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Neglected issues on the campaign trail will confront the next president

By Frank Davies
Mercury News Washington Bureau
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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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Neither candidate has made such a commitment, said Jamie Henn, spokesman for the organization.

Interrogation issue

Another issue that received lots of attention in the past four years, but not much on the campaign trail, is how to detain and interrogate suspects in the war on terror. The Bush administration greatly expanded executive powers in this area by setting up secret detention centers, seeking to eliminate prisoners' rights and allowing treatment regarded as torture under international law.

Both candidates have deplored torture, but McCain went along with Bush's plans to severely limit detainees' rights. McCain and Obama have pledged to close the Guantanamo prison, but have not been specific on what they would do with several hundred prisoners held there.

"I'm disappointed but not surprised that these issues have not been aired in the campaign," said Michael Posner, president of Human Rights First. He favors a "9/11-style commission" to investigate the decisions and practices of the Bush administration, but neither candidate has agreed to that idea.

High court

One big decision the next president will likely make is to appoint at least one new justice to the Supreme Court. That decision could tip the balance on a court closely divided on abortion rights and other controversies.

Both candidates have mentioned the importance of that decision, and the subject came up at the final debate, but polls show it registers low on the concerns of most voters.

David Van Taylor, a filmmaker, said voters should be paying more attention to the high court. His documentary on how confirmation battles were waged over John Roberts, Harriet Miers and Samuel Alito, titled "Advise & Dissent," will be released next year, but he gave a preview showing last week in Washington.

"The message is clear," he told several hundred viewers. "Elections matter. Your vote really counts on what kind of court you get."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Both campaigns have position papers on immigration, climate change and other issues. Check www.barackobama.com and www.johnmccain.com. Another site, www.procon.org, shows candidates' views on a wide variety of issues.

Contact Frank Davies at fdavies@mercurynews.com or (202) 662-8921.

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