The Waxman-Markey bill narrowly passed the House yesterday. This is a historic achievement.

As Cara reported yesterday, there are some real qualms about whether the bill is strong enough — and particularly about its heavy reliance on offsets. Environmentalists have never liked offsets, partly because they lessen the technology-forcing effect of emissions controls and partly because enforcement and monitoring can be problematic.

Waxman-Markey certainly isn't the ideal climate legislation, and the qualms about the bill are understandable. But I think that the concerns about the bill are not fundamental — and more importantly, it's critical to start the country moving in the right direction. All of the same arguments could have been used against the Kyoto Protocol — and if they had prevailed, it's clear that we wouldn't have a stronger international agreement today; we'd have no international agrement at all.

Both of the concerns about Waxman-Markey are genuine but they need to be kept in perspective. The technology-forcing point is true but really points to the need for other steps in addition to cap-and-trade. There is considerable doubt about the ability of cap-and-trade regimes to produce technological innovation. We will need other measures, including research funding and sector-based mandates such as renewable energy portfolios, to produce the kind of technological changes that we need.

The concerns about measuring and enforcing offsets are genuine (and increased because of Waxman-Markey's reliance on USDA to do the job.) But those problems aren't insurmountable either. Instead of complaining about reliance on offsets or the inclusion of USDA, we need to think about how to improve the offset program.

Moving this bill forward will help us in dealing with China by proving that we are serious about the issue. It will also help with the public by showing that emissions controls aren't the economic disaster portrayed by Republicans.

In short, although I would be happier if the bill were stronger, I think it's a serious mistake to let the desire for a stronger bill distract us from the importance of this legislative victory. The House leadership and the White House deserve great credit for getting us this far. Now, it's time for the Senate to act.