

# Political Footprints on the Planet

OBAMA AND McCAIN'S PLATFORMS TOO SIMILAR

## EARTH SCOPE

*A new administration will* be upon us after the results are tallied for the November presidential elections. One way or another, the seating arrangements in the U.S. government will change, and a new set of political party affiliates will become entrenched for a four-year tour of duty at the helm of one of the world's most influential nations. In pondering this peaceful transfer of power, one of the U.S.A.'s most civilized behaviors, we might reflect on the impact of the 44th presidential election on the earth, and the current conditions and trajectories of that impact.

Those who are acute observers of the state of the planet will undoubtedly agree that regardless of who the victor is, the political footprint will be measurable and will affect us all. We might easily be distracted by economic chaos and Wall Street chicanery, or by military adventurism or by obdurate Russian leaders who appear to be singing "It's a rainy night in Georgia" while casting kerosene onto the international bonfire of vanities. However, the bottom line on preserving our biodiversity and coping with climate change remains paramount for our survival as a civilized species.

TIMOTHY W. FORESMAN, PhD is President of the International Centre for Remote Sensing Education. He has been director of United Nations Environment Programme's Division of Early Warning and Assessment (Nairobi, Kenya) and national program manager for NASA's Digital Earth (Washington, D.C.). He is editor of *The History of Geographic Information Systems*, 1998, Prentice Hall. Dr. Foresman was the Director-General for the 5th International Symposium on Digital Earth ([www.isde5.org](http://www.isde5.org)).

The old axiom that all politics is local is an apt focus for the fact that all environmental impacts are also local to someone, albeit shared with the rest of us one way or another. Therefore, we might take the opportunity to look at the two major political parties and—with careful attention to objectivity and non-partisanship—differentiate which policies, as espoused by the campaign platforms and Web pages, will likely leave the greatest ecological footprints in the coming years.

### ENERGY POLICY

Both parties' proclivities are to salve the citizens' fears of higher energy prices with a clever mix of more domestic oil drilling combined with increased nuclear energy, a minimum level of conservation, and investment into alternatives or renewables. While the McCain team has led the charge to "drill now," the Obama team has acquiesced to that strategy and also has offered the strategic oil reserve to further lower gas prices: blatant political pandering by both camps as they seek to protect the voting public from increased gasoline prices.

The oil industry's geophysicist, Dr. M. King Hubbert, calculated almost fifty years ago the fact that peak oil usage would impact the nation and world about right now. Experts increasingly accept the reality that we are heading on the down slope of this finite resource. Domestic oil drilling will not yield the results being claimed by both parties. We are running out of oil and the gas pump prices will continue to rise, while neither political candidate is willing to broadcast this new reality. Continued burning of oil will further damage our severely polluted atmosphere and exacerbate global warming. Neither campaign is willing to place this issue

against the stark reality of citizens' behaviors and chart a 180-degree shift in national policy that would demonstrate real change and real international leadership. Pain at the pump will be a legacy until renewables alter the equation.

The other hot topic endorsed by both campaigns is clean-coal technology. This is neither cheap nor truly clean. Mountain-top removal is but one startling dimension of any ambitious coal energy policy. Solar, hydroelectric, tidal electric, wind, non-cereal biomass, and geothermal are requisite priorities for an energy policy that does not further damage the Earth.

### GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Parity on the issue of climate change among the political campaigns is a given. Senator McCain has been a student of climate change science for over a decade and Senator Obama has been consistent in his aligned opinions. The two sides to the coin are (1) reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and (2) adaptation strategies for the impacts of global warming. Timely action on (1) may reduce the costly actions necessary for (2). Two quotes below highlight the critical nature of this issue and the stated urgency required to begin addressing our national and global challenges. Unfortunately, neither campaign appears ready to place the urgency of this issue front and center before the voting public, especially with our collective habit of watching feel-good news and entertainment.

*"There is still time to avoid the worst impacts of climate change if strong collective action starts now."*  
— *Stern Review, "The Economics of Climate Change," 2006.*

*“Humanity must act collectively and urgently to change course through leadership at all levels of society. There is no more time for delay.”*  
– Sigma Xi and United Nations Foundation Report, “Confronting Climate Change: Avoiding the Unmanageable and Managing the Unavoidable,” 2007.

“implement an economy-wide cap-and-trade program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions 80% by 2050.” Neither campaign represents fast-track action.

Neither camp appears to embrace the concept of ‘urgency’ on this topic, and both are inclined to follow the cap-and-trade system that was used for acid rain reduction to protect sensitive lakes and

#### SPACE TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM

What emphasis is being placed on our capacity for Earth observation at a time of climate change, biodiversity loss, over-fishing, and other impacts? McCain’s campaign offers to “ensure that space exploration is top priority and that the U.S. remains a leader,” to “maintain infrastructure investments in Earth-monitoring satellites and support systems.” Earth-monitoring satellites will compete with missions to the Moon and to Mars, as space exploration is top dog for these space enthusiasts. This does not bode well for Landsat data continuity missions.

Obama’s campaign articulates a comprehensive space exploration agenda, but it too holds no safety net for the competition between space explorers and Earth monitors and is loaded in favor of space exploration. Perhaps star gazers for both parties should join the rest of us to look at what is happening beneath their feet. After 50 years, NASA and the nation should figure out that Mission to Planet Earth is still the best idea it has ever had.

A host of other areas could, and should, be examined to see if Spaceship Earth will receive the kind of care and maintenance it must have to successfully continue our journey through the cosmos. These areas include: green jobs, smart growth, transportation, international treaties (e.g., Law of the Sea and Kyoto), U.N. support, economics/trade, weapons sales, and population control. For everyone’s benefit, let us hope that real change for the better does occur from the party that takes over leadership of the U.S. and that the winner accepts the challenge of saving the planet in an urgent and collaborative manner. ❧

Neither campaign is willing to place this issue against the stark reality of citizens’ behaviors and chart a 180-degree shift in national (energy) policy that would demonstrate **REAL CHANGE AND REAL INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP.** Pain at the pump will be a legacy until renewables alter the equation.

McCain’s camp suggests that a “cap and trade system would encompass electric power, transportation fuels, commercial business, and industrial business – sectors responsible for just below 90 percent of all emissions. The cap and trade system would allow for the *gradual* reduction of emissions [emphasis added].” Their goal for 2050 is 60% below 1990 Levels (66% below 2005 levels).

Obama’s camp suggests that they will

historic statues. Urgency would imply the kind of attention that paramedics face when deciding whether to stop bleeding or assist breathing on an accident victim. And because all aspects of urgent action are intricately tied to economic, social, and environmental dimensions of governance and international trade, it is unlikely that any political actions will be categorized as urgent. Meanwhile, the victim still lies on the ground.