

Report on New America Foundation event 9 October 2012
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The New America Foundation held a panel entitled “It’s Science and Technology Policy, Stupid” on October 9, 2012 in Washington, DC. Panelists included Stacy Cline, Counsel for Ranking Member Enzi, Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee; Sheri Fink, Future Tense Fellow, New America Foundation and Pulitzer Prize-winning Investigative Reporter; Amanda Ripley, Emerson Fellow, New America Foundation and Contributing Writer, *Time Magazine*; and Konstantin Kakaes, Bernard L. Schwartz Fellow, New America Foundation. The moderator was Robert Wright, Senior Future Tense Fellow, New America Foundation and Author, *The Evolution of God*, *Nonzero*, and *The Moral Animal*.

The panel was convened to focus on the politics of science and technology (S&T) during the current US presidential campaign.

Kakaes believes the S&T policy differences between the parties are minimal. He provided an excellent example of the Superconducting Super Collider failure (cancelled in 1993) in Texas. The House opposed funding the Super Collider despite the Senate’s support. The failure, then, could not be blamed on partisan politics. Kakaes also believes that science advances regardless of whether its sound or not. His examples are fracking-shale gas extraction and missile defense. Both have flawed scientific principles, yet politicians support them in order to appear stronger on an environmental or defense platforms. The issue becomes more about the politics than about the science. A last, more depressing, statement by Kakaes is that the consumer [voter] has less influence on S&T policy than big businesses that have much to gain (or lose) by policy formulation.

Cline stated that in this election neither candidate has an official policy statement about S&T, nor does either candidate mention S&T much in campaign speeches. She did note that President Obama would double S&T research funds, while Governor Romney would keep funding S&T at the current level. She mentioned net neutrality as one issue where there is a clear difference — President Obama is for net neutrality and Governor Romney is against it. Cline believes copyrights and privacy will be major issues for the next president to address.

Fink’s area is health care and biomedical research. She clarified that President Obama would double funding for the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institute for Standards and Technology, but would “flatline” the National Institute of Health (NIH). Fink was unsure if Governor Romney had a statement on funding science. Fink brought up a website, *ScienceDebate*, that publishes questions answered by President Obama and Governor Romney on science topics. She raised the issue of embryonic stem cell research as a partisan difference. President Bush banned this type of research and President Obama overturned the ban. Even though this question primarily involves values, it still affects S&T funding. Fink proposed that stimulus funding and openness of data could be metrics in evaluating an administration’s emphasis on S&T.

Ripley’s specialty is education and she believes not enough rigor, or emphasis on the math and science education programs, exists in the US. She claimed it is not all about technology — plenty

of poor performing schools have smart boards, while many high performing schools are low tech. This campaign's education issue differences have been about state vs. federal ideology. President Obama has been very successful in education reform through the use of stimulus money. He has established common core standards in 45 out of 50 states in math and reading. Governor Romney would not support stimulus funding for education, preferring to leave education standards to the preference of the state.

Overall all four panelists, plus the moderator, agreed there is not enough discussion on S&T in the election campaign. The few issues that were mentioned in campaign speeches were only a line or two of a much longer speech. Perhaps a better question than 'Where do the candidates fall on S&T policy?' is 'How do we get the candidates to focus on S&T policy?' However, in order to get the candidates to focus on it, we have to get the country to care. How do we get the country excited about S&T? Ripley pointed out that the US spends a lot more on athletics than on science in the high schools. If America's youth have no interest, S&T concerns will not carry over to the adult population and subsequently will not be addressed in policy. The US needs S&T reform, but not solely focused on technology. We must reform the ideology and again make science important.

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