

But others are stakeholders in the status quo. Energy companies that do not retool stand to lose the huge profits generated by a dwindling supply of (and increased demand for) oil. Those who advocate a smaller role in our lives for government oppose the governmental subsidies and support that are often necessary in getting a fledgling industry started, particularly before it can be profitable on its own terms. The public itself is divided on this; one 2011 poll showed that 57 percent of likely U.S. voters said they think free-market competition is more likely than government subsidies and regulation to help the country develop alternative sources of energy. And 71 percent said that private-sector companies and investors were better than government officials at determining long-term benefits and potential of new technologies.¹³⁰ Of course, many people continue to deny that climate change and global warming are occurring, despite clear scientific evidence to the contrary.

Despite opposition from those who stand to lose on this issue, proponents remain optimistic. Economist Lester R. Brown points to the explosive growth in the use of mobile phones and personal computers as examples of how quickly new technologies can spread. In 1986, about 1 million people had cell phones; by 2007, more than 2 billion were in use. Home computer sales grew from 1 million in 1983 to around 160 million two decades later. But Brown adds that time is of the essence with renewables, given the advancing threat of climate change and the specter of huge global population growth: “Whereas the restructuring of the information and communications sectors was shaped by advancing technology and market forces, the restructuring of the energy economy will be driven also by the realization that the fate of our global civilization may depend not only on doing so, but doing so at wartime speed.”¹³¹