Environmental issues haven't been on the front page much recently, and on the whole I think that's a good thing. The fact is that budget issues, the race for the Republican presidential nomination, and Medicare have pushed the environment out of the spotlight. Predictions about politics are always hazardous and seem to be getting even less reliable lately. However, it seems to me that the window for making major anti-regulatory changes in Congress may be closing.

The problem, from the anti-regulatory perspective, is limited bandwidth. Since the House has no need for bargaining or deliberation when it's under firm one-party control, it's no problem to move anti-regulatory measures there. But the Senate is a different matter. Passing any thing through the Senate is a demanding and difficult process. That makes it hard to do more than one big thing at a time, as we saw when climate legislation had to take the back seat to health care reform. Moreover, the budget process seems to be increasing polarization, making it even harder to get anything passed.

Public attention is also limited. The GOP has clearly decided to prioritize the budget over all other issues. We are facing a possible debt default right now, and even if we get past that, we'll have plenty of opportunities for dramatic budget confrontations coming up in the future. The nomination process is also likely to offer lots of drama, especially as the GOP race heats up. It's going to be very hard for House committee chairs to get any attention for their hearings on environmental issues.

I wouldn't rule out the possibility that the House might have some success with anti-environmental riders, but so far that strategy hasn't been notably successful. Budget cuts are likely to happen, and those may impair regulation, but probably no more than other government functions.

From the point of view of business — or at least, the parts of the business world who would like weaker pollution regulations and fewer protections for public lands — this should all sound familiar. Those segments of the business world tend to favor the Republicans, but their issues often get lower priority than social issues or fiscal matters. The result is that business gets less in the way of tangible results than they might if deregulation was the number one priority of the party.