The Green New Deal and the case against incremental climate policy

The only way Democrats can hope to pass climate legislation is by radically shaking up the status quo balance of powers.

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The public debate over the Green New Deal has taken on a surreal quality.

The non-binding resolution introduced to Congress last month, meant to address the dual crises of climate change and growing inequality, is just 14 pages long. It only takes a minute to read it. Yet the debate has been dominated by phantasms and lurid projections, all sorts of things imagined to be in the GND, or imagined to be prohibited by it (e.g. cars and airplanes). The reality of what’s on those pages has made only glancing appearances.

The most puzzling critiques have come not from Republicans, but from the center left, broadly speaking. They urge policies to reduce greenhouse gases that are perfectly commensurate with the GND framework ... but present them as alternatives to the GND framework. (We'll look at some examples later.)
The connecting theme, the message, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, is this: move more slowly. Accept piecemeal progress rather than a big thing. Don't push beyond strict carbon policy into social or economic policy.

A chorus of voices is telling GND proponents, in short, to ask for less.

If the choice these critiques presented — ask for everything and get nothing versus ask for and get incremental progress — were in fact the choice on the table, the critiques would make sense. During the 2016 election, I wrote a few critiques like that myself, scolding activists for asking for big impossible things because I thought Hillary Clinton would be good at grinding out incremental progress, which I viewed as the only progress possible.

I think it’s long past time to admit that it isn’t possible. Republicans will block any federal Democratic climate initiative that they have the power to block. Period. Big stuff. Small stuff. Anything.

And under the current alignment of forces, they can block everything.

Even if they lose the presidency and both houses of Congress in 2020, they will still have the Senate filibuster, and as long as they do, they can and will strangle any Democratic bill. (There won’t be 60 Democratic Senators anytime soon, and anyone who thinks eight or nine Republican senators will vote for climate legislation is smoking the good stuff.)

The only way Democrats can hope to pass any legislation — not big legislation, any legislation — is by radically shaking up the status quo balance of powers. That would mean getting rid of the filibuster, possibly granting statehood to Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico, reforming the electoral college and voting laws, and possibly expanding the Supreme Court.

Every piece of that reform agenda is big, risky, and unlikely to succeed, and at the end of it there would still be an enormous struggle over climate legislation (even getting 51 Democratic senators to be bold is a challenge). If you were in Vegas, you’d bet against any of this happening.

But let’s be clear: The alternative is not small, sensible, bipartisan steps, as so many pundits and pols are promising. The alternative is nothing. And on climate change, nothing means disaster. Those who would ask us to resign ourselves to disaster should, at the very least, frankly acknowledge the implications.
Incrementalism only works with willing partners on the other side, and there are none

Economist Brad DeLong spoke with my Vox colleague Zack Beauchamp earlier this year and explained the theory of change with which he and his fellow “Rubin Democrats” went into the Obama administration. The idea was, make concessions to reasonable Republicans on policy — “Barack Obama rolls into office with Mitt Romney’s health care policy, with John McCain’s climate policy, with Bill Clinton’s tax policy, and George H.W. Bush’s foreign policy,” DeLong says — and build a coalition from the center out.

“And did George H.W. Bush, did Mitt Romney, did John McCain say a single good word about anything Barack Obama ever did over the course of eight solid years?” he asks. “No, they fucking did not.”

From the beginning of Obama’s presidency, Republicans (accurately!) perceived that two-party partisan politics is a zero-sum game and that any cooperation they offered would count as a victory for their opponents. So they offered none. They vowed total, unstinting opposition and stuck to it with remarkable consistency for eight years. They stiff-armed Obama on everything, big and small, no matter the concessions he was willing to make, until he finally resigned himself to using executive powers. (His last major legislative accomplishment, Obamacare, passed the Senate with 60 Democratic votes and zero Republicans.)

That strategy paid off for Republicans beyond their wildest aspirations, yielding them a huge majority of state legislative seats, governors mansions, and eventually both houses of Congress and the presidency.

And the “moderates” in the GOP, to whom all those policy concessions were made? They herded right along, as captive to right-wing media as everyone else in their caucus. As one of those moderates, David Frum (who eventually escaped the party), put it in 2010: “Republicans originally thought Fox worked for us. Then we discovered that we work for Fox.”

Every dismal trend on the right — increasing insularity, extremism, ethnonationalism, anti-intellectualism — has continued and accelerated ever since Obama was elected. Trump is the symbol of those trends, their apotheosis, but he is not their cause.

The moderate Republican is an extinct species. “Today, there’s literally nobody on the right between those frantically accommodating Donald Trump, on the one hand, and us [Rubin
Democrats] on the other,” Delong says.

With no center-right, there is no center. It is blustering, trolling, and shitposting all the way down now.

Where among the intellectual and moral wreckage of the modern GOP do “moderate” Democrats hope to find counterparts for their incrementalism? What evidence is there from recent history that they will find partners willing to take real political risks?
John McCain was the one Senate vote that saved Obamacare from repeal and prevented millions of people from being thrown off their insurance. He’s not around any more. Who in the GOP is going to stick their neck out for a carbon tax or a clean energy standard?

Let’s take the temperature of the Republican Party on climate change by having a look at their reaction to the GND.

The GND has exposed the GOP’s bankruptcy on climate change

Almost immediately upon the introduction of the GND resolution, the right spun off into a bizarre parallel universe where the GND bans cows and cars and airplanes and backyard barbecues and capitalism.

Late last month, a group of actual adults assembled on the Capitol steps for a press conference in which they ate hamburgers before a small handful of reporters, in defiance of their entirely imagined hamburger ban.
The same rep, Utah Republican Rob Bishop, later said the Green New Deal is “tantamount to genocide.”

On Tuesday, another Utah Republican, Sen. Mike Lee — alleged to be one of the thoughtful, policy-oriented Republicans — gave remarks on the GND on the Congress floor that featured ... well, you kind of have to see it.

Here is Mike Lee’s helpful alternative to the GND:
Here's Sen. Ted Cruz being funny, or trying.
These are grown men. Adults. They have not made the minimal effort necessary to understand the GND, they are willfully lying about it, and their party has absolutely no answer to the problem of climate change, about which they have consistently lied and dissembled for decades.

Meanwhile, the supposedly serious conservatives at the American Action Forum — run by Douglas Holtz-Eakin, who was once head of the CBO under G.W. Bush and a reasonably respected conservative wonk — were producing a “study” of what the GND resolution would cost. The resolution contains no actual policies, mind you, so the “study” was ludicrous guesswork from top to bottom, producing the Austin-Powers sounding price tag of $93 trillion.

Naturally, every conservative with a camera in his face has repeated this number like gospel.

What about the Republicans who pose as sensible on climate change? They aren’t much better. Sen. Marco Rubio criticizes the GND and instead suggests sensible policies like ... a study he once commissioned. (Seriously.)

Florida Republican Rep. Matt Gaetz has sponsored a “Green Real Deal” resolution in Congress. “The resolution acknowledges climate change as a threat to national security and says the government should promote innovation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions,” Zack Colman reports in Politico, “but it does not set any targets for future carbon cuts and calls for keeping the door open to all types of energy production.”

So, no carbon cuts, no reductions in fossil fuels, but instead ... “innovation.” And what might that mean? Lamar Alexander offered a glimpse in “One Republican’s Response to Climate Change.” His response? More research. (Seriously.)
Incidentally: We’ve seen this play before, back when Democrats were pushing the Waxman-Markey climate bill in 2009. For months and months, Democrats were led on by promises of cooperation if they just weakened the legislation a little more. It ended up so weak as to be virtually irrelevant … and then died a sad death in the Senate, all its “moderate” Republican partners (including John McCain and Lindsey Graham) having abandoned it once the political pressure got turned up.

All those Republicans today, handwaving about how they might support a carbon tax? What reason is there to think that support will hold up under the inevitable pounding it takes from right-wing media? What reason is there to think any Republicans in Congress will rally to offer a Democratic administration a victory, even a small one?

None. There is no evidence, no reason. It’s just a feeling people have — the idea of bipartisan cooperation warms a certain kind of heart. Certain politicians and pundits are drawn to the idea like a moth to a flame. It makes them feel reasonable and above mere partisanship. And that feeling is apparently immune to the lessons of experience.

**All these small things are not viable alternatives to the big thing: equitable decarbonization**

The urge for caution explains many of the peculiar reactions to the GND from people who allege to share its concern about climate change.

The dominant mode of such criticism is to pose various policies as “alternatives” to the GND. Here’s the USA Today editorial board **doing it.** Here’s former Colorado governor and inexplicable presidential candidate John Hickenlooper **doing it.** Here’s economist Steven Rattner, who served in Treasury under Obama, **doing it.** Here’s the editorial board of the Washington Post **doing it.** Here’s failed California gubernatorial candidate Michael Shellenberger **doing it.**

And so on. What all these criticisms have in common is that they put forward policies — carbon pricing, research money, subsidies for existing nuclear power plants, protections for hard-hit communities — that fit perfectly well in the broad GND framework. The GND simply sets out the goal of decarbonizing the economy in an equitable way that invests in American jobs. It is silent on which policy instruments might work best do so. (The policy framework is still **being worked out.**)

It does not “shun the private sector.” It does not prohibit nuclear power. It does not propose to raise energy prices and do nothing to help affected households. It no more...
does any of these things than it bans cows.

The only way any of these critiques make sense is if you read them as counseling less. Do these things and not other things. Reduce carbon emissions, but not so fast or so much. Protect hard-hit communities, but don’t ensure everyone has a job. Tweak market parameters, but don’t make big public investments.

Why? Of course some critics believe in good faith that policies that set grand ambitions we don’t yet know how to meet are, ipso facto, a bad idea. Some believe that policies to protect workers’ jobs, wages, and basic dignity are government overreach, or won’t work. Some believe it’s inappropriate for governments to interfere in markets more than absolutely necessary.

But few of the GND’s left-leaning critics are arguing against liberal social and economic policy as such, at least not directly. The implied argument always seems to be: That much can’t pass, but something more modest can. Trying to help workers activates a bunch of opposition, but more technocratic policies won’t. Something bold and aspirational will overwhelm Congress and voters, but they will embrace something deliberate and careful.

The House Democratic Caucus has recently produced a group of “New Democrats” who are making this pitch explicit: “New Democrats position themselves as realistic alternative to Green New Deal.” (The New Democrats are also offering up a bunch of policies that are perfectly commensurate with the GND framework.)

But what does that mean, “realistic”? Why are any of the policies any of these people are offering any more likely to pass the US Congress than the bolder policies necessary to achieve GND goals? They would all get zero Republican votes. They would all ground out in the filibuster. So what does this “realism” consist in exactly?

GND critics are frustratingly silent on this point — silent, in general, on questions of political economy, which are central to this debate. This isn’t a grad school seminar, with teams competing to construct the best policy package. Nobody’s getting graded. The only thing that matters is what can become law and begin to shift things on the ground. And GND critics have almost nothing to say on the subject other than the occasional handwaving at bipartisanship.

None mention the filibuster or any of the other procedural barriers that stand in the way of all progressive legislation. Plenty imagine that they might appeal to the centrist legislators
of their fantasies, but none discuss policy proposals in terms of their ability to marshal grassroots energy on the side of the aisle that actually cares about global warming. None contemplates how to build the power to *force* change, as opposed to persuading status quo powers to accept it.

They simply imagine the lost world that Brad Delong once believed in, a world where policy is built from the center out. But that world no longer exists. That center no longer exists.

**A small chance is better than no chance at all**

The GND theory of change is a long shot — a desperate Hail Mary in a game where time is running short. But at least it is a theory of change. The proffered alternative, a vague word salad invoking bipartisanship, centrism, and “common sense” (i.e., DC conventional wisdom), is not a theory of change at all. There is no story to tell about how, if the basic power relationships of US federal politics remain in place, modest, incremental climate policies can pass.

Anyone who believes the US can’t do big things any more should certainly feel free to say so. (I believe that myself every other weekday or so.) But those same people should acknowledge that, absent big changes, the US can’t do small things anymore either. To say big things can’t get done is to say nothing can get done — that we will return to the Obama-era politics of Dems proposing things, Republicans blocking them, and a Dem president fiddling around on the margins with executive powers.

On climate change, that is catastrophic. As I’ve said *over* and *over* again: The status quo leads to disaster. Unless you have a plan for changing the status quo, you are implicitly accepting that disaster.

I’m a liberal technocrat by nature. I would love nothing more than to time travel back to 1990 and design a set of smooth, gradually ratcheting policies that would slowly, in the background, wring carbon emissions out of the economy. We would be on track by now if we’d done that. (But the same kind of people arguing for incremental policies now were opposing them back then — at any given time, whatever progressives want is just a bit too much.)

However, largely thanks to the Republican Party, we didn’t act back then. And in the decades since, I’ve seen two things happening.
One is climate hawks begging and begging for cooperation from the right, tweaking their messaging, making their policies more “market friendly,” throwing in subsidies for fossil fuel research, whatever they could think of. And they have precious little to show for it.

The second is the Republican Party, at every juncture, becoming more cruel, insular, anti-intellectual, bigoted, and focused on power at the expense of any other shared value. There may be a handful of instances since Newt Gingrich first became House Speaker in 1995 when they took a different path. But not many.

Republicans aren’t going to get less obstructionist on climate change any time soon — not until the chokehold that right-wing media and fossil fuel companies have on the GOP is broken. Democrats will figure out a way to translate their larger share of the electorate into real political power, overcoming the many systemic biases that give conservative rural and suburban Americans disproportionate representation, or gridlock will continue, even if Democrats win big in 2020. And if gridlock continues, incremental progress on climate change is no more possible than revolution.

Enacting sweeping reform, in the face of a US political system heavily weighted in favor of the status quo, requires a groundswell. A popular mandate. And that in turn requires an agenda that can spark the public imagination and pull in apathetic and infrequent voters. Policy that is designed not to bother anyone won’t do that.

The house is on fire, as the 16-year-old activist Greta Thunberg reminds us. Now is the time for courage, out in the open.

Further reading:

- If you want to see what a Democrat who is cautious but collegial toward the GND looks like, check out Rep. Paul Tonko’s “Framework for Climate Action in the US Congress.” Tonko — who chairs the House Energy Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change — has been quick to say that his framework is not an alternative to the GND, but complementary to it. And all it is, really, is a restatement of GND goals in language less likely to startle excitable moderates.

- If you would like to read the best possible argument against the argument I make in this post, read this essay from Jerry Taylor at the Niskanen Center. Refreshingly among GND critics, he is sympathetic, respectful, and well-armed with political science. He argues that the GND strategy of seeking big, radical, outside-in change will “crash on the launching pad” and set back the climate effort. He is under no illusions about the prospects for Republican cooperation on incremental progress, but where I think the prospects are zero, he thinks they are merely low. Agree or disagree, it’s worth reading.