



Global Climate Change—Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Define *global climate change* and identify its features.
- Explain the “greenhouse effect” and the role of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in changing the Earth’s ecosystems.
- Understand the cap-and-trade policy option for reducing total carbon emissions and describe its major elements.
- Evaluate supporting and opposing arguments for implementing a cap-and-trade system in order to reduce overall carbon emissions.
- Decide, individually and as a group, whether the government should adopt a cap-and-trade system to limit greenhouse gas emissions; support decisions based on evidence and sound reasoning.
- Reflect on the value of deliberation when deciding issues in a democracy.

Question for Deliberation

Should our democracy adopt a cap-and-trade system to limit greenhouse gas emissions?

Materials

- Lesson Procedures
- Handout 1—Deliberation Guide
- Handout 2—Deliberation Worksheet
- Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation
- Reading
- Selected Resources
- Deliberation Question with Arguments
(*optional—use if students have difficulty extracting the arguments or time is limited*)



Global Climate Change—Reading

1 Polar bears can swim up to 100 miles before drowning. They swim to hunt seals—their
2 favorite food—and seals can be found on sea ice. If the ice disappears and polar bears are far
3 from land, they die. Unfortunately, the polar ice cap is melting as temperatures in the Arctic
4 continue to rise. As a result, more polar bears are drowning when they try to catch seals in the
5 ocean but cannot find ice on which to rest. More bears are also staying on land, where they must
6 scavenge for food and travel inland when they cannot find food on the beaches. Sadly, one bear
7 recently wandered into an Alaskan village looking for food and was killed because it threatened
8 people’s safety (Halpin, 2008). Unless changes in the global climate are checked, experts predict
9 that two-thirds of the polar bear population will disappear by 2050 (Revkin, 2007).

10 Polar bears are not the only species that will be affected by global climate change. A 2003
11 U.S. Department of Defense report acknowledged that climate change is occurring and
12 recognized the potential for relatively abrupt change. Such change, the Department said, could
13 result in “skirmishes, battles, and even war” due to food shortages, the loss of freshwater,
14 interruptions in energy supplies, and the migrations of millions of desperate people (Schwartz
15 and Randall, 2003). UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon has said that global climate change
16 poses a threat to humanity and the planet that is as grave as war (Osborne, 2007). Most national
17 leaders now agree that something must be done soon to avert a catastrophe. Countries are
18 particularly interested in reducing the harmful effects of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon
19 dioxide (CO₂). Cap-and-trade policies offer one way to do so.

20 **What Are Greenhouse Gases and the Greenhouse Effect?**

21 For more than 100 years, scientists have known about the “greenhouse effect.” Radiation from
22 the sun passes through the atmosphere and strikes the Earth’s surface. Instead of bouncing back
23 into space, the radiation is trapped by the atmosphere and becomes heat. This process keeps the
24 Earth from becoming cold and hostile to life. Over the past few centuries, human activities like
25 farming, heating, and industry have increased the amount of CO₂ and other gas emissions that trap
26 the sun’s radiation. Together, these emissions are called “greenhouse gases.”

27 Of course, the Earth can become warmer naturally, but scientists estimate that most
28 emissions that are warming the atmosphere come from burning fossil fuels like coal, oil, and
29 gasoline. The United States, with less than 5% of the world’s population, is responsible for 22%
30 of greenhouse gases that humans produce; China, with almost 20% of the world’s population, is
31 the next largest producer with 18% (“U.S. Emissions in a Global Perspective,” 2007). The
32 burning of forests—to clear land for farming, roads, and housing and commercial developments—
33 accounts for up to 25% of CO₂ emissions worldwide (Mitchell et al., 2007).

34 The UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) found that during the past 200
35 years (the era of the Industrial Revolution), levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere rose by about 30%.
36 The IPCC’s 2007 report noted that most of the increase in global average temperatures in the past
37 50 years is “very likely due” to human activities. The IPCC forecasts that growing concentrations of
38 greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will dramatically increase the Earth’s temperature, resulting
39 in more droughts, declines in crop yields, and even famine in poorer countries. Insects will thrive
40 and insect-borne diseases like malaria will expand. Increasingly violent storms, gathering
41 additional energy from a warmer ocean, will threaten life. In addition to losing polar bears and

42 the Arctic ecosystem, scientists estimate that numerous animal, bird, and fish species will
43 become extinct, as other ecosystems change or disappear.

44 **Limiting Carbon: The Kyoto Protocol and Cap-and-Trade Systems**

45 Today, countries are using different strategies to limit CO₂ emissions. A total of 174
46 countries have signed the Kyoto Protocol, a 1997 agreement that aims to reduce greenhouse gas
47 emissions. Of these, 36 countries are required to reduce their emissions, while 137 developing
48 countries—including China, the second-largest producer of carbon emissions—are required only
49 to monitor and report their emissions. The United States, the world's largest producer of carbon
50 emissions, originally signed the Kyoto Protocol but never ratified it. Nevertheless, the United
51 States and other non-participants in the Kyoto Protocol are still studying ways to reduce
52 emissions.

53 In addition to using the Kyoto Protocol and other treaties to reduce CO₂ emissions, many
54 governments are creating economic incentives. The European Union has developed a specific
55 policy called the Emissions Trading System (ETS). Begun in 2005, ETS is one kind of cap-and-
56 trade system. Under cap-and-trade, a country or group of countries sets a limit (or cap) on the
57 amount of a pollutant that can be released into the atmosphere. Companies or specific sectors of
58 the economy—such as energy or manufacturing—are permitted a number of credits that
59 represent just how much pollutant they can emit.

60 In European Union countries, companies or sectors that exceed their CO₂ credit limits have
61 two choices: either they can pay a heavy fine for the extra pollution, or they can buy pollution
62 credits from other, less polluting companies and industries that do not require them. Essentially,
63 ETS creates a market in which companies can trade pollutants. This market does several things:
64 (1) it permits companies that produce large quantities of CO₂ to remain in business but also

65 encourages large emitters to reduce their carbon “footprint”; (2) it rewards companies that emit
66 less CO₂; (3) it allows governments to limit the overall amount of CO₂ emitted into the
67 atmosphere; and (4) it uses economic strategies to achieve specific policy goals.

68 Other countries now use or are considering cap-and-trade systems for regulating CO₂
69 emissions. The Russian Federation uses a program similar to ETS, called “joint implementation,”
70 that allows countries with economies-in-transition to create tradeable carbon credits. The United
71 States, which already has a cap-and-trade system for regulating sulfur dioxide (SO₂) gas
72 emissions, is now debating whether to adopt a similar system for CO₂ emissions.

73 **Cap-and-Trade Skeptics and Believers**

74 Supporters of cap-and-trade say that this policy helps put global climate change in terms that
75 citizens and consumers can understand. Because climate change is an enormous problem, people
76 often have difficulty seeing how they can make a difference. People respond better to problems
77 that affect them directly and can be addressed by personal decisions. Cap-and-trade puts a price
78 on carbon emissions. Because citizens and consumers understand prices, they can choose to
79 support technologies and products that produce less carbon. Such consumer pressures will help
80 business owners see the benefit of reducing emissions.

81 Supporters also point to the success of similar efforts. Researchers with the Global
82 Environment Program note that the U.S. Clean Air Act in 1990 established a cap-and-trade
83 system for sulfur dioxide (SO₂) emissions, the primary cause of acid rain. “This system has
84 proven to be such an environmental and economic success—reducing SO₂ emissions at a fraction
85 of the expected costs—that the European Union borrowed directly from it to design its cap-and-
86 trade system for CO₂ emissions” (Mathers and Manion, 2005).

87 Opponents of cap-and-trade believe that such a plan cannot work because it is a national
88 response to a worldwide problem. Even if some countries “cap” carbon emissions, other
89 countries will continue to produce them. Thus, countries with caps lose business to countries
90 without caps, and the problem with carbon emissions continues. Many people also oppose cap-
91 and-trade because they believe it will cost jobs and other economic benefits. They argue that cap-
92 and-trade forces businesses either to produce less carbon or trade for carbon credits. In both
93 cases, the result is fewer jobs (Jordan, 2009).

94 Supporters agree that some carbon economy jobs will be affected by cap-and-trade. On the
95 other hand, they note what happened when the automobile was introduced in the 20th century:
96 while old jobs connected to horses disappeared, new jobs and industries were created. Similarly,
97 they argue, new jobs and industries will be created to meet the needs of a post-carbon economy.

98 Some opposition to cap-and-trade comes from environmentalists who say that some
99 important stakeholders are often left out of the process. They claim that industrial leaders are
100 included in decisions about the CO₂ emission “caps,” but environmental groups are excluded
101 from the discussions. A study by Climate Action Network Central and Eastern Europe (CAN-
102 CEE) concluded that “Environmental NGOs have often been excluded from the consultation
103 processes and even when given a chance to provide comments, those were not taken into
104 consideration or mentioned” (“Independent NGO Analysis of NAPs of New Member States,”
105 2004). These environmental opponents also worry that concessions made by government in order
106 to gain the support of businesses make the system too weak. In the Czech Republic, for example,
107 the annual CO₂ cap was set at almost 21% *above* historical emission levels. Ironically, a system
108 that is intended to benefit everyone is decided in secret only by a very select and powerful few.

109 Many economists and environmentalists oppose giving government-provided emission
110 credits without a cost to major CO₂ producers. Instead, they prefer carbon auctions, where major
111 CO₂ producers must buy their credits from the government. The government can then use these
112 funds to support other CO₂ reduction strategies such as “clean energy” sources (wind, solar,
113 geothermal, tidal). Some environmentalists even prefer a “carbon tax” on all carbon usage to
114 encourage everyone to reduce CO₂ quickly to avoid environmental catastrophe.

115 Many business interests oppose taxes as a matter of principle. They believe their primary
116 responsibility is to make money for their owners or investors, and government regulations are
117 often seen as attempts to reduce their profits. Thus, some companies prefer cap-and-trade
118 systems to more direct government mandates because cap-and-trade gives them the flexibility to
119 decide how they will meet their emissions targets.

120 Cap-and-trade supporters also argue that companies can both reduce their carbon emissions
121 and prosper economically without extra costs to their stakeholders. Until recently, industries
122 needed to pay the costs of monitoring and reporting data to the government. Reporting took time,
123 cost money, and depended on the honesty of the businesses that provided it. Today,
124 governments, non-governmental organizations, and even ordinary people can use satellite data
125 and other resources available via the Internet to monitor CO₂ emissions. Therefore, businesses
126 may no longer have to bear the cost of data collection and reporting or worry about transparency.

127 Cap-and-trade is but one example of what former Czech president Vaclav Havel has called
128 “the challenge to behave responsibly.” After all, he notes, “Technological measures and
129 regulations are important, but equally important is support for education, ecological training and
130 ethics—a consciousness of the commonality of all living beings and an emphasis on shared
131 responsibility” (Havel, 2007).



Global Climate Change—Selected Resources

- “Climate Analysis Indicators Tool (CAIT)” (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, n.d.), <http://cait.wri.org/>.
- “Global Warming: Undo It” (New York: Environmental Defense Action Fund, 2005), <http://www.undoit.org/home.cfm>.
- “Global Warming Updates: Science, Politics, Economics” (Washington, DC: Cooler Heads Coalition, 2004), <http://www.globalwarming.org/article.php?uid=562>.
- “Global Warming: What Should We Do About It?,” *Bill of Rights in Action* (Los Angeles, CA: Constitutional Rights Foundation, Fall 2002), Vol. 18: 4, http://www.crf-usa.org/bria/bria18_4b.htm.
- “Global Warming: Frequently Asked Questions” (Asheville, NC: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration [U.S.], National Climatic Data Center, 2005), <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/climate/globalwarming.html>.
- “Greenhouse Gas Emission Trends and Projections in Europe 2009,” Report No 9/2009 (Copenhagen, Denmark: European Environment Agency, 2009), http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/eea_report_2009_9.
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- National Center for Public Policy Research, “Global Warming Information Center” (Washington, DC: NCPPR, n.d.), <http://www.nationalcenter.org/Kyoto.html>.
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- Schwartz, Peter, and Doug Randall, *An Abrupt Climate Change Scenario and Its Implications for United States National Security*, a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Defense (Emeryville, CA: Global Business Network, October 2003), <http://www.gbn.com/ArticleDisplayServlet.srv?aid=26231>.
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>.
- “U.S. Emissions in a Global Perspective,” *Emissions of Greenhouse Gases Report*, Report #:DOE/EIA-0573 (Washington, DC: Energy Information Administration, Official Energy Statistics from the U.S. Government, November 28, 2007), <http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiap/1605/ggrpt/>.
- Weier, John, “Global Warming,” *Earth Observatory* (Goddard, MD: National Aeronautics and Space Administration [U.S.], Goddard Space Flight Center, April 8, 2002), <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Library/GlobalWarming/warming2.html>.



Global Climate Change—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should our democracy adopt a cap-and-trade system to limit greenhouse gas emissions?

YES – Arguments to Support the Deliberation Question

1. Global climate change has already begun, as evidenced by the rise in the Earth's temperature. Even the U.S. Department of Defense recognizes this change and is considering the consequences. If people wait too long, the climate might reach a threshold of irreversible and catastrophic change. Cap-and-trade is a reasonable plan for getting started before it's too late.
2. Cap-and-trade policies put a price on carbon emissions. Citizens and consumers understand prices and so can respond to them in ways that benefit the global environment. More specifically, they can use their wallets to support the technologies and products that produce less carbon.
3. Cap-and-trade is a method that has proven effective. A similar cap-and-trade approach in the United States was successful in reducing emissions of sulfur dioxide, the primary cause of acid rain. The sulfur dioxide cap-and-trade system reduced emissions at a fraction of the expected costs. As a result, the European Union borrowed directly from this model to design its CO₂ cap-and-trade system.
4. Cap-and-trade policies benefit the environment without hurting businesses. More direct government regulations, like carbon taxes, do not allow businesses the flexibility they need to reduce carbon emissions without reducing their profits. Cap-and-trade policies, on the other hand, let businesses decide how they can best reach emission reduction targets. While some old economy carbon-based jobs will be affected by cap-and-trade, new jobs and industries will be created to meet the needs of a post-carbon economy.
5. A cap-and-trade system is feasible now that governments and businesses have easy, cheap, and more transparent ways to monitor CO₂ emissions. Today, governments, non-governmental organizations, and even ordinary people can use satellite data and other resources via the Internet to monitor CO₂ emissions. Therefore, businesses may no longer have to bear the cost of data collection and reporting or worry about transparency.



Global Climate Change—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should our democracy adopt a cap-and-trade system to limit greenhouse gas emissions?

NO – Arguments to Oppose the Deliberation Question

1. Cap-and-trade is bad for the national economy. Countries that “cap” carbon emissions will force their businesses either to produce less carbon or trade for carbon credits. In either case, the result is fewer jobs. Countries with caps will lose those jobs to countries without caps, and the problem with carbon emissions continues. Cap-and-trade cannot work because it is a national response to a worldwide problem.
2. Reducing greenhouse gases is too urgent a problem for market-based solutions like a cap-and-trade system. To avert environmental catastrophe, carbon producers must be required to emit substantially less pollution immediately. A carbon tax would therefore be preferable to cap-and-trade policies.
3. The process for setting caps is flawed. Often, the government involves industries and other major CO₂ producers in determining the emission “caps” but does not involve environmental groups. Therefore, the cap numbers are too low to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Ironically, a system that is intended to benefit everyone is decided only by a very select and powerful few, behind closed doors. A flawed process leads to a cap-and-trade policy that is neither fair nor effective.
4. Weak carbon limits are worse than no limits at all. In order to convince businesses to agree to carbon limits, governments make cap-and-trade systems too weak. Major CO₂ producers should have to pay for their emissions, not trade credits with less polluting companies and industries. Global climate change requires strong regulations. If major carbon producers have to pay a substantial penalty for their high emissions, they will have an incentive to reduce their carbon “footprint.”
5. Cap-and-trade is a weak political compromise. Being good stewards of the Earth requires education, conservation practices, and ethics, not a quick policy solution. Unless a cap-and-trade system is coupled with a more comprehensive approach to challenging global warming, significant change in our behavior and carbon usage is not likely to occur.