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# Paris Climate Agreement

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Segment Length: 4:02 minutes

## **Lesson Description:**

Should the United States reduce emissions that might contribute to climate change? Shouldn't all countries? Isn't that what the Paris Climate Agreement does? This video looks at commitments some countries made in the Paris Climate Agreement.

## **Concepts & Key Terms:**

*Greenhouse Gas* – A gas that traps heat in an atmosphere, making the planet warmer through the greenhouse effect. The primary greenhouse gases in Earth's atmosphere are water vapor, carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and ozone.

## **Objectives:**

Students will be able to:

- explain the goal of the Paris Climate Agreement term “zero-sum” and how it does and does not apply to inventions, businesses, and trade.
- discuss the commitments made by some countries that support the Paris Climate Agreement.
- contrast efforts of countries to reduce greenhouse emissions.
- evaluate the effects on the United States of reducing greenhouse gas emissions while other countries don't.

## **Preview Activity and Questions:**

Distribute the K-W-L chart and have students complete the first two columns to the best of their ability. (Have them fill in the last column after viewing the video.)

## **Viewing Guide:**

It is recommended that teachers show the video twice: once to allow students to view it and focus on the issues presented, and once to allow them time to complete the viewing guide. After they complete the viewing guide, allow students a few minutes to work in pairs sharing and verifying answers.

## **Answers to Viewing Guide**

1. greenhouse gases
2. emissions
3. India
4. ambitious
5. China, India
6. pretending

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## Viewing Guide

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Class \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** As you watch the video, fill in the blanks with the correct words.

1. You don't even have to mention \_\_\_\_\_ in your commitment if you don't want to.
2. China for instance said, "We pledge to reach peak \_\_\_\_\_ by about 2030."
3. \_\_\_\_\_ made no pledge to limit their emissions at all.
4. The one country that showed up in Paris with a very costly, \_\_\_\_\_ target was the U.S.
5. Even if we zeroed out our emission tomorrow, the future of climate change is still a question of what happens in \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
6. The earth is warming. Man may well be increasing that. But the solution isn't to waste billions by forcing emissions cuts here while other countries do nothing while \_\_\_\_\_ to make cuts.

**Now, take a few moments to reflect on the video and answer the questions below:**

In the video, John Stossel said that his neighbors and most of the media opposed withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement, then added, "I bet they don't even know what was in the agreement."

In your experience, do people make decisions without knowing the facts? \_\_\_\_\_. What if any problems could that cause? \_\_\_\_\_

At the end of the video, John Stossel said, "the solution isn't to waste billions by forcing emissions cuts here while other countries do nothing while pretending to make cuts. Trump was right to repudiate this phony treaty." Do you agree or disagree? \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

### **Discussion and Analysis:**

1. What is the Paris Climate Agreement? What is its goal?
2. Why does Oren Cass object to the Paris Climate Agreement?
3. How might someone defend the agreement against Oren Cass's objections?
4. Why would countries feel the need to get together to reduce the emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases? Why wouldn't each country just make cuts on its own?
5. Based on information in the video, if the U.S. achieved its Paris commitments, how would its carbon dioxide emissions compare to China's and India's current levels?
6. Should the U.S. pursue emissions reductions on its own, even if other countries don't? Why or why not?
7. If the United States did work to reduce greenhouse gas emissions on its own, what benefits might result? What disadvantages might there be?
8. What would a fair climate agreement look like? Would it require all countries to have the same emission levels? The same emission levels per person? To cut the same amount or percent from their current emissions levels? Or some other approach? What are some advantages and drawbacks to each of these approaches?
9. Oren Cass said, "The Paris Accord was somewhere between a farce and a fraud." Why did he say that? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
10. Do you believe the U.S. was right to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement? Explain.

### **Discuss These Lines from the Video:**

1. President Trump isolated the United States with his reckless and indefensible decision.
2. The Paris Accord was somewhere between a farce and a fraud.
3. China for instance said, "We pledge to reach peak emission by about 2030." Well the United States government had already done a study to guess when Chinese emissions would peak, and their guess was about 2030.
4. My favorite was Pakistan, whose pledge was to reach a peak at some point after which to begin reducing emissions.
5. What you have is an agreement to do nothing.
6. The United States produces twice as much greenhouse gas per person as China and India, so isn't it on us to do more?
7. Even if we zeroed out our emissions tomorrow, the future of climate change is still a question of what happens in China and India.

8. The earth is warming. Man may well be increasing that. But the solution isn't to waste billions by forcing emissions cuts here while other countries do nothing while pretending to make cuts.

**Quotes for Discussion:**

The nations that remain in the Paris Agreement will be the nations that reap the benefits in jobs and industries created.  
– Barack Obama

The Paris climate treaty is climatically insignificant. EPA's own models show it would only lower global warming by an inconsequential two-tenths of a degree Celsius by 2100.

– Patrick Michaels

For better or worse, there is no country or set of countries, other than the United States, that has the resources, breadth of interests, or experience necessary to preserve and protect the global order.

– Fred Kaplan

As someone who lived under communism for most of his life, I feel obliged to say that I see the biggest threat to freedom, democracy, the market economy and prosperity now in ambitious environmentalism, not in communism. This ideology wants to replace the free and spontaneous evolution of mankind by a sort of central (now global) planning.

– Vaclav Klaus

We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.

– Madeleine Albright

If our Founding Fathers wanted us to care about the rest of the world, they wouldn't have declared their independence from it.

– Stephen Colbert

What's in the best interest of the United States? What's in the best interest of our people? When it comes to foreign policy that will be my guiding question.

– George W. Bush

International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power.

– Hans Morgenthau

If the rest of the world bought cars and trucks at the same per capita rate as in the United States, the world's population of cars and trucks would be 5.5 billion. The production of global warming pollution and the consumption of oil would increase dramatically over and above today's unsustainable levels.

– Al Gore

Although the use of coal is declining in the U.S., and coal-fired generating plants are being phased out in many other developed countries as well, China's coal imports have already increased 60-fold over the past decade—and will double again by 2015.

– Al Gore, 2013

Historically, the claim of consensus has been the first refuge of scoundrels; it is a way to avoid debate by claiming that the matter is already settled.

– Michael Crichton

The urge to save humanity is always a false front for the urge to rule it.

– H.L. Mencken

## Activities:

1. Have students complete the K-W-L chart in class or for homework.
2. Research the Paris Climate Accord. What are its goals? What does it actually do? What did the United States agree to do? How is the agreement enforced? Are there any costs? For which countries?
3. Produce a “man-on-the-street” video in which you ask people what they think about the United States withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement. Then, ask them what they know about it.
4. Read the “Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord” and write a persuasive essay in which you agree or disagree with it.  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-accord/>
5. Read the Summary of the Paris Agreement on the United Nations Climate: Get the Big Picture webpage and write an opinion piece for your school or local newspaper. Be sure to back up your opinions with facts.  
<http://bigpicture.unfccc.int/#content-the-paris-agreemen>
6. Choose five countries not mentioned in the video that were parties to the Paris Climate Agreement. What were each country’s commitments? How do their commitments compare to the commitments made by the United States? What, if anything, have those countries done to meet their commitments?
7. Read and summarize the article “Why the Paris climate deal is meaningless” by Oren Cass. Then explain why he wrote: The more seriously you take the need to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, the angrier you should be?  
<https://www.politico.eu/article/paris-climate-deal-is-meaningless-cop21-emissions-china-obama/>
8. Research the relationship between economic activity and carbon dioxide. What economic activities lead to CO2 emissions? Why have CO2 emissions risen as countries developed? Why would emissions eventually peak? How could a developing country move away from CO2-generating activity? How would this affect its economy?
9. Essay: Imagine you are a negotiator for your country, which is deciding whether to join an international agreement to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. In your essay, consider the following questions: How can your country be sure every other country will keep its commitments to a treaty requiring significant emissions reductions? Do you know for certain what impact the agreement will have on the climate in the future? The cuts required would be costly to your country’s economy, and everyone else’s. How will you decide whether to recommend joining the agreement?
10. Research the Kyoto Protocol and write a report. What was it? What were its goals? When was it negotiated? Which countries were parties to it? What about the U.S.? What were the main conflicts between developing countries and developed countries? Have the goals been met? What, if any, impact on the climate has it had? Compare and contrast the Kyoto Protocol with the Paris Climate Agreement.

## 11. Treaty Power: Executive agreements and treaties. Background Information for 11A and 11B.

Treaty power: The United States Constitution requires that the Senate approve, by a two-thirds vote, any treaty before it can become binding on the U.S.: “[The President] shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present concur.”

In the Paris Agreement, the U.S. and other countries weren’t making a legally binding promise to each other. There was no way of enforcing the commitments. Instead, countries were just announcing their goals. The hope was that, by publicly setting these goals, the countries would create expectations and peer pressure. That approach made it easier to get countries to agree to the deal. It also made it easier for President Obama to argue that the agreement wasn’t a treaty, and therefore didn’t need Senate approval.

When Donald Trump was elected, one of his goals was to repeal some of the restrictions President Obama had imposed on carbon dioxide emissions. With Donald Trump in office, the U.S. government was no longer committed to what President Obama agreed to in Paris. Although this agreement wasn’t binding, it would be awkward for America to remain officially committed to something it no longer had any intention of doing. Trump withdrew from the agreement.

When President Obama signed the Paris Climate Agreement, he knew the Republican Senate would be unlikely to approve it. So he didn’t submit it for ratification. Instead, he argued that it wasn’t a really a treaty. He said it was just a set of goals rather than a legally binding commitment.

However, some critics in Congress argued that the agreement was in fact a treaty. This is one of many cases in American history that the executive and legislative branches have disagreed over what is and is not a treaty.

Presidents often reach “executive agreements” with foreign leaders. In these cases, a president is making a commitment to another country’s leaders that he will take an action. This will usually be an action the president believes he has the legal authority to take on his own.

For example, in the case of the Paris Agreement, President Obama believed he had authority under environmental laws to impose the rules needed to meet his commitments. But he could not commit America to new laws by executive agreement. Nor could he make legally binding commitments to other countries. By contrast, a treaty approved by the Senate actually becomes part of the “supreme law of the land,” according to the Constitution.

Disagreement comes when Congress thinks the President has gone beyond his authority to make a personal commitment, and has instead made the country a party to a treaty.

A) Research one of the following executive agreements, or another one of your choice. Write a report on the agreement. Be sure to answer the following questions: Why did the U.S. president enter the agreement? What argument did he make that he had authority to do so (or what argument could he have made)? What controversy was there, if any, regarding the agreement? What controversy, if any, was there about the president’s authority to enter the agreement?

1. The Pact of Madrid, an agreement between the U.S. and Spain in 1953, early in the Cold War. Spain allowed the U.S. to build and use military bases, and in return the U.S. agreed to defend Spain from military attack. Spain at the time was not part of NATO, which was

created by treaty between the U.S. and other countries (mostly in Europe) as a defensive alliance against the Soviet Union.

2. President Carter's United States-Iran Agreement on Release of the American Hostages, which made concessions to Iran in return for the release of American diplomats being held hostage.
3. The Paris Peace Agreement of 1973 (Vietnam War).
4. President Obama's Iran nuclear deal, in which the U.S. and European countries agreed to allow more trade with Iran in return for Iran's concessions on its nuclear program.

- B) Research and report on one of the following treaties that presidents have agreed to, or another treaty of your choice. Why did the president want the treaty? Why did (or didn't) the Senate want it? What controversies were there surrounding the treaty? Why do you think the president submitted the agreement to the Senate as a treaty, rather than treating it an executive agreement?
1. The Jay Treaty with Britain in 1795
  2. Treaty of Versailles ending World War I (rejected by the Senate, which opposed U.S. involvement in the League of Nations)
  3. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
  4. The Kyoto Protocol (a treaty which never became law because President Clinton did not submit it to the Senate, knowing it would not be ratified)
  5. The Panama Canal Treaty, in which the U.S. agreed to give Panama control of the Panama Canal

## 12. Collective action problems:

When people would all benefit from cooperating, but people are unlikely to do so voluntarily, we have what is called a collective action problem. Usually, the problem comes because someone can benefit from the solution without contributing anything to it. A good example of this is national defense. Most people wouldn't voluntarily pay for it, so taxes are required.

Most problems aren't collective action problems. Consider the way we feed ourselves. A farmer grows and sells food, a grocer carries food at a store, and a family buys food to eat, without worrying about what everyone else in society will do.

Collective action problems can exist between countries, too. Perhaps no one country is willing to pay on its own to solve a worldwide problem. But if they can all get together and commit to solving the problem, a deal might be worthwhile for all of them.

Some people see climate change as an example of this kind of problem: if countries could all agree to reduce carbon emissions by a lot, they would all be better off. Others disagree, saying that the costs of the reductions in carbon emissions are greater than the benefits. If that is the case, collective action isn't worthwhile.

- A) List possible examples of collective action problems between countries. These can include cases where countries have tried to solve these problems through international agreements or laws.
- B) List possible examples of collective action problems that exist within countries, or between people in a group. You may include problems for which we have found solutions, either

governmental or non-governmental. You may also include collective action problems we haven't been able to solve.

C) What are some possible barriers to solving collective action problems?



Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Class \_\_\_\_\_ Per \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

## Paris Climate Agreement K-W-L Chart

**Directions:** Complete the **K** and **W** sections prior to watching the video. After you have seen the video, complete the **L** section and answer the two questions below the K-W-L chart.

<b>K</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>L</b>
What I know about the Paris Climate Agreement:	What I want to know about the Paris Climate Agreement:	What I've learned about the Paris Climate Agreement:

What is one positive statement you can make about the Paris Climate Agreement:

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What is one negative statement you can make about the Paris Climate Agreement?

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