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The Post-Bush Climate

Editorial

John McCain has been engaged in the fight against global warming for years, even at the expense of breaking with Republican orthodoxy and with President Bush on the issue. But it was still an important moment this week when Mr. McCain, the presumed Republican presidential nominee, decided to raise the profile of climate change in the 2008 campaign. We have clearly entered the post-Bush era of policy and politics on climate change. However this election turns out, the United States will have a president who supports mandatory cuts in greenhouse gases. It is possible to begin to believe in the prospect of serious Congressional action.

Politically, of course, Mr. McCain could also be helping himself. Endorsing an aggressive and potentially expensive effort to reduce carbon emissions will not win him friends on the right wing. But it allows him to make the case (at little cost given his well-known record on the issue) that he is not a Bush clone, even as he embraces the president's views on taxes, the federal judiciary and the war in Iraq.

Like the two Democratic candidates, Mr. McCain proposes a market-based "cap and trade" system in which power plants and other polluters could meet steadily stricter limits on gases like carbon dioxide — either by reducing emissions on their own or by buying credits from more efficient producers. His plan seeks to stabilize emissions in several years and then cut them by 60 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.

Some Democrats and environmentalists pounced quickly on the fact that Mr. McCain's goals are less ambitious than the 70 percent target contained in a bill sponsored by Senators Joseph Lieberman and John Warner that is expected to reach the Senate floor next month, or the 80 percent target proposed by Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

His plan differs in other respects, too. He decided at the last minute to delete from his speech a proposed tariff on countries like India and China that defy international agreements on emissions, partly because the tariff could be misconstrued as hostile to free trade, which Mr. McCain supports. The Senate bill contains such a provision. Meanwhile, Mr. McCain is much more enthusiastic, and in our view rightly so, about nuclear energy as a cleaner power source than the Senate sponsors or the two Democratic presidential candidates are.

At this stage, it would be a mistake to make too much of these differences, including the overall targets. With emissions continuing to rise, and the demand for energy expected to grow, any plan that calls for a big downward wrench in emissions will demand huge investments in cleaner ways of producing energy and far more fuel-efficient vehicles. Above all, it will require determined and courageous leadership from a president capable of conveying hard truths and asking a lot of the country.

Assuming that Mr. McCain and the two Democratic candidates mean what they say, on this issue at least, we seem assured of such a president.