

Adapting to Climate Change

The debate over global climate change is certain to play a role in this year's presidential election. But that debate is not what it used to be, and neither party seems fully attuned to the way it has been changing in the past few years.

First, there is now an overwhelming consensus among scientists that global warming is real and that human activity is a major contributing factor. Even just a few years ago, there was still considerable room for doubt on both fronts, but the evidence has continued to mount and even several prominent skeptics have been convinced. This doesn't mean that there is no longer a need for criticism of climate research; indeed, forceful criticism of climate science has done much to *improve* that science. And many important questions about climate change remain unanswered. But the scientific consensus is strong and growing stronger.

Second, the politics of the global warming debate have significantly shifted, too. Polling in this area is not definitive, but what polls there are indicate that the majority of Americans think global warming is real, and twice as many Americans believe it is due to human activity as believe it is a natural phenomenon. Al Gore's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, his having been awarded the Nobel Prize, and the past two years of scaremongering from a sympathetic press have surely gone far to persuade people of the reality of climate change—although not, the polls suggest, of the need for immediate political action.

Third, the last several years have seen a new emphasis—in the federal government, in the media, and especially in policy institutes—on the potential connections between climate change and global stability: disease, armed conflict, competition for resources, and other potential threats to international order and national security. Many of these concerns are just guesses based on imagined scenarios, and many, too, are preposterous. But they could come to have a very real political effect, especially if the public's image of global warming moves away from one of swimming polar bears to one of pestilence, famine, and bloodshed.

Other changes are on the horizon, too. Although the leading presidential candidates all support government regulation of greenhouse gas emissions, there is growing agreement among policy analysts that most regulatory proposals to mitigate global warming will have no real effect except to harm the economy. Instead, there is growing interest in encouraging technological innovation to reduce emissions, and also in *adaptation*, the notion that we should reduce our vulnerability to the effects of climate change. Adaptation proposals have long been "taboo" among environmental activists who consider adaptation an undesirable compromise. But if adaptation grows more prominent, the political map on climate change will likely have to be redrawn. Candidates in this year's election should pay attention to that possibility. It offers them an opportunity for a reasonable approach to climate change that demands neither a denial of the facts nor economic suicide.