

Pop-Up Case: Tackling Climate Change After the Pandemic: Opportunity or Obstacle?

As the United States emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic into a recession, policymakers need to consider another global crisis: climate change. How should the United States pursue environmental sustainability alongside economic recovery?

Use the following *hypothetical* case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

Experts have warned that, without proactive policies to limit global warming to below four degrees Celsius, climate change threatens permanent inundation of coastal areas, famine, and extreme weather that will endanger lives and livelihoods worldwide over the next century. By 2050, coastal U.S. cities such as New Orleans could be permanently flooded, displacing millions. Despite this threat, many countries have been slow to adopt the necessary measures to prevent climate change. The devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—another anticipated global crisis for which the world was largely underprepared—has highlighted the need for countries to address global threats before they reach catastrophic proportions. At the same time, as governments enact sweeping restrictions on the movement of goods and people to fight COVID-19, the pandemic has demonstrated that countries can in fact adopt the dramatic measures necessary to address urgent threats. As the world emerges from this crisis, policymakers have an opportunity to apply the lessons learned from the pandemic to advance the fight against climate change.

The pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented drop in global greenhouse gas emissions, but at astronomical economic cost, disrupting livelihoods and triggering a global recession. Moreover, as countries ramp up economic activity to begin recovering, they will likely produce a spike in emissions that erases the reductions achieved in 2020. As a result, more than ever, meaningful progress in the fight against climate change will require robust, sustainable policies that slow climate change while promoting economic growth. Environmental measures that risk slowing economic growth could appear overly burdensome as countries seek to restart their economies.

Past economic crises have provided opportunities to transition economies to firmer footing. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, large-scale government reforms, public works projects, and social programs facilitated the rise of new industries and spurred economic growth. In the wake of the pandemic, policymakers could similarly support new green initiatives, including environmental regulations, emissions restrictions, investments in renewable energy sources, and green infrastructure projects. These initiatives could drive economic growth and create new jobs, while also transitioning to a less carbon-dependent economy. At the same time, such measures could harm existing industries, potentially endangering livelihoods at an especially precarious time. As the world emerges from the pandemic into significant economic uncertainty, policymakers will be more challenged than ever to develop policies that balance the acute need to address climate change with promoting economic growth and stability.

Learn more:

1. [What the Coronavirus Teaches Us About Fighting Climate Change \(Council on Foreign Relations\)](#)
2. [Can the Lessons of the Coronavirus Pandemic be Applied to Climate Change? \(World Politics Review\)](#)
3. [Addressing Climate Change in a Post-Pandemic World \(McKinsey Quarterly\)](#)



Decision Point: Set in January 2021

It is the start of a new presidential term. Although the United States is still emerging from the devastation of COVID-19, the president has convened the National Security Council (NSC) to discuss another urgent global crisis: climate change. While other meetings are being held to discuss international initiatives, this meeting has been called specifically to decide whether and how to advance the fight against climate change domestically. The pandemic has highlighted the need to address threats before they become acute crises. However, it has also left the U.S. economy in recession. NSC members will need to weigh the pressing need to address climate change against the immediate need to support economic recovery and safeguard the livelihoods of Americans.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- Pursue an ambitious transition to a greener U.S. economy. This option could include immediate measures, such as strict emissions regulations, a national cap-and-trade system, renewable energy subsidies, funding for green initiatives, and job transition assistance. This approach would have the greatest effect on emissions and could promote new jobs and economic growth. However, new growth would not be guaranteed, and this option could threaten existing industries and slow short-term economic recovery.
- Adopt a gradual approach to protect existing industries and livelihoods, setting emissions regulations with delayed implementation periods to facilitate recovery and placing conditions on economic stimulus to ensure cleaner practices. This approach would limit economic hardships for existing industries and could achieve modest emissions reductions, but would likely be insufficient to meet current climate goals.
- Prioritize economic recovery above environmental goals, forgoing new regulations—or even loosening existing ones—and using economic stimulus to support recovery regardless of environmental consequences. This option does nothing to address climate change and could even trigger a spike in emissions as industries recover. However, a swift recovery could put the United States on better footing to make ambitious changes in the future.

Like Model Diplomacy? Try a full case at modeldiplomacy.cfr.org.

Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.



Simple NSC simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president.

NSC simulation with assigned opinions:

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign opinions. For example, assign one-third of the class to be isolationist, one-third to favor a military response, and one-third to favor a diplomatic response. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or a student) as president.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students imagine they are advising a generic president rather than a specific one.

Like Model Diplomacy? Try a full case at modeldiplomacy.cfr.org.