Partisan politics fuels energy debate

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America's energy policy took center stage at a special congressional debate hosted by the Freeman School's Entergy-Tulane Energy Institute, but despite the organizers' goal of fostering a constructive dialog between parties, the participants in large part stuck to familiar partisan scripts.

"America is addicted to oil, but instead of developing new energy sources, the Republicans are demanding more drilling," proclaimed Rep. Bart Stupak (D-Mich). "We can't drill our way out of high prices. We need to develop alternative energy sources beyond drilling to reduce energy prices and provide a long-term solution."

"We depend on oil, gas, coal, wind, hydro and nuclear," countered Rep. Denny Rehberg (R-Mont.). "Which of these is the answer to the energy challenge? All of the above and more. Leave no stone unturned."

The debate, which took place on July 28 in the Lavin-Bernick Center for University Life, was part of "Congress Debates," a series of bipartisan national policy discussions sponsored by the House Democratic Caucus, the House Republican Conference, the Democratic Leadership Council and the Congressional Institute. Joining Stupak and Rehberg in debating the nation's energy policy were Reps. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.), Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.), Jay Inslee (D-Wash.), Hilda Solis (D-Calif.), Fred Upton (R-Mich.) and Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.). The event was moderated by Jeanne Cummings of politico.com.

Throughout the debate, Democrats argued in favor of increasing funding for alternative and renewable energy, cracking down on excessive energy speculation, and improving fuel efficiency standards. The Democrats also voiced strong opposition to lifting the federal ban on offshore oil drilling, noting that 82 percent of the natural gas and 79 percent of the oil in the outer continental shelf is already available to energy companies through existing leases.

"The Democrats are for drilling, but you've got to drill responsibly," Stupak said. "Of about 44 million acres [currently leased], we're drilling on about 10 million acres. Use it or lose it."

The Republicans argued for an all-of-the-above, market-driven approach to energy policy including new nuclear plants and tax credits to promote conservation and the development of alternative energy sources, but increasing domestic oil and gas capacity was clearly a priority.

"In the 14 years I've been in the House, we've cast 24 votes to increase oil and gas capacity in this country, and 85 percent of the time the Democrats vote no," said Wamp. "The consequences of not having that new oil and gas capacity today are very painful for the people we represent."

There was one bright spot in all the partisan bickering. When Upton complained that Democrats had voted against an amendment to build the transmission lines necessary to get renewable energies like wind and solar power to the national grid, Inslee invited Upton to become the first Republican cosponsor of his bill to create a national high-capacity grid system to accomplish that goal.

"If there's not some hidden provision in there, I'll be on board," Upton responded. "I'll be glad to work with you."

While that pledge may not have been the "minor miracle" that moderator Cummings wryly described it as, it was an encouraging sign that bipartisan solutions to the nation's energy crisis are at least possible.