



Why the US Political System Is Unable to React to Peak Oil: Institutions

Posted by [Prof. Goose](#) on February 16, 2006 - 11:39am

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I've been thinking a lot since the open thread Tuesday about political change in the United States, as well as the Deffeyes date set a couple of posts down. Many of us would argue that the evidence is there, "why isn't the government reacting?"

I thought I would bring some pieces of the political puzzle together into a post on why I believe the US, at least at the federal level, will be overly slow to react to the problems of peak oil in both the short and long term. This is the first piece in a series of a few, the first has to do with the institutions of American government. More of my argument under the fold...

I think it is safe to say that we can assume politicians are self-interested actors, wishing to keep their job and doing whatever they can, most of the time within reason, to keep it.

These politicians, once holding power, play the political game inside a set of institutions. These institutions are basically sets of rules and norms that produce public policy, the outputs of government.

It is important to understand that only those politicians in "safe" districts (where the MoC (Member of Congress) gets a large percentage (usually defined as over 55%) of the vote (an increasingly common occurrence with the use of GIS tools to draw lines come redistricting time) with no ambitions for higher office *take real political risks* and try to change the system (e.g., Roscoe Bartlett, but this is even more true of safe members of the party out of power).

The institutions (and the rules governing the "game" of politics) of the United States incentivize this behavior, because they were designed from the founding of the country to be deliberative and slow, if not glacial; they were designed to do all they can to perpetuate the status quo. I think understanding the American government's response to peak oil or any crisis requires an understanding of the theory behind the institutions, an analysis of why they are they way they are and what it will take for them to actually change.

Remember that the US does not have a "social" (like many in Europe) democracy, we have a "liberal" democracy. Part of why this distinction exists has to do with institutions (two party/separation of powers/presidential system) that are set up to not be at all reactive but overly slow to change and deliberative.

Separation of powers is an important component that you have heard of many times, I am sure. What it means is that power in America is distributed across many actors or sets of actors, and those actors often hold responsibilities and interests set in opposition by the rules of the game. The president's roles and constituencies in our politics are quite different from those of Congress

or the courts; even though we can say that the Republican Party has basic control of the three branches of government, they do not march in lockstep; this will especially be the case if there are electoral gains made by the Democrats in 2006.

Take Britain for example, which has a "responsible party" socially democratic government with a different set of rules and institutions. The Labour Party holds power there. The prime minister, Tony Blair, (caveat: there's more to this story, but this is the simple explanation.) was elected by his party to be the prime minister of parliament, not by the populace like in our system.

The party's ability to be "responsible" (staying on the same page legislatively) is even more important in the British case; for instance, if the Labour Party ever actually loses an important (called a "party" vote) parliamentary vote, then elections would usually not be far behind. This can happen in many parliamentary systems quite quickly.

Still the point is that executive and legislative power are more consolidated in Britain than in the US, meaning that there is more incentive for the sides to maintain "responsibility" and stay on the same partisan page.

Let's say we lived in a parliamentary/social democracy here in the US, pretending the rules of the game were different. Let's also imagine that the party is in control of (responsible for) government and policy and it screws up. With recent salient circumstances in the US, we could see how new elections could have been called countless numbers of times over the past few years and a change of leadership would have resulted. Instead, here in the US, we have a predictable election cycle that allows for manipulation of resources and "the game," which allows those in office to maintain office; we call this the "incumbency" advantage. (Let's also be clear, this is not an anti-Bush rant, the same thing could have happened in 1978 or 1994, where power would have changed hand completely between the party in power and the out-party...the point is that change could/should have happened and did not).

Also, over 93% of incumbents in the House win reelection with a little lower proportion in the Senate, meaning new people with new ideas rarely make into the legislature, let alone hold positions of power.

here's wikis on presidential and parliamentary systems for contrast:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presidential_system

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliamentary>

The other part of the equation that people need to understand is that our two party system is part of the problem and is likely to never change. For the most part, that too is constructed because of the way our institutions are set up, because many of our elections only have one winner (as opposed to a parliamentary system, where if you get a percentage of the vote, you are assured representation), therefore it incentivizes third, fourth, and fifth place actors, if they want power, to work with the loser of the election...over time that sorts itself out into the ideologically coherent, but polarized party system that we have presently. Here's a wiki with more on why we have a two party system...

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two_party_system

Uncommon, unconventional ideas and ideologies remain non-influential, so policies and governments do not change rapidly. (Others dispute whether such innate conservatism provides advantages. While smaller parties find this exceptionally frustrating, proponents of the two-party system suggest that it enhances stability while eventually

(These systems all turn out this way because of Duverger's Law (my field's only "law"...and it ain't really a law: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duverger%27s_law)

In my courses, I often describe the social democracy/parliamentary system as an ideological speedboat, it can react, zigging and zagging back and forth quickly, but it can also flip over and kill you.

I describe the our presidential/two party/first past the post system as a very very large cruise ship. It is overly stable.

However, I think we also all have heard of the event/seen the movie where the crewman saw the iceberg, threw the wheel hard over, and the ship didn't turn in time.

Simply put, both systems have weaknesses, but one is more responsive than the other.

In better words, my point is that those same institutions that have maintained the stability of the United States over the times of plenty are exactly the institutions that will keep us from reacting, as a country, in time to avoid most catastrophes. The federal systems are not designed to be proactive, as at the founding of the country, that's not what they wanted. At least that's my feel for it.

This is why most of the efforts to react to peak oil are occurring at local levels of government (e.g., relocalization movements, etc.) or from the grass roots. However, those groups rarely have the power to shift resources or incentivize behaviors to the scale that the federal government could, if it would just react.

We need to reorganize our political culture at the federal level; but in order to do that, we would need a new Constitution, a new set of rules, but that would require a public outcry or political instability heretofore unseen in the US, as well as a lot of time to implement.

As I said somewhere else already today, I didn't see anyone outside with a sandwich board today clamoring for change...so obviously, we ain't there yet.

In my next post on this, I will discuss another set of actors, the linkages between the mass politic and these institutions that further clog the system of change and maintain the status quo.

(some of this piece comes from the comments I made in the Tuesday open thread, but I've refined it a bit)



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