As the American public weighs the personalities, the politics, the policies, and the passions of this election year, there is one area where their differences could not be more clear, the commitment to livable communities and a cleaner environment. In the long run, there may be no area where the decisions are more significant.

The forces of environmental degradation will not be easy to reverse. Cleaning up our waterways and dealing with the consequences of unplanned growth and sprawl may take decades. Reversing global warming may take thousands of years. We have no time to waste.

Luckily for the American public, Al Gore and Joe Lieberman have the very highest rating from the people whose job it is to advocate for and monitor congressional performance on the environment.

One does not have to be merely concerned about the stated environmental policies and positions of a Bush/Cheney administration, like drilling in the Arctic Wilderness Reserve or reversing monument status protections for some of our national treasures.

The Republican ticket also has an environmental record. Dick Cheney, in his 12 years in this Chamber, compiled one of the worst environmental voting records. Governor Bush, after two terms leading the State of Texas, has failed to lead his State from the bottom ranks in air and water quality. His voluntary approach for polluting industries out of compliance with air quality standards has resulted in only 30 of 461 companies stepping forward, raising questions about both his judgment and his commitment to the environment.

Indeed, sad as his performance has been, it is the lack of perception and passion that I find most disturbing. He seems unaware of the Texas environmental problems. Where is his outrage and his concern that, under his leadership, Houston has become the city in the country with the worst air quality? This environmental indifference, if combined with that of the Republican leadership in this Congress, could be disastrous.

The Clinton/Gore administration has been perhaps the most environmentally sensitive in

history, but progress has been slowed not just by the complexity of today's environmental problems but by highly organized special interests and, sadly, by a Republican-controlled Congress that has been one of the least sensitive in history.

For example, since the Gingrich revolution, the EPA has been under continuous assault and a series of destructive riders have made the budget process an ordeal every single year for the environment.

Bipartisan alliances to protect the environment should be the rule, and we have seen them on this floor. I salute the work of the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. Shuster) and the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. Oberstar) with TEA-21, keeping the framework in place, of the gentleman from Alaska] (Mr. Young) and the gentleman from California (Mr. George Miller) on CARA, with the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. Bereuter) working with me on flood insurance reform. But these, sadly, have been the rare exception.

The leader of the other body not only proclaims brownfields reform to be off-limits but actually puts this incredible pledge in writing. In the House, the majority leader and the majority whip have an environmental voting record of zero from the League of Conservation Voters.

We should also consider the hidden environmental issue of this election, that of judicial appointments. The third branch of government, the judiciary, has at times played a key role in protecting the environment by requiring the enforcement of environmental laws, preventing overreaching by public and private parties. Governor Bush has voiced enthusiasm for judges in the mold of Scalia and Thomas. Judicial appointments along these lines could not only hamstring an administration for years but could cripple environmental enforcement for a generation.

There are some who suggest there is no difference between the Republicans and the Democrats in this election. When it comes to the environment, the reality is stark. The Democrats have a positive record of support and accomplishment, of sympathy and passion for the environment. The Republican ticket offers indifferent voting record, cursory performance in office, and advocacy of dangerous, even reckless, environmental policies.

Our air, the water, the landscape, our precious natural resources do not have the time to

survive benign neglect, malicious indifference, let alone active assault.

There is a huge difference, perhaps more than any other issue, that of the environment. The stakes for the environment could not be higher, and the public should give it the attention that it deserves.