Getting Up to Speed on Space

It was a single sentence in the last paragraph of a 15-page white paper on education reform. But when presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama (D–IL) suggested in November that he would partially finance those reforms by delaying NASA’s new launch vehicle for 5 years, space enthusiasts let out a howl. “It was not full-fledged blowback,” says one senior Obama staffer who requested anonymity. “But we did hear from people who wanted an explanation.”

Last month, shortly after Obama’s victory in the Iowa caucuses, they got one. The candidate’s first position paper on space not only promises to stick to the current schedule during at least the early phase of the launcher, but it also backs “a bold array of robotic missions” and pledges a “much-needed infusion of funds” for federally funded scientific research.

What happened? Obama’s sudden support for the rocket that will replace the shuttle as the country’s new vehicle to explore space demonstrates the surprising success of grassroots and Internet-based space efforts in affecting the course of the 2008 presidential campaign. Blogs such as Space Politics and NASA Watch, and organizations such as the Mars Society, keep a close eye on every utterance by a candidate on space policy. They instruct their audience how to contact the campaigns and even coach readers on how to get a space question inserted into a presidential debate. And they are being heard.

“It’s a small but vocal group, and they’ve reached out from the beginning,” says the Obama staffer. “I’m impressed with the grassroots effort,” adds Lori Garver, a Washington, D.C., space consultant and former NASA official who advises Obama’s chief rival, Senator Hillary Clinton (D–NY). “They’ve done more than all the sophisticated lobbyists.”

Space has never been on the radar of so many candidates so early in a presidential campaign. Its presence is forcing campaign staffs to be familiar with acronyms, engineering plans, and flight timetables to a degree unthinkable in previous elections. Clinton, for example, promised in October to speed up construction of the new rocket, restore cuts to the agency’s aeronautics effort, and pour new money into a space-based climate change initiative. “This is not a traditional core issue for a campaign,” admits a senior staffer about the increased attention to space policy. “It’s a pretty steep learning curve.”

The increased scrutiny may also be the reason we already know that the sharpest difference between Clinton and Obama on space involves not whether to build the Ares rocket but where it should go once it’s ready for launch. Neither candidate specifically backs President George W. Bush’s goal of sending astronauts back to the moon by 2020, but a senior Clinton staffer said last week that she “will support future missions to the moon.” Obama, by contrast, is not yet sold on a lunar base as a sensible or necessary step. His campaign staffer predicts that the “later phases” of NASA’s exploration plans will be delayed.

Some policy analysts say that the rising interest in space is also being driven by old-fashioned worries about jobs. “Candidates feel compelled to talk about NASA not because it’s a topic of intrinsic interest,” says David Goldston, a former House Republican staffer who is now a visiting lecturer at Harvard University. “At some point it becomes an important local issue they can’t ignore. They are stuck with it rather than drawn to it.”

The economic factor is heightened by the fact that the space shuttle, the mainstay for U.S. human exploration over nearly 3 decades, is finally being phased out. Its retirement threatens to lay off thousands of workers in the politically crucial state of Florida, home to the agency’s sprawling Kennedy Space Center. The projected 4-year time gap between flying the shuttle and a new rocket is another hot local issue.

Accordingly, Republican presidential candidates Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney made separate pilgrimages in the days before the state’s 29 January primary to tour shuttle facilities, shake hands with workers, and assure business leaders that they won’t abandon an area dubbed the Space Coast. “Florida will continue to be the center of America’s space program … and our emerging space industry,” Giuliani promised a group of local business executives, whereas Romney spoke warmly of Bush’s push to return to the moon (see main text). Another Republican presidential contender, veteran Senator John McCain (R–AZ), declined the group’s invitation. But McCain already knows the players in the space community, thanks to a stint as chair of the Senate committee that oversees NASA.

Campaign staffers say that they welcome input beyond the usual circle of lobbyists on how to shape science, space, and technology policies. “We’re trying to spread a wider net,” says the Obama staffer. That gives researchers and engineers a new opportunity to plug into the political process. “They are looking for politically seasoned people they can trust,” Garver says about the candidates. “And now it’s so easy to have an impact.”

—A.L.