

Is America's oil age already waning?

October 17 2005

The United States is at a crossroads: Americans want more oil, but they are split on whether it's worth the international political cost or the environmental damage. The situation seems hopeless, unless you're a geologically cross-trained political scientist, that is. Then the oil-politics paradox hints at a time of rapid change and innovation.

That's what it is beginning to look like to Karen McCurdy, a political scientist at Georgia Southern University who is applying geological concepts of change to political science. She's coming up with a fertile way to study and learn about the connections among oil, politics, and democracy. McCurdy presented some of her geological/political science research and some inklings of what it may say about the past and the future on Sunday, 16 October, at the annual meeting of the Geological Society of America in Salt Lake City.

Political scientists have traditionally viewed government and political systems in terms of how they stabilize and keep working. But what if they are really more like the ground under our feet and the history of life: prone to long periods of relative equilibrium and punctuated by shorter periods of rapid and dramatic change? McCurdy and others are asking just this question and examining policy in 50-100 year ranges instead of the more typical 5-20 year ranges.

"There's this fascination with stability," says McCurdy, referring to the previous generation of political scientists. That fascination made it nearly impossible for political scientists to explain gradual and rapid changes that spring out of unstable systems and slow cultural changes –

all of which have been seen in the 20th century and today.

Even the language of political science has trouble describing instability. Which is why you don't usually hear political scientists using physical science terms like "phase transition" although "punctuated equilibria" was recently suggested by others working on questions of policy agenda-setting, says McCurdy.

Today's oil-divided America has evolved over many decades, McCurdy explains. Thirty years ago it was said that "Oil doesn't have any enemies on Capitol Hill." That very oil-friendly period had itself taken decades to evolve, beginning with the creation of the oil industry in the early 1900s and strengthened by such things as the 1913 advent of the Oil Depletion Allowance – a big tax break for oil producers – and the opening of the California oil fields in 1921. These and other events contributed to the growing political clout of oil in America and the creation in Congress of what political scientists call a policy monopoly.

But then, in the later half of the 20th century, came the Santa Barbara oil spill, the Arab Oil Embargo, the Alaska Pipeline controversy, the Exxon Valdez oil spill and now the controversy over drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. At the same time western and southern populations boomed and many new congressional districts popped up, each filled with prosperous suburban and exurban voters who voted differently than the farmers in the vast old agricultural, mining, and timber districts.

Yet we still have the Oil Depletion Allowance and oil still drives policy in America.

"It takes a lot to break in and change the policy," says McCurdy explaining the nature of policy monopolies work. "It takes amazingly little energy to not change policy."

What McCurdy now wants to do is gather more data about the voting within congressional districts and congressional committees and see how well it reflects public oil policy. If it follows the pattern of other policy shifts over the years, there might be a lag time of decades between what voters want and when policies actually shift – essentially a generational change at the top.

Eventually, McCurdy hopes to gain insight into what is happening today and whether we are truly at a "phase transition" in American oil policy. If the change is happening, we will be moving from a predictable status quo to more volatile policy situation in which entirely new policies can become established. "Volatility is not bad," McCurdy points out, "it's just unpredictable."

Source: Geological Society of America

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