



Editorial



When the boundaries between science and politics are blurred

Summer in the Northern Hemisphere is over, and just about to start in the Southern Hemisphere. We, in the North, should have memories of our recent vacations and be in the process of welcoming ambitious students and postdocs to our labs. But this year, it all seems different. When we talk about being airborne, we more likely than not refer to SARS-CoV-2 rather than traveling in economy class on a flight to a distant destination. In the US and elsewhere, while the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has captured our collective health attention, a second virus of outright racism has confronted our consciousness.

We are indeed faced with some of the most pressing health, economic and political questions of our time. We assert, as scientists, most of us have compartmentalized our political views from our science, begging the question as to whether the time has come for the two to intersect. In the US, and no doubt elsewhere, when we consider the cross-pollination between science and politics, we need look no further than contemporary arguments, misrepresentations, disagreements, and activism related to health care, SARS-CoV-2, masks and vaccines, to name a few.

And when we weigh the advice, it seems to those of us true to science that it is manipulated for political gains. And its politicization—whether by misapplication, overextension, or outright manipulation of the scientific record to advance particular policy agendas—imposes health risks, financial burdens, and missed opportunities.

How a nation, or world citizenry respond to such rancor is up to each of us as individuals and scientists. More than ever before, we cannot remain bystanders. We must display responsibility in advocating the right from the wrong, assuring a safe and protective health and social climate. Our moral compass cannot remain silent!

Science is the commitment to reason and objectivity. Politics is the maneuvering for power gains. While they do not have to be mutually exclusive, when power seekers show disinterest in facts and truth, they corrupt both the process and the product of science. Scientific debates on any issue, whether masks, herd immunity, global warming, racial discrimination and alike should be encouraged; they can be productive, precisely because they derive from objective discussions on science and intellectual enterprise, intersecting with the drive for the best public health outcomes. But when the boundaries between science and politics are blurred, it is not only the science that suffers, but the populous as a whole, as advice given to it is rooted in the mere thirst for power at the expense of public well-being and health.

Unfortunately, today we are experiencing these consequences worldwide.

“We cannot stand by and let science be undermined”¹, as the “...truth is neither liberal nor conservative”². We must speak with a unified voice that is driven by truth driven by facts!

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¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02852-x>.

² <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe2029812>.