

The McCain-Obama Mismatch on Urban Policy

by Tom Angotti

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How do John McCain and Barack Obama compare on urban policy and what will it mean for New York and other large cities? Obama's campaign has a detailed set of [principles and proposals](#) that differ markedly from previous Democratic policy. McCain, on the other hand, has no explicit policy for cities, but several basic concepts are implicit in his platform, and some of his energy and environmental proposals are similar to Obama's.

Obama Goes From City to Metropolis

Unlike the Carter and Clinton administrations, which put forth (modest) policies to aid central cities like New York, the Obama campaign instead deals with metropolitan regions as a whole. This represents a major break with Democratic Party policy since the civil rights era. The War on Poverty and Model Cities programs focused federal resources on central cities, while the recommendations of the 1968 [Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders](#) (the Kerner Commission) further called attention to the [neglect of central cities](#).

After World War II, the nation's suburbs grew dramatically, and today some 80 percent of the U.S. population lives in large metropolitan regions. Most of that population is in suburbs, with central cities representing the smaller part of these giant regions. While suburbanites may not think of themselves as "urban," they are now part of a much larger urbanized area that may be lower in density than the central city but bears little resemblance to a small town or rural fringe.

Over the last two decades, presidents of both parties have shifted the focus of national urban policy from central cities to suburbs. Congress gained a suburban majority, and the nation's de facto urban policy became the promotion of home ownership, particularly in newly urbanizing regions. Home ownership levels increased, though only marginally (and have now begun to decline as a result of the mortgage crisis). But we now know that owning a home by itself does not necessarily mean progress for individuals or households, especially if homeowners resort to sub-prime mortgages because of their low incomes or redlining.

A far cry from the apocryphal call for cities to "drop dead" (widely [attributed](#) to a Republican president), the Obama platform explicitly states that cities should be seen not as the problem but as the solution. But he means the metropolitan regions, not the central cities. With this in mind, his specific solutions include: creation of a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank funded to the tune of \$10 billion over 10 years; regional clusters for economic innovation; business incubators; workforce training; and green technology and green jobs.

Obama's platform still offers something for the older central cities. In housing and community development, areas of considerable concern to central cities like New York, Obama would restore rent subsidies and public housing operating funds that were cut under the George W. Bush administration - actions that might help the [New York City Housing Authority balance its budget](#) and prevent privatization. He would restore and increase [Community Development Block Grant](#) funding and create 20 "Promise Neighborhoods" that comprehensively deal with poverty. The Obama platform supports homeland security and community policing but requires police to be attentive to issues of accountability and brutality. Broader economic policies such as increasing the [minimum wage](#) and [Earned Income Tax Credit](#) are also listed as part of Obama's urban policy.

Obama addresses the "livability of cities"-- particularly public health and environmental concerns -- by calling for efforts to combat inefficient low-density suburban sprawl through "smart growth" around higher density urban centers. Smart growth has been a major goal of urban planning professionals in the nation.

"Our communities will better serve all of their residents," says the Obama campaign, "if we are able to leave our cars, to walk, bicycle and access other transportation alternatives." This could lead to federal support for recent efforts by the New York City Department of Transportation to improve the bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. In the Senate, Obama sponsored the [Healthy Places Act](#) requiring federal agencies to evaluate the health impacts of urban policies.

McCain on Housing, Energy and the Environment

Perhaps the closest that [John McCain](#) comes to an urban policy is his [Homeownership Resurgence Plan](#). In the second presidential debate McCain called for government to buy up and renegotiate fixed-rate mortgages for households struggling to meet their monthly payments. (Obama counters that, under the recent bailout legislation, the Treasury Department already has the ability to do this

Mortgage rescue would be good news for New York City neighborhoods facing exceptionally high rates of [foreclosure](#). However, McCain's plan has a loophole that could affect its ability to rescue victims of [predatory lenders](#) that were particularly active in places like New York. The McCain plan requires beneficiaries to "prove their credit worthiness at the time of their original loan" and to have made a down payment. Predatory lenders have been especially active in minority neighborhoods in central cities, where they actively went after borrowers who did not make enough to pay their inflated mortgage and purposely confused or lied to them about the long-term costs and terms of the mortgages.

McCain's energy policies could help improve the environment in cities like New York. He promotes the development of hybrid and zero-emission vehicles, energy efficiency in government buildings, retrofitting private homes for energy efficiency and green jobs. He advocates the development of alternative fuels, including nuclear, biofuels and clean coal.

While there are some important differences between the two candidates on energy and environment, Obama also supports alternative fuels. Both candidates' policies would likely help reduce pollution from transportation in urban areas. However, to the extent that their programs emphasize use of alternative fuels and encourage auto use, they could exacerbate global warming and other long-term problems related to auto dependency in metropolitan regions. Obama mentions transportation alternatives, but it remains to be seen whether this would go beyond the current token support by federal, state and local governments for reducing auto use, such as striped bicycle lanes instead of protected lanes, or building more sidewalks in the suburbs that are rarely used.

Whither HUD?

Obama's platform includes two administrative changes aimed at implementing his urban proposals. First, he would create a White House Office on Urban Policy that would report directly to the president. And he would revive the federal agency in charge of housing and urban policy - the [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#). President Lyndon Johnson made HUD a cabinet-level agency in 1965, but President Richard Nixon reduced the agency's responsibilities and Ronald Reagan severely cut the agency's budget. Most support for the direct construction of new low-income housing ended in the 1980s.

When Republicans led by Newt Gingrich controlled the House of Representatives in the 1990s, they came close to abolishing HUD as a Cabinet-level agency. It survived to implement the [HOPE VI](#) program, which subsidized the demolition of public housing and, in the most dramatic case, led to the abandonment of public housing tenants in New Orleans after Katrina. Since the 1980s, HUD has been wracked by several corruption scandals. Obama pledges to restore HUD programs "to their original purpose" - though he has not made it entirely clear what he means by that.

Neither of the two candidates has explicitly acknowledged the failure of the current urban policy that single-mindedly promotes homeownership. But if history is not to repeat itself, both parties might do well to explicitly acknowledge the needs and problems of urban renters - that means the majority of New Yorkers -- and redefine the "American Dream" as a stable job, a rent-controlled apartment and a safe, walkable *urban* environment.

See: [McCain and Obama: Who's Best For the Cities?](#) By Neil Pierce and [On Urban Issues, Obama, McCain are True to Their Parties](#)

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