

U.S. science groups have 20 questions for candidates



By [Jeffrey Mervis](#) Aug. 10, 2016 , 6:30 AM

Politicians talk about issues they think will sway voters, a tenet that explains why U.S. presidential candidates never say much about science, research, and innovation on the campaign trail.

That perennial silence frustrates scientific leaders, who feel that citizens deserve to know where the candidates stand on issues ranging from climate change to cybersecurity. So a coalition of 56 higher education and scientific organizations has come up with 20 questions whose answers could help voters choose from among Democrat Hillary Clinton, Republican Donald Trump, the Green Party's Jill Stein, and Libertarian Gary Johnson.

Created in 2008 and expanded for the 2016 campaign, [ScienceDebate](#) has promised to post each candidate's reply. But its real targets are the public and the media, which the coalition hopes will force the candidates to address some of these topics during the final 3 months of the campaign.

"We are encouraging journalists to ask these questions at every opportunity," says Shawn Otto, the effort's organizer, who is based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. "We're in a new era where science is impacting people more than ever, and candidates will respond to what is on the minds of the public."

The coalition hasn't abandoned its original goal of having the candidates participate in a live debate devoted to science-related issues. However, that idea never gained traction in 2008 and 2012, and Otto admits there's no reason to expect it to fare any better in 2016. So the group has put most of its energy into coming up with questions that they hope will elicit written answers from each campaign organization.

The final list was winnowed from some 400 questions submitted by members of each participating organization. (AAAS, which publishes *ScienceInsider*, is part of the coalition, but notable absentees include the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities.) The new version reprises earlier questions on innovation policy, climate change, energy, food security, clean water, ocean health, and space. But some perennial topics have acquired a different focus; for example, the question about the internet has shifted from ensuring access to cybersecurity and privacy, and the question dealing with education now focuses on attracting more women and minorities into the scientific workforce rather than on boosting overall student achievement. There are also some fresh faces: Opioid addiction and mental health have cracked the list, whereas concern about safeguarding critical natural resources has fallen by the wayside.

Otto says that the coalition consciously excluded issues that seemed too narrow, like funding a particular federal agency or reforming the Department of Energy's network of national laboratories. But that doesn't mean scientific groups plan to stop pushing the candidates on issues about which their members feel strongly.

For example, the Association of American Universities (AAU), a Washington, D.C.-based group of 62 research universities, coincidentally [released a letter to the candidates yesterday](#) that highlights four issues. Only one—innovation—appears on the coalition's list of 20 questions. One AAU talking point deals with college affordability, and another seeks relief from the administrative burden facing universities who carry out federally funded research.

AAU's vice president for public affairs, Barry Toiv, says the association applauds what ScienceDebate is trying to do even though it is not part of the coalition. "But we also feel it's important to highlight the issues that our members feel strongly about."