of those voters are disaffected Republicans and independents - moderate Republicans - that both went for Obama last time around. And he's got to capture them again, and that's the battleground where Romney has got to try and take votes away from him. Most of those people are pro-science. They're pragmatists. They're not driven by ideology. And so having a debate on some of these issues actually would be a way to speak to those particular voters and to contrast the candidates with each other.

Now, that's a - there's an argument for Romney that he's got to do that to move away a little bit from his base after he gets the endorsement, and there's an argument for Obama that that's where the battle is going to happen. He's tried to lay out some of that, I think, in his Rolling Stone interview. I think some of that is in defense against the Koch brothers-funded ads against him. He can say that's not about energy or shipping jobs overseas. It's about climate change. So I think that that there are reasoned arguments on both sides.

FLATOW: 1-800-989-8255 is our number if you'd like to talk about what's going on in the debate. Michael, do you think that's fertile ground to give undecided voters - or what does your survey show about this?

LUBELL: I think the problem, I mean, Shawn and I have actually talked about this, and I think one of the difficulties, as the caller brought - pointed out, a presidential candidate - I don't know if he used Governor Romney as an example - is not certainly conversant on the scientific issues. And to expect somebody - and I've done a lot of work on campaigns, maybe not as much as David, but I've had a long history of this. You don't want to expose a candidate to embarrassment, and that could happen.

I think that President Obama would probably do very well. I think this is an issue that he's been concerned about, and he would probably do well in it. But I think Governor Romney's handlers would say stay away from this as far as possible. I like to make one other point, and that is that when we look at the declining investment in science, when we compare that to the gross domestic product, it is a very serious issue. The United States is very much like a high-tech company as we've - and I think Shawn pointed out, that David pointed out, 70 percent is actually the figure today, the gross domestic, GDP growth related to science and technology, and at the same time, the percentage that we're investing is going down and down and down.

Our trade deficit gets worse and worse and worse within the high-tech sector. We're not on a good path. We have to reverse it. I don't think the public recognizes it, and we've got to get that out in the debate.

FLATOW: 1-800-989-8255 is our number. I'm Ira Flatow. This is SCIENCE FRIDAY from NPR. And as far as bringing it up as a topic science in general and investment in science research, on one of your surveys, I'm looking at one of the key points. It says nearly seven in 10 voters approve of using taxpayer funds to sponsor scientific research, and among all voters, the percentage that approved among key voter groups, 54 percent of Tea Party supporters say they should do that.

LUBELL: That was one of the biggest surprises. I have to say there were many things in the survey that I think we - a number of us have anticipated. This is one that blew us away because we know that the trust in government among Tea Party people is low, particularly among Tea Party people, and yet, they actually wind up saying if I'm going to have taxpayer money spent, spend it on science. Remarkable. Again, this is a message we try to get out to politicians, and I'll mention one other thing.

We - and I took the iPad - Steve Jobs' great creation - and we deconstructed it for staffers of what is called the Republican Study Committee. These are the most conservative members of Congress. They number now about 175. They were blown

away as well. When they saw what was inside the iPad, where it all came from, and it was almost all government-funded research. Steve Jobs is a genius. He knew how to take - take those discoveries and create a product that he had the vision to see the public was going to embrace.

GERGEN: Yeah. I really want to go back to this.

FLATOW: Yes, David.

GERGEN: (Unintelligible) and that is I do think that if you can bring the public inside some of these things and bring members of Congress inside some of these laboratories in effect, not only can they put more - fully appreciate what's going on, especially in medical research, and people really love that when they understand it, and they become very excited about what you're going to accomplish. But there is also in our society, there is a - in - among people who are in the humanities, there is now sort of a pessimism about the future.

There's sort of a sense we can't cope. And when you bring people into technologies and basic research and science, there's so much excitement and positive energy about the future that I think that the more people get exposed to this, the better they'd feel about what we can accomplish, the more we would raise our sights as a people and realize, you know, there's still great things out there we can do, and we may be on the verge of some huge breakthroughs. I would get people very excited about that, and I think it would really improve the morale of the country and bring a lot more support to the kinds of things we really ought to be doing.

FLATOW: Mm-hmm. Shawn Otto, we have about time for one last question. What about on the local level, on congressional and senatorial levels, asking those questions too?

OTTO: Oh, absolutely. Well, we did take a subset of this list of 14, subset of eight, and we have that on our site at sciencedebate.org. They're appropriate for congressional races and also lower-level races. And this is really important for two reasons. One is that legislation initiates in Congress, and there's little that the president can do if there's not legislation to back it up. And the second reason is that a lot of the people in lower level races are eventually going to be in Congress or running for president. And we've got to get them onboard in understanding how important science is to the future of this country.

FLATOW: And these are questions you or the citizens can go to a local meeting and ask what they won't ask on national television. All right. Gentlemen, thank you very much. We've ran out of time. David Gergen, professor of public service and director of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School, also senior political analyst at CNN. Dr. Michael Lubell, professor of physics at City College of the City University of New York, director of public affairs at the American Physical Society. Shawn Otto, CEO and co-founder of ScienceDebate.org, also author of "Fool Me Twice: Fighting the Assault on Science in America." Gentlemen, thank you all for taking time to be with us today.

GERGEN: Thanks, Ira.

LUBELL: You're welcome.

OTTO: Thanks. Thanks, Ira.

FLATOW: We're going to take a quick break, change gears, talk about microchips the size of your thumb that can mimic human organs and why that's important. So stay with us. We'll be right back after this break. I'm Ira Flatow. This is SCIENCE FRIDAY from NPR.

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