

Climate Change Possibilities

A Live, Web-Based Democratic Deliberation

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Sense of the Discussion

The first three sessions produced a broad understanding about climate change that was used to inform the policy possibilities that resulted from this deliberative exercise. The chief features of this understanding include the following:

- Climate change is a serious threat to humans and eco-systems
- The need for action is urgent
- Climate change is a global problem, with difficult issues of allocating costs and maintaining enforcement
- Solving the problem of a carbon intensive economy requires new international agreements, changes in investment patterns, changes in personal and societal habits, and application of technological resources to problem-solving
- There are many good reasons to solve the carbon problem even if worst case scenarios are not precisely predictive (economic diversification, spur to innovation, energy independence, blow to petro-dictators, public health improvements, etc)
- Solutions require substantial agreement or at least coordination among the major economies
- The various publics within major economies need to understand and support action

Policy Elements

The second three-session round produced a substantial number of policy elements (flowing from the understandings above) that discussants thought were significant enough to merit preservation for policy possibility formation. This development flowed from a series of questions and answers about the nature of climate change concerns. The policy elements assumed the dimensions of tentative findings to inform policy discussion, but were not viewed as absolute truths, but rather as reflecting the best current information. These elements, in order of occurrence in discussion (not ranked or prioritized) were as follows:

1. The science behind climate change supports action to reduce emission of greenhouse gases.
2. That science suggests trends that will take some time to reverse, so “pay offs” of policy change are not immediate.
3. Impacts are already felt in Arctic and coastal areas.
4. Climate change threatens food supplies.
5. Climate change threatens fresh water supplies.

6. Climate change will displace populations.
7. Climate change will likely intensify conflict over resources.
8. Current institutions and protocols seem deficient in dealing with climate change.
9. Nations look to minimize costs to themselves in approaching the global problem of climate change.
10. The market has not been effective up to this point.
11. Political will to change has not been present among the significant actors.
12. Citizens support change, but are not eager to pay for it.
13. Changing personal habits poses challenges.
14. Changing corporate behavior poses challenges.
15. The influence and situations among global players is not always scaled according to size of the economy.
16. Nations as a source of emissions vary on many factors, often relating to levels of development.

Development of Policy Possibilities

The third three-session round of online interactions dealt more directly with those possibilities that participants thought were important to discuss in light of the Copenhagen conference. This is the stage where the moderator played the largest facilitative role. The possibilities below were developed in two editorial stages, with the moderator asking for permission to proceed with a draft and developing it through interaction (basically asking if there was objection to language changes). This fairly informal method of development seemed to work because of the moderator's good sense of what had been said and because the participants were focused on the conceptual possibilities that might prove helpful to discussion, not on the details of implementation.

Participants assented to putting forth the following for broader discussion:

A. Set the Price of Carbon

- Minimizes need for bureaucratic enforcement
- Allows managers to utilize different approaches
- Works through taxation or cap-and-trade systems
- Price must be set sufficiently high to impact planning and behavior
- Multilateral framework not easy to achieve

B. Regulate All Greenhouse Gas Emissions

- Moves past problem of who pays/who benefits, costs passed on or absorbed by public
- Moves faster than sluggish parts of market
- Regulation is easier to phase in than pricing
- Requires substantial enforcement apparatus
- Multilateral framework also difficult in this situation

C. Tackle Emissions Sources As Separate Technical and Political Problems

- Allows focus and progress on most solvable aspects of the problem
- Draws on historical examples of past successful agreements
- Encourages those in a position to act to do so without holding them hostage to grand schemes and difficult consensus processes
- Builds experience at finding solutions and brokering agreements and thus builds confidence
- Provides almost immediate benefits

D. Create Crash Programs for Technological Breakthroughs

- Provides stimulus for market action and assures investors of strong institutional support
- Harnesses political will and vision to identifiable goals, generating excitement
- Strong possibility of positive unintended consequences and spin-offs
- Strengthens roles of scientists, engineers, and technological managers in ways that elevate problem-solving over political brokering
- May be approached through a mix of government and private R&D funds, prizes, incubators, tax incentives, and special proprietary rights

E. Subsidize Alternatives that Reduce Emissions

- Market may not respond with sufficient urgency, so public sector action is vital
- Governments and their citizens can tailor mixes that fit their situations and preferences
- Forces collaborations between major polluting nations as way of holding down costs
- Makes sense to protect the common property of air and water through public subsidies, much as with any major problem
- Creates logical next step of taxing dirty technology to pay for clean technology