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ENVIRONMENTALISTS, sadly, did not feature among the many categories of American voters identified in exit polls, dissected by psephologists and psychoanalysed in election-night broadcasts. But there can be little doubt that the presidential candidate who appealed most to tree-huggers won.

Although John McCain stands out among Republicans for his green principles, Barack Obama goes further. He wants America to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to 80% below the level of 1990 by 2050—a bigger cut than Mr McCain proposed. He wants to spend \$150 billion overhauling America's energy system. He is keen on windmills, lukewarm about nuclear plants and downright hostile to coal and oil. His energy and climate platform reads like a green advocacy group's manifesto.



So will the new president transform America from eco-pariah to green crusader? That certainly seems to be his intention. On claiming the Democratic nomination in June, he grandly declared, "This was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal."

But the planet is not out of the woods yet, for three reasons. The first is Congress. Before Mr Obama can sign a bill curbing emissions, it will have to pass one; before he can spend billions on green causes, it will have to provide the funds. Many observers point to the large majorities that Democrats won in both houses of Congress as an indication that Mr Obama should have no problem turning his environmental ideals into law. But the Republicans are likely to have enough votes in the Senate to delay indefinitely bills they don't like. They certainly have enough to block an international climate treaty that is not to their liking. Anyway, many of the newly elected Democrats are moderates from the heartlands, not coastal liberals who accept the need to stop climate change as an article of faith. And the Senate has never been known for party discipline.

The foremost thought in the minds of legislators wavering over green bills will be the second big obstacle to Mr Obama's green ambitions: the state of the economy. The president-elect's newly appointed chief-of-staff, Rahm Emanuel, insists that the grim outlook is reason to press rather than postpone the green agenda: "You don't ever want a crisis to go to waste; it's an opportunity to do important things that you would otherwise avoid." The notion that government spending on greenery will help lift America out of recession has become faddish. But there is little evidence to support it.

To have a big impact on America's emissions, Congress will either have to spend a lot of money or dramatically increase the price of fossil fuels. The first option will add to an already enormous deficit; the

second is tantamount to raising taxes. So many congressmen will see the first option as unaffordable in a fiscal sense, and the second as unaffordable in a political one. Mr Obama may decide that it will be easier to fix the economy first and worry about greenery later.

That decision, in turn, will hinge on the third obstacle: the voters themselves. As the economy soured, the environment fell down the rankings of Americans' concerns—and it was never that high in the first place. On the whole, people tell pollsters that they worry about global warming and want to preserve the environment. But they are also keen for the price of petrol to fall. That contradiction suggests that most Americans have not thought through exactly how far they are prepared to go to stop climate change. Woe betide the politician who over-estimates their enthusiasm.

Forcing polluters to pay for the damage they do is a good idea. But in the case of greenhouse gases, the polluters are not a few renegade corporations, but the mass of America's citizens. If Mr Obama gets his way, they will have to start paying for something they used to be able to do without charge: sullyng the atmosphere. Neither he nor most other politicians have been honest about that. In fact, they are busily promoting the opposite idea—that greenery provides a painless way out of the economic doldrums. One way or another, that could prove a costly deception.

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