

# World's Citizens to Politicians: Get Serious on Global Warming Now!

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On September 26th, a new day dawned for global democracy.

On that date, nearly 4,000 people gathered in 38 countries spanning six continents to consider what should happen at the UN climate change negotiation this December in Copenhagen (COP15).



The passionate convictions that emerged should prompt serious second thoughts among UN negotiators and national politicians, including Obama Administration officials, who have recently warned that it won't be possible to hammer out a new climate treaty in Copenhagen.

## An International Call to Action

The September 26 assemblies were organized by World Wide Views on Global Warming, the first planetwide citizens' deliberation in human history. Participants embraced their role as citizen advisors enthusiastically and seriously. The results are remarkable.

- Around the world and in the U.S., nine out of ten participants believe that it is urgent for the UN COP15 climate summit to reach a new international agreement this year.
- Worldwide, 89 percent (87 percent in the U.S.) want that deal to reduce year 2020 greenhouse gas emissions for developed nations 25-40 percent or more beneath 1990 levels. That's more ambitious than proposals on the table for Copenhagen or than the pending Kerry-Boxer Senate bill, which would cut U.S. emissions only 20 percent below 2005 levels.
- Globally, 88 percent (82 percent in the U.S.) favor holding global warming to within 2 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial levels. Half the participants, especially in countries predicted to be hardest hit by climate change, want to maintain temperatures at the current level or bring them down to pre-industrial levels.
- There is strong consensus for sharing the burdens of mitigating and adapting to climate change, with 76 percent favoring 2020 emissions reduction targets for fast-growing economies like India, China, and Brazil. Among the 38 represented countries, Chinese participants were the least inclined to introduce 2020 targets for fast-growing economies; even so, 45 percent support such reductions, another 52 percent support limiting growth in emissions in fast-growing economies, and none believed that there should be no commitment to control such emissions.

### Messages from participants:

**Germany:** *We demand binding reduction targets which are in accordance with both the*

*capabilities and the responsibility of all countries.*

**Malawi:** *Strong policies should be implemented for those countries with high emissions of greenhouse gases. Developed countries must adopt new and clean technologies to reduce emissions.*

**Brazil:** *All countries should contribute to a fund that would be used for the development of new technologies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Everyone would be able to benefit, because although we live in a particular country, we all belong to the same planet.*

Poignantly, citizens from the lowest-income nations—which have contributed the least to global warming but stand to suffer some of the worst consequences—were generally more willing to limit their own national greenhouse gas emissions than citizens from wealthier nations would consider asking them to.

“World Wide Views has given us politicians a unique insight into the views of ordinary citizens from all corners of the world on the climate crisis,” said Connie Hedegaard, Denmark’s influential minister of climate and energy and the host of the upcoming UN climate summit. “It is a powerful signal to the politicians when citizens all over the world agree that action is urgent.”

But are citizens ready to put their wallets on the line to limit global warming? You bet.

Worldwide, 74 percent believe that fossil fuel prices should be increased in developed nations. That percentage averaged 69 percent among the 338 Americans who met in Atlanta, Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, and Phoenix.

In addition, 71 percent of the U.S. participants (and 86 percent worldwide) favor creating a new global financial mechanism to assist developing nations in limiting their carbon footprints and adapting to climate change.

What of nations that don’t meet their obligations under a new climate deal? In America, a compelling 71 percent said that non-complying countries should be subject to significant or severe economic sanctions. Globally, that figure was 83 percent.

Participants discuss climate change in Chile, South Africa, India, Vietnam, Belgium, and the U.S.

Photos courtesy of wwviews.org

## Not Your Typical Opinion Poll

The strength of these convictions contrasts with bewildering contradictions that otherwise litter the political landscape of climate change. For instance:

- Just two days before 350.org's International Day of Climate Action on October 24th, a new Pew poll found that Americans' concern with global warming is declining. (Only 35 percent of the Pew respondents expressed strong concern about global warming, compared with 74 percent of the U.S. participants in World Wide Views.)
- A month after British scientists expressed "shock" at their own new predictions that average global temperature could rise a searing 7 degrees Fahrenheit before today's children reach retirement, the *New York Times* reported that international negotiators now see little chance that they will succeed in producing a new climate change treaty at the UN summit in Copenhagen.

In the face of such opposing trends, why did World Wide Views yield such strong statements of concern and striking calls to action?

World Wide Views' process differed significantly from traditional opinion polls. Participants received balanced expert information in advance, building largely on the most recent assessment by the Nobel Prize-winning UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They also learned the views of scientists more skeptical about global warming and of others more alarmed. Then they spent an entire day talking 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 rural residency, 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 participant Larry Ragland of Methuen, Massachusetts. “I’m not an environmentalist, and two weeks ago I had a completely different impression of what climate change meant.”

In contrast, climate change polls typically ask a random sample of people a few simple questions over the phone, frequently interrupting dinnertime. It’s a dubious way to inform public policy. Nothing in the U.S. Constitution, political theory, or political history suggests that relying on fleeting, off-the-cuff public opinion would be a sensible way to guide important decisions, least of all on a complex issue that potentially involves enormous and irreversible planetary consequences cascading out over centuries.

What we’re hearing from World Wide Views is not seat-of-the-pants opinion but carefully considered judgment. The results provide the strongest measure available to date of informed popular opinion worldwide, and indicate the direction general public opinion is likely to move as we all learn more about the consequences of global warming.

Toward the end of the day on September 26th, citizens brainstormed and voted on their own action proposals for the UN climate negotiators. The top idea from Bangladesh: a new climate deal should create an international court to try climate cases and “provide opportunity for negatively affected countries to claim compensation.” The sentiment is understandable. According to experts, in coming decades rising sea levels and other global warming consequences could turn millions of Bangladeshis into refugees.

## Deliberative Democracy at the Global Level

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Through World Wide Views, humanity has begun to find its voice. The next step is for all of us to pitch in and amplify that voice, ensuring that politicians and negotiators understand that, around the world, people who have a chance to become informed and reflect about climate change want their leaders to do more and go faster, not scale back and slow down as they’re apparently inclined to do now.

Indeed, if anyone tries to dismiss the efforts of environmental activist groups like [350.org](#) as somehow fringe, World Wide Views provides uniquely compelling evidence that, in this case, [the activists](#) sit squarely in the mainstream of considered public opinion.

The gap between current popular opinion (as measured by climate change polls) and considered opinion as revealed by World Wide Views-style citizen deliberation defines the space for enlightened politics and authentic political leadership. Politicians who move too far and too fast ahead of poll-measured popular opinion risk policy defeat or even forfeiting re-election. But politicians who passively conform to momentary poll results squander the opportunity to educate and inspire citizens to move toward the informed and considered equilibrium that deliberation has identified.

We called this project “World Wide Views on Global Warming” because there will be future World Wide Views on other global issues. The process is designed so that it can easily and economically expand to encompass every nation on the Earth.

Now that we've shown that it's possible to conduct democratic procedures on a global scale, the precedent is established. One can safely predict that we will see more initiatives to institutionalize democracy at the global level, and that there will be increasing challenges to all those extant global decision-making processes that continue the old pattern of excluding democratic engagement and considered popular opinion.

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*Further information about World Wide Views is online at, including all votes and recommendations from the U.S., the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Brazil, India, China, Russia, Egypt, Malawi, the Maldives, and 27 other nations.*

*World Wide Views was initiated and coordinated by the Danish Board of Technology, an agency of the Danish parliament, working with a global network of government, university, and NGO partners. U.S. partners included Arizona State University's Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes; Colorado School of Mines; the Boston Museum of Science; Boston University's Department of Environmental Health; the Brookfield Institute; Georgia Institute of Technology; the Loka Institute; and Pomona College.*