

# Project Syndicate



## The American Climate Consensus

Dec 1, 2021 | **LAURA TYSON, LENNY MENDONCA**

*A recent experiment in citizen deliberation shows that Americans from across the political spectrum will tend to align on basic questions about climate change and what to do about it when given the same set of facts. What is needed now is for policymakers to claim this common ground and build on it.*

BERKELEY – In September, an initiative by several influential civic and non-profit organizations made a remarkable discovery: When properly informed about climate change, Americans across the political spectrum agree that it is an urgent threat caused by human activity. There is broad-based demand for a public-private approach combining federal targets, tailored state-level strategies, and investment and innovation from the private sector. Americans want the transition to a low-carbon economy to be managed equitably. They want climate policies that protect low-income households and the communities that will be hardest hit, while ensuring that US competitiveness is not jeopardized.

These findings come from [America in One Room: Climate and Energy](#), an experimental deliberative exercise that brought together a representative sample

of 962 Americans in order to answer a crucial question: “What would the American public really think about our climate and energy challenges if it had the chance to deliberate about them in depth, with good and balanced information?”

The process was organized by Helena (in partnership with several other groups), and supervised by Stanford University’s [Center for Deliberative Democracy](#) and [NORC](#) (the National Opinion Research Center) at the University of Chicago. Respondents deliberated online, working through an extensive questionnaire posing 72 substantive questions about climate and energy. They then received a briefing document, broke up into 104 moderated smaller groups to discuss the issues, and finally retook the original questionnaire to measure changes in knowledge and opinions. A separate control group of 671 citizens answered the same questionnaires but did not participate in the deliberations.

Overall, the results indicate that a majority of Americans believe that the climate-change threat is real and immediate, and that it requires significant remedial, mitigation, and transition actions. A 2021 Pew Research [survey](#) reached similar conclusions, but the Helena project shows how properly structured deliberation can reduce partisan divides on the issue.

As Nadine Ono of California Forward [notes](#), in response to statements such as, “Rising temperatures are caused by human activities that emit greenhouse gases, like carbon dioxide and methane, which trap heat in the atmosphere and warm the earth’s climate,” participants “moved from 67% agreeing before deliberation to 76% after.” Broken down by partisan political identity, “Democrats rose slightly to 94%. Independents rose 14 points to 76%, and Republicans rose from 35% to 54%.”

Similar movements occurred in participants’ responses to other statements about the role of human activity in climate change, the obligation to future generations, the need to phase out coal, and the importance of adopting a mix of technologies, including renewable energies. The results also revealed strong bipartisan agreement on priorities for implementing a transition to a net-zero emissions target. These include support for federal goals with state flexibility; a long-term budget showing how much the transition will cost, how funding will be provided, who will pay, and how it will be affordable for low- and middle-income Americans; and measures to minimize impacts on US economic competitiveness, in particular on jobs during and after the transition.

Even after oversampling California and Texas to evaluate differences between citizen views in the biggest blue and red states, the study found agreement on most issues and growing agreement following the deliberations. For example, Texans showed a 23-point increase in support for achieving net-zero, moving toward closer agreement with Californians; and Californians moved 15 points closer to Texans in support for building [new-generation nuclear plants](#) that minimize waste and safety risks.

The Helena project confirms that when Americans take the time to engage in fact-based dialogue, they tend to align on basic questions about the urgency of climate change and the policies needed to address it. Now, policymakers must act on the public's demands.

There is good news on that front. The US federal government is poised to make unprecedented investments in climate mitigation and adaptation. The recently passed \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure [bill](#) includes [\\$47 billion to support climate resilience](#), \$65 billion for clean energy and grid-related investments, and \$7.5 billion in grants to build a national network of electric-vehicle (EV) charging stations.

Moreover, the infrastructure bill's passage has cleared the way for US President Joe Biden's Build Back Better budget proposal, which includes an estimated [\\$555 billion](#) to address the climate crisis. The bill, which has already passed the House, includes \$300 billion in tax incentives for clean-energy generation, EVs, transmission lines, and home energy efficiency. It would also establish a Civilian Climate Corps to restore forests and wetlands and strengthen climate resilience. And it would impose new fees on emissions of methane, which is a significantly more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

All told, the proposal's climate provisions are well designed to accelerate the shift in the US economy from fossil fuels and internal combustion engines to renewables and EVs. This process is already [underway](#), owing to significant reductions in the prices of cleaner energies over the past decade.

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As the federal government mobilizes to address climate change, many state governments continue to take aggressive actions of their own. Already, 14 states and the District of Columbia have adopted California's tough auto-emissions standards, as has the automotive industry itself. In [California](#), 60% of electricity is

carbon-free, compared to only 40% in the rest of the United States and 33% in the world. Governor Gavin Newsom has established a 2045 target for carbon neutrality and 100% carbon-free electricity, as well as a requirement that all new passenger vehicles sold in California be emissions-free by 2035. He has also promised \$3.9 billion for investments in EV charging stations and other measures to accelerate the shift to a net-zero future.

The American people are demanding action. State and local governments are responding. We will know in the next few weeks whether the Democrats in the Senate are, too.



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