

# Why the Polls on Climate Change Are Wrong

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By [Richard Sclove, Ph.D.](#)

This Saturday, October 24, is [350.org](#)'s International Day of Climate Action. Citizens all over the world will participate in rallies and creative actions to let governments and delegates to the Copenhagen climate change conference know they want real solutions on climate change now, and not incremental steps or half measures that punt to some future day of reckoning.

Here's a little creative action you can do to mark the occasion right now from your computer. Go ahead and News-Google the words: New Survey Climate Change. Watch what happens. At present writing, the top two search results that come up are utterly, irreconcilably contradictory. The first is a writeup of a groundbreaking project that I advised, [World Wide Views on Global Warming](#), which surveyed citizens in the US and 37 other countries; we found that everywhere, including in the U.S., citizens want much more aggressive action on climate change than either the U.S. Congress or the negotiators preparing for the Copenhagen seem prepared to consider. The second is an [article about a new Pew poll](#) that shows the number of Americans who see global warming as a threat has fallen 20% in the last two years.

Who's right? It seems that our representatives in Washington and delegates to the UN COP15 climate summit in Copenhagen are eager to believe the second poll. Congressional debate on climate change legislation and preparations for COP15 are both following a similar [pattern of lowering ambitions and expectations](#), focusing on limited areas of current agreement and incremental steps, and deferring more contentious issues of targets, timetables, funding and enforcement until some later date. We are increasingly hearing from climate policymakers that it will take more time to do things right, that we have to meet people where they are instead of imposing radical reforms from above.

But there is reason to believe that they're dead wrong, and that citizens are way ahead of the policy makers, despite what some polls say. Climate change polls typically spend a few minutes on the phone asking a random sample of people a couple of superficial, often leading questions, frequently interrupting dinnertime. The process elicits off-the-cuff reactions to complex issues that are profoundly consequential to life on our planet. It's a dubious way to gather opinion on a sober subject like climate change, and many understandably shrug it off with some cynicism.

World Wide Views on the other hand is a citizen deliberative process distinct from polling, and expanded for the first time to the global level. Unlike polls or this summer's over-heated Congressional "town halls" on health care, World Wide Views participants received balanced

expert information in advance, based on the Fourth Assessment Report of the Nobel Prize-winning UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Then they spent an entire day learning together, in neutrally facilitated deliberations, prior to voting on policy recommendations.

Participants were everyday people selected to reflect general demographic tendencies in their nation or region in terms of age, gender, education, occupation, urban versus countryside, and ethnicity or race. Climate experts and staff from organized stakeholder groups involved with global warming were excluded. "I'm from West Virginia; coal miners don't talk a lot about climate change," explained Larry Ragland, a participant from Methuen, Massachusetts. "I'm not an environmentalist, and two weeks ago I had a completely different impression of what climate change meant."

Thousands of people like Larry gathered on September 26th in Atlanta, Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, and Phoenix, and throughout Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and Latin America. During the course of the day, they voted overwhelmingly that their leaders should do far more and go far faster, not scale back and slow down as they're apparently doing now.

Here are some of the key U.S. results from World Wide Views:

- 90% of U.S. participants say it is urgent to reach a tough, new agreement at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December and not punt to subsequent meetings.
- 87% said that by 2020 greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. and other developed nations should be cut 25-40% or even more below 1990 levels (the Kerry-Boxer Senate bill would cut US emissions only 20% below 2005 levels).
- 71% want nations that fail to meet their obligations under a new agreement to be subject to severe or significant economic sanctions.
- 69% believe the price of fossil fuels should be increased.

And among participants worldwide:

- 88% want strict targets for keeping global warming within 2 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial levels (half of participants, especially in countries hardest hit by climate change, want measures to hold temperatures at the current level or even bring them down to pre-industrial levels).
- There is strong consensus for more fair and proportionate burden sharing, with 76% favoring 2020 emissions reduction targets for fast-growing economies like India, China and Brazil.
- 83% support significant or severe economic sanctions against countries that do not live up to their emissions reduction commitments (the citizen group in Bangladesh proposed creating an international court to try climate cases and "provide opportunity for negatively affected countries to claim compensation").
- 87% want strong new international financial mechanisms to support these goals.

These are ambitions that you'll either find very much dumbed down or absent entirely in current negotiations on Kerry-Boxer and COP15. You don't have to be a conspiracy theorist to sense something is wrong with this picture.

Considering the deep concern and striking calls to action evident in World Wide Views' global and U.S. deliberative results, what should we make of conventional polls that say Americans and some others aren't really all that worked up about climate change and don't support robust measures to combat it? Are those polls measuring informed public opinion, or does their approach give political cover to climate incrementalists and climate change deniers? You decide.

So when citizens around the world take to streets on October 24 to demand faster, more aggressive action on climate change from Washington and Copenhagen, don't fall into the trap of dismissing them as somehow on the fringe. The best and most thoughtful vehicle we have for registering considered public opinion indicates that in reality those activists represent the mainstream. If members of Congress and delegates to Copenhagen want to be responsive to public opinion, as they claim they do, then World Wide Views provides the survey results they need to take to heart.