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## Republicans vs. the environment

### *Ignoring science and forgetting their history*

Steve Chapman

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Kicking off her recent bus tour, Sarah Palin attended a motorcycle rally and took a deep breath. "I love that smell of the emissions," she exulted.

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Her comment reflected a common attitude in the Republican Party: Exhaust fumes are as American as apple pie. Cool kids don't need clean air. Arctic ice is overrated.

Republicans like Palin often compete to see who can sound most indifferent to the environment. So someone taking a different tack stands out. Mitt Romney got grief from Rush Limbaugh and others for saying, "I believe the world is getting warmer, and I believe that humans have contributed to that."

This is like noticing that bananas are yellow. Mainstream scientists have said the same thing for a long time. But the consensus has spread.

Bjorn Lomborg, a conservative hero for his 2001 book "The Skeptical Environmentalist," now writes: "We have long moved on from any mainstream disagreements about the science of climate change. The crucial, relevant conversation of today is about what to do about climate change."

In their book "Climate of Extremes," published by the libertarian Cato Institute, scientists Patrick Michaels and Robert Balling Jr. assail various plans to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. But they admit: "Humans are implicated in the planetary warming that began around 1975. Greenhouse gases are likely to be one cause, probably a considerable one ..."

Most GOP candidates, however, don't care. Rick Santorum dismisses such claims as "junk science." Michele Bachmann derides the notion that carbon dioxide could be harmful. Tim Pawlenty's campaign declined to answer when asked if he agrees with Romney.

During last year's campaign, the National Journal reported, "Of the 20 serious GOP Senate challengers who have taken a position, 19 have declared that the science of climate change is inconclusive or flat-out incorrect." (The exception: Mark Kirk of Illinois.)

Conservatives fear liberals will use climate change to justify heavy-handed intrusive regulation and wasteful subsidies, and they are right to worry. But that's no excuse for pretending global warming is a myth or refusing

to do anything about it. It's an argument for devising cost-effective, market-based remedies that minimize bureaucratic control.

If today's Republican attitude had prevailed four decades ago, Americans would not have such vital measures as the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act. Then, many people worried that environmentalism would strangle economic growth and personal freedom. But both have survived and even flourished.

Conservatives once understood that corporations are not entitled to foul the environment, any more than individuals have the right to dump garbage in the street.

Barry Goldwater, the 1964 GOP presidential nominee, wrote, "When pollution is found, it should be halted at the source, even if this requires stringent government action." As governor of California, Ronald Reagan signed major environmental bills and called for "all-out war against the debauching of the environment."

But modern Republicans think the environment is big enough to take care of itself. They decried President Barack Obama's moratorium on new deepwater drilling, which was imposed to prevent a repeat of last year's catastrophic spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Bush administration gave a green light to mountaintop coal mining, which it admitted would mean burying more than 700 miles of rivers in debris. They see preventing pollution as an unaffordable luxury.

But that's intellectually untenable and politically dangerous. What's more, the GOP doesn't have to surrender its principles to confront environmental reality. There is plenty of room for disagreement, for instance, about how to combat global warming.

The method most congenial to personal and economic freedom is a carbon tax. Instead of putting the government behind favored forms of energy, as the administration likes to do, it would create strong incentives for people to find their own ways to reduce emissions.

It would achieve maximum benefits at minimum cost. It could be revenue-neutral, if the receipts were used to pay for other tax cuts.

A carbon tax is hardly a liberal idea. Among its proponents are Gregory Mankiw, who headed the Council of Economic Advisers under President George W. Bush, and Douglas Holtz-Eakin, John McCain's chief economist during his presidential campaign. But Republican politicians have no interest.

During hard economic times, that approach may work. But at some point, voters will conclude that global warming and other environmental problems demand solutions. And Republicans will be left wondering why they didn't come up with any.

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