Election 2008: The Presidential Candidates & Climate Change

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A note on the science of global warming

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was formed in 1988 as a response to growing scientific evidence that suggested that the global climate was changing. Beginning in 1990 the IPCC has released four reports which document the increasing evidence of man-made global climate change, a change commonly referred to as 'global warming.' In 2007, the Panel concluded that enough evidence had accumulated to conclude that "most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-twentieth century is very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations."

In that 2007 report, the IPCC summarized a variety of global warming scenarios and concluded that the average surface temperature on earth will rise between 1.1 and 6.4 degrees Celsius (2.0 - 11.5 degrees Fahrenheit). This "anthropogenic warming and [subsequent] sea level rise [will] continue for centuries due to the timescales associated with climate processes and feedbacks, even if greenhouse gas concentrations were to be stabilized."

The candidates and global warming legislation

Both Senator John McCain and Senator Barack Obama are co-sponsors of S. 280 - "A bill to provide for a program to accelerate the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States by establishing a market-driven system of greenhouse gas tradeable allowances, to support the deployment of new climate change-related technologies, and to ensure benefits to consumers from the trading in such allowances, and for other purposes." Other sponsors of S. 280 include Senators Carper (D-DE), Clinton (D-NY), Coleman (R-MN), Collins (R-ME), Durbin (D-IL), Klobuchar (D-MN), Lieberman (I-CT), Lincoln (D-AR), Nelson (D-FL) and Snowe (R-ME).
The Democratic & Republican Platforms

2008 Democratic Party Platform

2008 Republican Party Platform

Both parties’ 2008 platforms include more discussion about global warming than they did in 2004. Both platforms focus on government providing incentives for new technological advances with regard to energy production. The Democratic Platform states that “government procurement policies [should be used] to incentivize domestic production of clean and renewable energy... [and the government should] invest in research and development, and deployment of renewable energy technologies.” The Republican Platform states that a “Climate Prize...honoraria of many millions of dollars...for technological developments that eliminate our need for gas-powered cars or abate atmospheric carbon.”

The Democratic Platform on global warming and energy policy relating to global warming places considerable emphasis on new “green technologies.” The platform pledges to “make America 50 percent more energy efficient by 2030,” “reduce oil consumption by at least 35 percent, or ten million barrels per day, by 2030,” “get at least 25 percent of our electricity from renewable resources by 2025,” and “implement a market-based cap and trade system to reduce carbon emissions by the amount scientists say is necessary to avoid catastrophic change.” Furthermore, the Democrats want “to fast-track investment of billions of dollars over the next ten years to establish a green energy sector that will create up to five million jobs.”

The Republican Platform's stances on global warming focus mainly on the transportation sector and the associated advances in technology. The Republicans want to make an impact by “minimizing transportation's impact on climate change,” and design “technology-driven, market-based solutions to decrease emissions, reduce excess greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere, increase energy efficiency, mitigate the impact of climate change where it occurs, and maximize any ancillary benefits climate change might offer for the economy.”
The Candidates on Energy and Climate Change

Senator Barack Obama’s website  

Senator John McCain’s website  
http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/da151a1c-733a-4dc1-9cd3-f9ea5caba1de.htm

Senator Obama would like a government investment of $150 billion over 10 years to create 5 million new jobs as well as giving car manufacturers $4 billion to retool their manufacturing plants in order to have one million plug-in hybrid cars on the road by 2015. He also couples these requirements with increasing the EPA standard mpg 4% a year and having 10% of energy being renewable by 2012 and 25% renewable by 2025 while building five new commercial scale clean coal plants.

Senator McCain wants to build "45 new [nuclear] plants by 2030," and invest "$2 Billion [in] clean coal annually. He would couple these proposals with a "cap-and-trade system" like that proposed in S. 280. Senator McCain would also expand the use of fossil fuels, specifically encouraging off-shore drilling, in order to reduce energy prices. Senator McCain's policies also include a lowering of taxes to encourage research and development of 'new technologies' and pressuring of manufacturers to manufacture 50 percent of their cars to be Flex-Fuel by 2012. He would further like to provide incentives for foreign governments, particularly India and China, to buy 'green technologies' from the United States.

Selected quotes from the candidates

“We have untapped oil reserves of at least 21 billion barrels... but a broad federal moratorium stands in the way of energy exploration and production.”  
- John McCain (September 28, 2008)

“Nuclear power is not only important as far as eliminating our dependence on foreign oil but it’s also responsibility as far as climate change is concerned and the issue I have been involved in for many, many years and I’m proud of the work of the work that I’ve done there along with President Clinton.”  
- John McCain (September 26, 2008 – Presidential Debate)

“We had an energy bill before the United States Senate. It was festooned with Christmas tree ornaments. It had all kinds of breaks for the oil companies, I mean, billions of dollars worth. I voted against it; Senator Obama voted for it.”  
- John McCain (September 26, 2008 – Presidential Debate)
"No one can be opposed to alternate energy."
- John McCain (September 26, 2008 – Presidential Debate)

"No challenge of energy is to be taken lightly, and least of all the need to avoid the consequences of global warming...“global warming presents a test of foresight, or political courage, and of the unselfish concern that one generation owes to the next.”"
- John McCain (September 25, 2008)

"Climate change, my friend, I have to tell you with all due respect, is real. It’s real and the question is how do we address it."
- John McCain (July 2008)

“We have to have energy independence, so I’ve put forward a plan to make sure that, in 10 years’ time, we have freed ourselves from dependence on Middle Eastern oil by increasing production at home, but most importantly by starting to invest in alternative energy, solar, wind, biodiesel, making sure that we’re developing the fuel-efficient cars of the future right here in the United States, in Ohio and Michigan, instead of Japan and South Korea.”
- Barack Obama (September 26, 2008 – Presidential Debate)

“And that means, yes, increasing domestic production and off-shore drilling, but we only have 3 percent of the world’s oil supplies and we use 25 percent of the world’s oil. So we can’t simply drill our way out of the problem...What we’re going to have to do is to approach it through alternative energy, like solar, and wind, and biodiesel, and, yes, nuclear energy, clean-coal technology...Over 26 years, Senator McCain voted 23 times against alternative energy, like solar, and wind, and biodiesel."
- Barack Obama (September 26, 2008 – Presidential Debate)

"I’m also going to create the jobs of the future by transforming our energy sector," he said. "We’ll tap our natural gas reserves; we’ll invest in clean coal technology. We’ll find ways to safely harness nuclear power. I’ll help the auto companies retool so that the fuel efficient cars of the future are built right here in America."
- Barack Obama (September 24, 2008)

"We are going to cap the greenhouse gases that cause global warming," Obama told one audience. "We are going to take some of the money that’s generated from fining polluters, and we are going to spend billions of dollars on solar, wind and biodiesel."
- Barack Obama (September 17, 2008)
The green bubble bursts

Amid the energy crisis, Democrats are losing the high ground on the environment to a GOP that is pushing oil drilling.

By Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger

September 30, 2008

As the election enters its endgame, Democrats and their environmental allies face a political challenge they could hardly have imagined just a few months ago. America’s growing dependence on fossil fuels, once viewed as a Democratic trump card held alongside the Iraq war and the deflating economy, has become a lodestone instead. Republicans stole the energy issue from Democrats by proposing expanded drilling -- particularly lifting bans on offshore oil drilling -- to bring down gasoline prices. Whereas Barack Obama told Americans to properly inflate their tires, Republicans at their convention gleefully chanted “Drill, baby, drill!” Obama’s point on conservation and efficiency was lost on an electorate eager for a solution to what they perceive as a supply crisis.

Democrats and greens ended up in this predicament because they believed their own press clippings -- or, perhaps more accurately, Al Gore’s. After the release of the documentary film and book “An Inconvenient Truth,” greens convinced themselves that U.S. public opinion on climate change had shifted dramatically, despite having no empirical evidence that was the case. In fact, public concern about global warming was about the same before the movie -- 65% told a Gallup poll in 2007 that global warming was a somewhat or very important concern in comparison to 63% in 1989. Global warming remains a low-priority issue, hovering near the bottom of the Pew Center for People and the Press’ top 20 priorities.

By contrast, public concern about gasoline and energy prices has shifted dramatically. While liberals and environmentalists were congratulating themselves on the triumph of climate science over fossil-fuel-funded ignorance, planning inauguration parties and writing legislation for the next Democratic president and Congress, gas prices became the second-highest concern after the economy, according to Gallup.

This summer, elite opinion ran headlong into American popular opinion. The train wreck happened in the Senate and went by the name of the Climate Security Act. That bill to cap U.S. greenhouse gas emissions would, by all accounts (even the authors’), increased gasoline and energy prices. Despite clear evidence that energy-price anxiety was rising, Democrats brought the bill to the Senate floor in June when gas prices were well over $4 a gallon in most of the country. Republicans were all too happy to join that fight.
Indeed, they so relished the opportunity to accuse Democrats of raising gasoline prices in the midst of an energy crisis, they insisted that the 500-page bill be read into the Senate record in its entirety in order to prolong the debate. Within days, Senate Democrats started jumping ship. Democratic leaders finally killed the debate to avert an embarrassing defeat, but by then they had handed Republicans a powerful political club.

Republicans have been bludgeoning Democrats with it ever since. They held dramatic "hearings," unauthorized by the Democratic leadership, on the need for expanded oil drilling to lower gas prices. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich quickly announced a book, "Drill Here, Drill Now, Pay Less," a movie and a petition drive. And Republican presidential candidate John McCain stopped making speeches about his support for bipartisan climate action, which is how he had started his campaign, and attacked Obama and congressional Democrats for opposing drilling instead.

On June 9, three days after the emissions cap-and-trade bill died in the Senate, Obama led McCain by eight points, according to Gallup. By June 24, the race was in a dead heat, a shift owed in no small part to Republicans battering Democrats on energy. Seeing the writing on the wall, Obama reversed his opposition to drilling in August, and congressional Democrats quickly followed suit.

But the damage has largely been done. In following greens, Democrats allowed McCain and Republicans to cast them as the party out of touch with the pocketbook concerns of middle-class Americans and captive to special interests that prioritize remote wilderness over economic prosperity.

In a tacit acknowledgment of their defeat, some green leaders, such as the Sierra Club's Carl Pope, have endorsed the Democrats' pro-drilling strategy. But few of them seem to realize the political implications. The most influential environmental groups in Washington -- the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Environmental Defense Fund -- are continuing to bet the farm on a strategy that relies on emissions limits and other regulations aimed at making fossil fuels more expensive in order to encourage conservation, efficiency and renewable energy. But with an economic recession likely, and energy prices sure to remain high for years to come thanks to expanding demand in China and other developing countries, any strategy predicated centrally on making fossil fuels more expensive is doomed to failure.

A better approach is to make clean energy cheap through technology innovation funded directly by the federal government. In contrast to raising energy prices, investing somewhere between $30 billion and $50 billion annually in technology R&D, infrastructure and transmission lines to bring power from windy and sunny places to cities is overwhelmingly popular with voters. Instead of embracing this big investment, greens and Democrats push instead for tiny tax credits for renewable energy -- nothing approaching the national commitment that's needed.

With just six weeks before the election, the bursting of the green bubble is a wake-up call for Democrats. Environmental groups, perpetually certain that a new ecological age is about to dawn in America, have_serially overestimated their strength and misread public opinion. Democrats must break once and for all from green orthodoxy that focuses primarily on making dirty energy more expensive and instead embrace a strategy to make clean energy cheap.

By continuing to hew to the green agenda, Democrats have not only put in jeopardy their chance of taking back the White House and growing their majority in Congress, they also have set back the prospects of establishing policies that might effectively address the climate and energy crises.
Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger are authors of "Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility" and co-founders of the Breakthrough Institute.
McCain, Obama deal puts limits on “town hall” debate

Lynn Sweet, Chicago Sun-Times, October 6, 2008

WASHINGTON -- Barack Obama and John McCain meet for a second debate Tuesday night with a "town hall" format, but a deal made between the camps limits the interaction the candidates will have with the undecided voters in the pool of questioners.

Almost every important detail about the debates -- three presidential and one vice presidential -- is governed by a 31-page "memorandum of understanding." It was collegially negotiated between the Obama and McCain camps and covers everything from how the candidates are addressed to the permissible camera shots.

The campaign pact was worked out by Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.) and attorney Robert Barnett, representing Obama, and Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Brett O’Donnell, a former debate coach at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, representing McCain.

Tuesday's match-up at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn., will be moderated by NBC's Tom Brokaw, with the questions to be culled from a group of 100 to 150 uncommitted likely voters in the audience and another one-third to come via the Internet. The Gallup Organization -- as in past debates like this -- has the job of making sure the questioners reflect the demographic makeup of the nation.

Brokaw selects the questions to ask from written queries submitted prior to the debate, according to the "contract."

An audience member will not be allowed to switch questions. Under the deal, the moderator may not ask followups or make comments. The person who asks the question will not be allowed a follow-up either, and his or her microphone will be turned off after the question is read. A camera shot will only be shown of the person asking -- not reacting.

While there will be director's chairs (with backs and foot rests), McCain and Obama will be allowed to stand -- but they can't roam past their "designated area" to be marked on the stage. McCain and Obama are not supposed to ask each other direct questions.

As in all the debates, the contenders cannot bring in notes, though they can take them once at the lectern.

Sarah Palin seemed to be looking at notes several times during her debate with Joe Biden. Each candidate is allowed to "take notes during the debate on the size, color and type of blank paper that each prefers."

And I'll dub this the "Lazio" rule.

A reason Rep. Rick Lazio (R-N.Y.) lost his Senate bid against Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2000 was when he walked from his lectern to Clinton and demanded that she sign a pledge not to take soft money, he looked like a bully. Anyway, in 2008, the candidates are banned during the debates from moving to the other side -- and from wielding proposed pledges.