

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH THE GREEN NEW DEAL?

By Alice Loyd

Climate change is finally getting a lot of mainstream media coverage, and recently most of that has been about the phenomenon known as the Green New Deal (the GND). The GND and its photogenic sponsor Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (also known by her initials AOC), Democrat from New York, have even taken attention away from the story of the border wall, allowing us to read about proposals to solve a real crisis. The GND at present is a resolution introduced by Rep. Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Ed Markey, D-MA, on February 7, 2019. It begins, "Whereas the October 2018 report entitled 'Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C° [states] human activity is the dominant cause of observed climate change over the past century. . . . [It is] the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal."

The resolution is basically a political messaging document, issuing a challenge to Congress and the country. While the actions it prescribes are not more radical than the ones that will be needed if we are to prevent the worst outcomes, they exceed what we are accustomed to hearing from lawmakers, and they've caused a stir. Republicans are excited about GND because they think it will divide the Democrats and alarm the voters. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is so pleased he [plans to send](#) the resolution to the Senate floor for a vote quickly "to see how they feel"—a strategy intended to force Democrats to go public before any of the measures the resolution contains have been fully considered. No part of the proposal has been offered as a bill in either house at this writing.

Here are some of the objectives included in the resolution as they appear in the online [posting](#) of the document:

- (A) building resiliency against climate change-related disasters
- (B) repairing and upgrading the infrastructure in the United States
- (C) meeting 100 percent of the power demand in the United States through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources, including by dramatically expanding and upgrading existing renewable power sources and by deploying new capacity
- (D) building or upgrading to energy-efficient, distributed, and "smart" power grids, and working to ensure affordable access to electricity
- (E) upgrading all existing buildings in the United States and building new buildings to achieve maximal energy efficiency, water efficiency, safety, affordability, comfort, and durability, including through electrification
- (F) spurring massive growth in clean manufacturing in the United States and removing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from manufacturing and industry as much as is

technologically feasible, including by expanding renewable energy manufacturing and investing in existing manufacturing and industry

(G) working collaboratively with farmers and ranchers in the United States to eliminate pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector as much as is technologically feasible, including by supporting family farming; by investing in sustainable farming and land use practices that increase soil health; and by building a more sustainable food system that ensures universal access to healthy food

(H) overhauling transportation systems in the United States to eliminate pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector as much as is technologically feasible, including through investment in zero-emission vehicle infrastructure and manufacturing; clean, affordable, and accessible public transportation; and high-speed rail.

The socialism label that many politicians and publications are applying relates to the resolution's call for a mobilization that guarantees wage and benefit parity for workers affected by the transition; offers high-quality union jobs that pay prevailing wages; hires local workers; offers training and advancement opportunities; guarantees a family-sustaining wage, adequate family and medical leave, paid vacations, and retirement security to all people of the United States; and strengthens and protects the right of all workers to organize, unionize, and collectively bargain free of coercion, intimidation, and harassment. The resolution's social justice emphasis is seen in statements such as this: "A Green New Deal must be developed through transparent and inclusive consultation, collaboration, and partnership with frontline and vulnerable communities, labor unions, worker cooperatives, civil society groups, academia, and businesses."

In summary, the resolution calls for actions that specifically target greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuels, specifies a number of social goals, and concludes with a succinct list of expected outcomes of a Green New Deal: that as the economy decarbonizes it will provide "all people of the United States with high-quality health care; affordable, safe, and adequate housing; economic security; and access to clean water, clean air, healthy and affordable food, and nature."

The Green New Deal is alarming to conservatives for several reasons. It calls for large government investment, it aims to move wealth downward, and it goes against the interests of those profiting most from the fossil fuel economy—although the GND hopes to achieve enough economic growth for everyone to have a share. Noah Smith writes on [Bloomberg](#), "First, the plan overreaches in its desire to deliver a raft of expensive new entitlements—guaranteed jobs, benefits, health care, housing, education, income and more. If the large deficits required to pay for all of these things ended up harming the economy, it would actually hurt the cause of limiting climate change rather than help it." Timothy P. Carney says in [Washington Examiner](#): "All of these dreams become real only if the federal government forks over billions and billions to General Electric, Siemens, monopoly utilities, Tesla, Google, and the other corporate giants

who hire the right lobbyists and position themselves to pocket the handouts. This is how it will take shape, even if it isn't exactly the same as the unicorns and rainbows that some of its authors might really have in mind.”

From a different framework, on [Green Social Thought](#) Stan Cox of the Land Institute criticizes the plan as being “less of what we don’t need”—growth. He says the GND would “hitch its sustainable-infrastructure investment and taxation reforms to the existing economy,” a strategy he calls “the politically palatable, well-worn, but rarely successful equality-through-growth route.” He believes, “Any effective strategy to drive emissions down to zero cannot also expect to spur aggregate growth; it would in fact curtail and even reverse the growth of GDP.” He continues, “Fortunately—well-tended conventional wisdom notwithstanding—de-growth in America would not necessarily bring on a Great-Depression-style social catastrophe.”

CES advocates a transition away from the industrial-economic values of this period and toward an age governed by ecological and cultural values. Those values would embrace clean energy and social justice but would view continued economic growth that involved material throughput¹ in the wealthy global North as unjust as well as unrealistic.

Writing in [The Guardian](#), economist Ann Pettifor says a Green New Deal has to embrace the need for structural change to the global financial and economic system. “Its ambition is on a much grander scale than Roosevelt’s 1930s New Deal. . . . To tackle climate change we need simultaneously to tackle the root cause of growing toxic emissions: a self-regulating, globalised financial system that injects exponential supplies of unregulated credit into the hands of speculators and consumers. Credit that is used in turn to inflate the prices of existing assets, and to fuel consumption of the earth’s finite assets extracted via the energy of fossil fuels. Only once we switch off, regulate and moderate the ‘tap’ of ‘easy money’ will it be possible to regulate and ‘switch off’ the toxic emissions of fossil fuels.”

Six of the largest, most influential environmental advocacy groups have not signed a [letter](#) in support of the New Green Deal that was sent to members of Congress. Signed by 626 other environmental groups as of February 14, the letter is a broad endorsement, and the reluctance to sign by Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Fund, Mom’s Clean Air Force, Environment America, and Audubon Society may indicate only that more study is required. Two green groups founded by Democratic celebrities are also absent: Al Gore’s Climate Reality Project and Tom Steyer’s NextGen America. As of February 17 there were 95 co-signers to the resolution in the US House. The [Sunrise](#) Movement website maintains a tally and offers a way for individuals to sign in support.

A survey conducted by think tank [Data for Progress](#) shows high voter support for key Green New Deal tenets like improving water infrastructure and a 100 percent renewables mandate,

¹ Each time we purchase a good or service we set in motion a chain of activities that has an impact on the physical world.

but lower enthusiasm when voters were presented with higher-cost options for achieving these goals and mandates with strict timelines, like proposing only electric cars be sold by 2030. A [green jobs guarantee](#) outpolls a straight jobs guarantee, especially among young people. It even brings Trump voters almost (but not quite) up to majority approval. A [survey](#) from Yale and George Mason universities finds that respondents really like the "Green New Deal," with 81% of registered voters either "strongly" or "somewhat" supporting these features of the deal: a move to 100% renewable power within 10 years, upgrades to grid and other infrastructure, and job training. This includes nearly two-thirds of Republican respondents. Relevant to this high rating may be the fact that the poll question only partially describes the sweeping proposal.

A [Green New Deal](#) has been part of the Green Party's platform for more than a decade, and Jill Stein had been campaigning on it since 2012. The term [can be traced back to Thomas Friedman](#), who wrote a [New York Times column in 2007](#) about the concept and later expanded the idea in a book. The following year Barack Obama brought Van Jones into his administration to try to implement a small a version of Green New Deal, or "Green Jobs." "Green New Deal" was only a working title until articles began to appear calling it a Green New Deal before the organizers decided on a name. Its sudden surge into the mainstream happened after Sunrise, a youth-led environmental organization, held a sit-in in Nancy Pelosi's office.

Given this history and the absence up to now of specific legislation, David Roberts, writing on [Vox](#), asks, "What must be in a policy platform for it to earn the name GND?" Based on answers he received when he did a sampling: 1) The plan must decarbonize the economy. The young people who will have to live with the effects of climate change want a plan that begins with what is necessary rather than what is deemed politically possible. 2) The plan must include a federal jobs guarantee and large-scale public investments. Again, the GND is not just climate policy. It's about transforming the economy, lifting the up the poor and middle class, and creating a more muscular, active public sector. 3) The plan must include a just transition. Several people he spoke with stressed that they want to avoid the mistakes of the original New Deal, many elements of which entrenched or exacerbated racial inequalities. Everyone wants to make sure that the plan includes protections for those hit hardest by historical discrimination and those set to suffer most from the effects of climate change.

Advocates are working now to create legislation in both House and Senate reflecting the GND goals. Most commentaries express doubt that any bill addressing climate change in an effective way has a chance of success—yet. What the New Green Deal has undeniably done, however, is to raise the issue to a higher priority. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-KY, may be right in betting many Democrats aren't ready to take the risk of voting yes at this time, but Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer is not backing down. On February 14 he [said](#) Democrats would not be intimidated by the "cynical stunt" of voting on the Green New Deal resolution, and demanded the Kentucky Republican acknowledge the scientific consensus around climate change and commit the chamber to tackling the problem. "I challenge Leader McConnell to say that climate change is real, that it's caused by humans, and that Congress needs to act," Schumer said. Seen as challenge to inactivity, the New Green Deal is already a success.