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Geoengineering Experiments Shouldn't Require Global Agreement

By [Lee Lane](#)

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Last week in Asilomar, California, at a meeting sponsored by the Climate Institute, experts of various stripes gathered to discuss the future of geoengineering. Wikipedia describes geoengineering as efforts “to deliberately manipulate the Earth’s climate to counteract the effects of global warming from greenhouse gas emissions.” (Many scientists regard the term “climate engineering,” or CE for short, as a more accurate description.) As at all expert gatherings, one heard some very insightful things, and, one also heard some things that were, well, perhaps not so insightful.

Proposals to subject CE experiments to some form of global-scale participatory democracy fall in the latter category. At the conference, some versions of the idea were voiced more stridently than others. Essentially, though, all these demands rest on the same logic. CE, were it to be tested, might affect climate everywhere. Climate impacts everyone; so everyone should have a voice. No one would trust most Third World governments to protect the interests of their citizens; thus some means, it is claimed, must be found to assess the global general will.

As a matter of practical reason, this line of thought is faulty. About 40 percent of the world’s population, mostly those in very poor countries, has not even heard of climate change; therefore, insisting on proof of global informed consent as a precondition for testing CE amounts to saying that CE can never be tested—exactly the outcome that some may want, but not necessarily the one that best serves the interests of the people in whose names the demand is being made.

Further, governments of the more industrialized states have concrete obligations to their own peoples. The U.S. Constitution enjoins our government to promote the general welfare, and the context is clearly a national one. A U.S. government that allowed abstract notions of global informed consent to block action needed to protect Americans from harm would soon find itself out of office—and rightly so.

At the same time, post–World War II history also makes clear that Americans, all else being equal, prefer to achieve their own ends in ways that further those of other nations. Then too, growing global interdependence acts to reinforce U.S. interest of the wealth, stability, and welfare in other nations. It impels other open societies in the same direction. In effect, trade, linked markets, and mobile populations broaden the definition of enlightened self-interest.

This incentive for advanced states to take a broad view suggests one of the insightful things said at Asilomar. Ambassador Richard Benedick proposed that about 15 major world powers should manage large CE tests—and perhaps eventually deployment. Managing CE will entail many choices, and, as knowledge grows, it will be necessary to frequently fine-tune the system. Expectations and interests will differ, and bargaining costs may be high. With too many players, the process could easily grind to a halt. The major states, by virtue of their power to act alone on CE, automatically have a voice in CE decisions, and the far-flung nature of their interests ensures that many of them would pay heed to the risk of ill effects—wherever they might occur.

Limiting active control of CE to those states that already have the de facto power to affect outcomes

would deprive Third World kleptocracies of the chance to halt progress in hopes of exacting more bribes—one of the pathologies prominent in the current UN climate policy framework. To be sure, control by the major powers will likely be imperfect, but, then again, locking the world into a CE stalemate pending arrival of global-scale Periclean democracy seems to be an even less appealing option.

Image by [John Morton](#).

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 - [Monetary Policy](#) (16)
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 - [Trade](#) (24)
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 - [Africa](#) (5)
 - [Asia Pacific](#) (38)
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 - [Europe and Russia](#) (25)
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 - [War on Terror](#) (52)
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 - [Global Health](#) (23)
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 - [Supreme Court](#) (8)

- [Politics and Public Opinion](#) (183)
- [Society and Culture](#) (180)
- [Uncategorized](#) (19)

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