Neglected issues on the campaign trail will confront the next president - S...

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WASHINGTON — Soon after he becomes president, Barack Obama or John McCain will face tough decisions on immigration, climate change, the detention and interrogation of suspected terrorists, and a host of other issues.

But with few exceptions, those issues have been off the radar screen of the presidential campaign. You can find some details on the candidates' positions on their Web sites. Just don't expect to hear much about them in the waning days of the race.

It's the economy

With the economic downturn dominating all else, the candidates for weeks have been reluctant to talk about difficult, complex questions like how to deal with 12 million undocumented immigrants, or how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions without disrupting a teetering economy.

"Immigration is a complicated, emotional issue, and you lose voters whatever you say," said Audrey Singer, who studies the issue at the Brookings Institution. There's a "fact-free zone around immigration" at this point in the campaign, she said.

Even though Obama and McCain both support a comprehensive plan that would provide a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, they say little about it except in Spanish-language ads in which they blame each other for the demise of an immigration bill last year.

Immigration legislation may be difficult to revive, but the next president must deal with a detention system for immigrants that has been criticized for abuses, and he will have to decide whether to continue controversial workplace raids around the country.

'Serious problems'

"We have serious problems, and we need better administration of that system," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren, the San Jose Democrat who chairs the House immigration subcommittee. "We have too many people in custody who don't need to be in custody."

On climate change, both candidates in principle favor a complex cap and trade system that would limit greenhouse gas emissions from all sources and set up a market in pollution credits that would encourage utilities, for example, to switch to renewable sources of energy.

This year the Senate backed away from a comprehensive bill to tackle climate change, and the Bush administration has opposed mandatory controls. But advocates on climate change say the issue is still urgent.

"The economy has swallowed everything in the campaign, and it's naïve to think that any other issue will get marquee billing," said Tony Kreindler of the Environmental Defense Fund.

Obama and McCain have plans to boost investment in renewable fuels, but they shy away from commitments on a timetable to enact emissions controls. One environmental group, 350.org, has gathered 40,000 signatures on a petition urging the next president to attend a U.N. meeting in December in Poland to lay the groundwork for an international treaty.
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