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Sciences, Publics, Politics

The Green New Dilemma

Following the demise in 2010 of federal cap-and-trade legislation aimed at slowing greenhouse gas emissions, environmental donors gathered in Chicago in 2011 to meet with David Axelrod and Rahm Emanuel, pressing the two senior White House advisers on why President Obama had not lobbied more aggressively for the bill. Despite devoting half a billion dollars to the cause, backers of the legislation struggled to win a single Republican vote, Emanuel responded. The previous year, he had advised the coalition of environmental and corporate leaders behind the legislation to shift support to an energy bill that did not include an economy-wide cap on carbon dioxide emissions. Emanuel was focused on putting points on the board, moving forward cautiously in order to protect Democratic control of Congress, playing a long game intended to build momentum for policy over an eight-year Obama presidency.

But the coalition and Democratic leaders in Congress chose to move forward with the cap-and-trade bill. In response, conservative groups and Republican leaders, aided by Fox News and libertarian donors, efficiently folded their opposition to the legislation into a larger narrative opposing big government, taxes, “socialism,” and “Obamacare,” spreading doubt about climate science in the process. The strategy mobilized Republican-leaning voters during the 2010 midterm elections, costing Democrats their majority in the House of Representatives, shutting the door on climate legislation during the rest of the Obama presidency. “Your DNA and my DNA are so different,” Emanuel reportedly told the environmental funders gathered at the Chicago meeting. “I’m about trying to get to first base. You’re about trying to hit it over the fence.”

Eight years later, having finally regained majority control of the House, Democrats and their environmentalist allies once again face a similar dilemma, one that has split the party heading into the 2020 elections. On one side are progressive insurgents who argue that Democrats should close ranks in support of the Green New Deal, an audacious plan sponsored by Sen. Edward Markey (D-MA), one of the authors of the

2010 cap-and-trade bill, and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), that urges a “national, social, industrial, and economic mobilization not seen since World War II and the New Deal.” The resolution calls not only for centralized government involvement in labor and energy markets and the setting of industrial policy to zero out greenhouse gas emissions within a decade, but also for dramatic expansion of social welfare spending, including a government jobs program, free college tuition, and Medicare-for-all.

The overarching aim of the Ocasio-Cortez/Markey plan is to transition the United States into a social democracy in the mold of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, and then to spread a similar Green New Deal model across other countries of the world. As argued by backers of the resolution, the long-standing problems of climate change and income inequality share common causes, rooted in a “neoliberal” capitalist economy that favors corporations, economic growth, and the wealthy over everything else. This imbalance in power has not only created a climate emergency, they argue, but also has perpetuated the historic oppression of the working class, women, the disabled, people of color, and other “frontline and vulnerable communities.”

In this regard, progressives see climate change as not only a crisis but also an opportunity. As argued by Naomi Klein in her 2014 best-selling book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, a climate movement inspired by bold policy proposals such as the Green New Deal, and equal in intensity to political movements that battled slavery and colonialism, would allow an alliance of left-wing groups to achieve a diverse range of social justice goals. For progressives, climate change, she argued, is the best chance to right the “festering wrongs” of colonialism and slavery, “the unfinished business of liberation.”

On the other side of the Green New Deal debate are left-of-center Democrats led by House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA). Heeding the lessons of cap-and-trade, these more pragmatic-minded legislators acknowledge the urgency of the problem but instead favor a series of climate and energy bills that have a stronger likelihood of eventual passage, establishing

momentum over the long term, while protecting Democratic electoral chances. Examples include R&D funding for clean energy and negative emissions technologies, narrowly targeted regulations aimed at cutting powerful greenhouse gases such as methane and hydrofluorocarbons, a national clean electricity standard, a carbon fee and rebate program, stronger energy efficiency standards for homes, buildings, and transportation, and an infrastructure funding bill that prioritizes resilience.

These pragmatists calculate that divided party control of government and intense hyper-partisanship are likely to endure for many years to come. Even if Democrats during the 2020 elections recapture the White House and Senate and maintain control of the House, the political structure of the nation suggests that these victories will be temporary. Since 1968, Democrats have controlled the executive and legislative branches *for a total of eight years out of 50*. To survive swings

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in party control, any climate and energy policy must be able to unify support from progressives and centrists but also win backing from at least some conservatives.

Many pragmatists also understand that given the sizable lobbying advantage of the fossil fuel industry and its allies, successful legislation will need the backing not only of some Republicans but also of at least a few major industry members. In the cases of health care reform and tobacco regulation, after decades of grassroots activism, historic bills passed because a pragmatic coalition of leaders granted concessions to long-standing industry opponents. A similar strategy is likely to apply to future climate change legislation. The pragmatists also recognize that to have a chance of rapidly decarbonizing the US economy, future legislation cannot focus solely on wind, solar, and batteries—the implausible path that many progressives insist on—but must also target innovation, cost reduction, and deployment across a broad range of low-carbon technologies.

In contrast, Green New Deal advocates have framed the choice for Americans in starkly binary terms: Either join us in a utopian quest to transform the United States into a social democracy or face the catastrophic consequences of a dystopian climate future. There are no other choices. In fact, their battle is as much against moderates and pragmatists as

it is against conservatives. “Moderate is not a stance,” Ocasio-Cortez told the audience at the 2019 South by Southwest ideas festival. “It’s just an attitude towards life of, like, ‘meh.’” The Super PAC Justice Democrats, which spearheaded Ocasio-Cortez’s Democratic primary defeat of a longtime moderate incumbent, has plans to do the same during the 2020 election cycle to other centrist Democrats who do not fully support the Green New Deal or other causes such as abolishing the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

Yet in their push for a social democratic America, Green New Deal proponents ignore the unique cultural and regional differences that have characterized the country since its founding, and that make a US-style social democracy virtually impossible to enact. The much-admired northern European social democracies of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark are characterized by a relatively unified political culture shared across national populations comparable in size to New York City, living together in relatively close geographic proximity. This makes it far easier in these countries to maintain consensus on behalf of generous social welfare programs and to win support for centralized decarbonization efforts. In contrast, the United States is a nation of 325 million people, more than 50 times bigger by population than Denmark or Norway. Americans are divided geographically across four million square miles and 11 distinct regional cultures, as Colin Woodward documents in his 2016 book, *American Character*. These regions never have been, nor are they likely ever to be, united by common purpose or principles.

The Green New Deal reflects the groupthink of Yankeedom and the Left Coast, regions that include New England, New York, the Upper Midwest, coastal California, Oregon, and Washington. Public sentiment in these regions has always tilted toward confidence in government as a tool for human betterment, complemented by egalitarian and communitarian values that prioritize the welfare of the most vulnerable and the protection of nature over the economic rights of individuals. Notably, three-quarters of the 90 current House cosponsors of the Green New Deal resolution represent districts in these regions that for the most part are also safe seats for Democrats. More than half of the cosponsors are from just California, New York, and Massachusetts. In contrast, the regional cultures of Greater Appalachia, the Tidewater region of coastal Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina, the Deep South, the Far West, and parts of the Southwest are characterized by either an intense commitment to individual sovereignty and personal liberty or an aristocratic libertarianism highly resistant to federal government dictates. Not surprisingly, only a handful of Democratic cosponsors of the Green New Deal resolution represent districts in these regions, which tend to lean Republican and conservative, and therefore require a Democratic officeholder to tread carefully.

Not only are the social democracy aspirations of Green New Deal proponents at odds with America’s pluralistic political

culture, but the proposal is also an anachronism, a form of political nostalgia in which progressives articulate their vision for transformative policy via the lens of what they believe was so special about mid-twentieth-century America. Such nostalgia, however, blinds advocates on the Left to the defining features of the present that any ambitious climate and energy strategy must navigate.

As progressives tell their version of the story, after passage of the New Deal in the 1930s and the Great Society programs of the 1960s, the United States was on its way to becoming a social democracy, only to be halted in 1980 by the emergence of radical neoliberal economics and the election of Ronald Reagan. By the 1990s, neoliberalism had infected the Democratic party, as the Clinton administration insisted that countries agreeing to the 1997 Kyoto climate treaty adopt a market-based, tradeable emission permits approach rather than command-and-control regulation, and as Clinton joined with congressional Republicans to cut social welfare benefits and loosen regulations on Wall Street.

But history is far more complex than this simple story, notes Yuval Levin in his 2016 book, *Fractured Republic*. As progressives have battled to combat problems such as climate change and inequality via enhanced federal spending and regulation, relying on technocratic expertise to justify the shift, multiple dimensions of American society have been moving in the opposite direction, becoming more diffuse, decentralized, and distrustful of technocrats. It is true that the mid-century years that progressives yearn for featured low income inequality, much higher unionization, and robust economic growth, but this economic prosperity was enabled by a two-decade lack of global competition, as Europe recovered from World War II and Asia embarked on economic modernization.

The brief historical moments for which progressives wax nostalgic were also periods of unusually high institutional confidence and optimism about government. When Lyndon Johnson was elected president in 1964, in a span of a few years he achieved landmark civil rights, Head Start, Medicare, and Social Security bills at a time when 77% of Americans said they trusted the federal government “always” or “most of the time” and as his Democratic party held two-thirds majorities in Congress. A similar level of trust in government existed in 1970 when Republican president Richard Nixon signed into law the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts and established the Environmental Protection Agency. Today, during an era of perpetually divided party control of government, trust stands at just 18%.

Over the past half-century, writes Levin, as federal government has become decentralized, more fragmented, and more distrusted, so has almost everything else in society, as a tightly wound, cohesive body politic forged in the aftermath of World War II dispersed in all directions. We moved from a mid-century culture of cohesion and solidarity

that was focused on public service, community, family, and church to a society that by the 1970s had become a culture focused on the Self. The best life became one of “maximum self-expression, self-actualization and maximum personal freedom, economic as well as lifestyle,” observed the *New York Times’s* David Brooks in a recent column. Today, as Brooks explained it, absent any shared sense of national identity, Americans on the Right view “our” kind of people as under attack from “theirs,” so that the solution is to “erect walls, build barriers and fight.” For their part, Americans on the Left see in neoliberal America “the story of class, racial and gender oppression” whose solution “is to rise up and destroy the systems of oppression.”

The Green New Deal intentionally magnifies these tribal distinctions. In the quest for climate progress, the goal is not to broker cross-alliances between the center-right, center-left, and left wing, drawing on the best ideas that those factions can offer, but rather to build progressive power. Yet what might be good for progressives in wresting control of the Democratic party from moderates is not likely to help combat climate change or be good for the country. People who are made conscious of their group membership are driven to participate on behalf of their groups, not the greater good, writes Lillian Mason in her 2018 book, *Uncivil Disagreement*. The tactics that progressives are employing, defining climate change as an “us versus them” battle between an intersectional Left and everyone else, only increases already intense political prejudice and animosity, stoking a righteousness that caricatures conservatives and the fossil fuel industry as “deniers” incapable of reason, and moderates as enablers of their evil.

Still, it is not enough for moderates and conservatives to poke holes in the reasoning of progressives, or to dismiss the Green New Deal out of hand. Ideas that empower a vital center of elected officials and decision-makers will be essential, helping to forge coalitions on behalf of politically viable and effective policy approaches that begin to make decisive progress toward a resilient, net-zero carbon economy. Among the major investments needed will be the fostering of a new solutions-focused conversation that critically evaluates conventional narratives about climate change as a social problem, exposes faulty thinking, holds those in power accountable, promotes cross-cutting dialogue, cultivates optimism and cooperation rather than anger and polarization, and encourages better decisions and more inclusive politics by widening the scope of available technological and policy options rather than narrowing them as part of a self-defeating strategy to distinguish “us” from “them.”

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