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What Voters Really Need To Know

In the United States, 2008 is a presidential election year, and a big one at that. Our sitting president, George W. Bush, is finishing up his second—and final—term, and the vice president has no intention of running for president on his own. This means that the field is wide open for candidates from both major political parties. This has not occurred in this country for many decades.

Unfortunately, one of the minor campaign issues this year is the proposed high-level waste/spent nuclear fuel repository at Yucca Mountain. In a recent issue, this magazine quoted some campaign rhetoric by various candidates about the Yucca Mountain project (see "Headlines," Radwaste Solutions, Sept./Oct. 2007, p. 10). The majority of those comments were decidedly negative.

A letter to the editor in this issue (see page 5) comments on that news report. The writer, Dr. Ruth Weiner, a distinguished nuclear waste expert (for example, she serves on the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Advisory Committee on Nuclear Waste and Materials), makes the point that these political candidates, who generally decry the repository program as emblematic of "bad science," are merely repeating "press release propaganda."

Her letter spurred some politically incorrect thinking on my part. Wouldn't it be nice, I thought (to quote a song from one of my favorite '60s bands, the Beach Boys), if the current crop of political candidates acknowledged the real reasons they oppose the Yucca Mountain project? How refreshing would that be? With that in mind, I have "translated" the political rhetoric we hear about Yucca Mountain into normal, everyday speech that anyone can understand.

For example, when a Democratic candidate speaks against the project, he or she is really saying: "I recognize that, as Senate majority leader, Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada controls the agenda at the Senate. When I am president, I will need the cooperation of the Senate majority leader to get my legislative initiatives on the Senate floor. Therefore, I will say that I support what Sen. Reid supports and oppose what he opposes. If he opposes the Yucca Mountain project, then I oppose it as well. I personally know nothing about Yucca Mountain, but if Harry's against it, then so am I. Besides, there's no political downside to opposing the project, so what I have got to lose?"

Similarly, those Republican candidates who say they are against the project are really saying: "Nevada is an early caucus state. A good showing at an early caucus will be a big boost for the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries. Because Nevada is a 'red' state, a good showing there will bode well for primaries in other red states. So, because the state of Nevada opposes the Yucca Mountain project, I will say I oppose it as well. Also, the Yucca Mountain project doesn't seem to matter to any state but Nevada, so being against the project might help me to win the state's five electoral votes, and shouldn't hurt me in any other state."

Alas, one rule of politics is that you cannot admit that politics exists. Therefore, you must find another reason for a political position. In the case of Yucca Mountain, that reason becomes science, or rather, "bad science."

It's Not "Bad Science," It's Just Bad Politicking

So, all you people who have worked on the project and might be offended by being accused of doing bad science, before you get terribly upset, remember what the candidates are really saying, and don't take it personally.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor