

## WASHINGTON **US election deadlock portends little change in research**

The US research boom will roar on, regardless of who is inaugurated as president on Jan 20, 2001. In a perilous season for forecasts, that's a fairly safe one, given both candidates' commitment to rapid growth in federal research spending, Congressional zest for even faster growth, and huge revenue surpluses. But, if campaign rhetoric foretells politics, there are some differences in how a Gore or Bush administration would distribute the research and development wealth, now totalling about US\$80 billion in the government sector.

Both have signed on to Congressional plans to double the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) over 5 years to a goal of more than \$25 billion. The build-up, now in its third year, is on schedule. However, as usual in American-style biomedical politics, partisanship and rancour continue over reproductive biology.

During the campaign, Vice President Gore supported government funding of research involving stem cells derived from human embryos, and he welcomed the Food and Drug Administration's approval for marketing of mifepristone. Governor Bush expressed opposition on both counts. But he did so softly, in line with his successful strategy of minimising abortion-related issues.

When the topic was thrust at him, Bush deftly responded that he is opposed to abortion and would like to outlaw it, but stressed that he recognises that America is not ready to fol-

low him down that path. Although it was always lurking off stage, abortion received scant overt attention in the campaign, a reflection, most likely, of widespread weariness with the topic and set minds. Just prior to election day, former NIH director Harold Varmus publicly deplored Bush's

---

**"However, as usual in American-style biomedical politics, partisanship and rancour continue over matters related to reproductive biology"**

---

opposition to stem-cell research, warning that Bush "would shut down this important avenue" for developing treatments for cancer, diabetes, and neurological disorders. The message went virtually unnoted in the press. Having embraced the politically popular medical sciences, both candidates also declared their support for all the sciences, thus lining up with physics, chemistry, maths, and others that have been brooding about neglect. Gore extended the budget-doubling formula to the National Science Foundation (NSF), while Bush merely called for a bigger budget for NSF. In any case, money for that agency was already climbing rapidly; this year, Congress approved the biggest budget increase in NSF's 50-year history, \$500 million, bringing the total to \$4.5 billion.

In general, differences of emphasis, rather than sharp divisions, charac-

terised the candidates' positions toward other sectors of government-supported research. Bush advocated a \$20-billion increase in military research and development, while Gore, emphasising environmental research, also called for more money for the Pentagon. Regarding government programmes to stimulate technological innovation—a Democratic favourite that arouses Republican cries of "corporate welfare"—Gore said he's for the programmes, while Bush said he's for "a stable environment that encourages research and innovation without attempting to direct them." Gore assailed the pricing practices of the pharmaceutical industry, thus hinting at price controls; Bush said he would help the poor pay for drugs, but specifically denounced price controls as a burden on the profits that finance research.

How the Gore-Bush differences might translate into policy is far from clear. Research policy was a small sideshow in the campaign, obscured by rhetorical volleys over tax cuts, Social Security, education, and health care—matters of broad public concern, by contrast with the obscure issues of the scientific enterprise. Following the long and bitter post-election ballot count, the next president can claim no national mandate. With the electorate evenly divided, and Republicans holding a minuscule majority in Congress, opportunities for innovation are slight.

*Daniel S Greenberg*

## OTTAWA **Ontario to impose "urinary witch-hunt"?**

Just days after proposing to give themselves a 42% pay increase, Ontario's governing Tories announced that they plan to impose mandatory drug testing and treatment on welfare recipients to stop the drain on tax dollars. The irony was so palpable that one media wag felt compelled to inquire whether mandatory drug testing should begin with the provincial cabinet, given that it was now apparent they'd all been smoking something that confused their judgment.

But Ontario Social Services minister John Baird argued that drug abuse among welfare recipients has become so rampant that drastic measures are needed. Theatrically spilling syringes at the feet of televi-

sion cameras, Baird told a press conference on Nov 16 that "here we have what are for many the instruments of despair. What we want to do is to work to stop people from shooting their welfare cheques up their arms and to help them shooting up the ladder of success".

Although the Ontario Human Rights Commission has previously told the government that people who refuse tests or treatment cannot be denied welfare benefits, Baird insisted that all recipients who test positive for illegal drugs and refuse treatment will be wiped from the welfare rolls. Estimating that as many as one in ten of those people claiming welfare benefits have drug problems, Baird claimed

that the crackdown is an entirely humanitarian action. "Our government is not prepared to simply turn its back and write anyone off. It's difficult to get a job if you're addicted to drugs", he says.

But the Canadian Civil Liberties Association promptly dubbed the measure a "urinary witch-hunt" and indicated that the association will pursue a court challenge if the government proceeds with the draconian measure. The province will carry out a 6-week consultation process with municipalities and other bodies to iron out the details of exactly how mandatory drug testing will be imposed.

*Wayne Kondro*