

The Future of US Climate Politics

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Leslie Vinjamuri speaks to Gitika Bhardwaj about the state of the climate debate in the US and how the new Democrat-controlled House of Representatives can change the conversation.



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2019-01-20-Alexandria-Ocasio-Cortez(MediumSize).jpg



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez addresses a crowd at the annual Women's March on 19 January 2019. Ocasio-Cortez is one of the newly-elected Democrats pushing for a Green New Deal. Photo: Getty Images.

Given the partisan state of US politics, how can discussion on climate change be depoliticized? Is there a path forward for bipartisan action on the

climate without major changes in US politics?

Donald Trump has taken an active interest in combating the basic facts of climate science. But it hasn't worked. Indeed Trump's rhetorical attacks on climate science appear to have backfired. **The percentage of Americans that believe in climate science has increased 3 per cent since last March, bringing the total to roughly 73 per cent, and 7 in 10 Americans take this issue personally.**

Trump's attacks on internationalism also seem to be failing at least when it comes to the environment. The public has not lined up behind Trump's decision to exit the Paris deal. A significant majority – about 69 per cent – think international cooperation is critical and **want the US to remain in the Paris Agreement.**

Still, if his goal is to dent environmental progress, then Trump can still claim some success. He has certainly fostered the perception that

environmentalism is costly and that the payoff isn't worth the sticker shock. Leadership matters. At home, it is more difficult than it should be to get the backing of the public for environmentally-friendly policies – especially for taxes – and, in 2018 alone, US carbon dioxide emissions rose 3.4 per cent.

The opportunity-cost of the US ducking a leadership role internationally is also considerable. Persuading China and other emerging economies to follow through with key environmental policies is bound to be harder when the US president makes shirking on international environmental commitments acceptable.

Trump has so far rolled back 76 national environmental regulations since announcing his intention to withdraw from the global Paris Agreement in 2016. How might the newly Democratic-controlled House of Representatives

challenge him on this issue?

Environmental issues won't be invisible in the 116th US Congress. Already, Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, has created a new Select Committee on the Climate Crisis and progressive Democrats in the House are championing a Green New Deal for America.

This 'new deal' is a strategy that is based on the idea that environmentalism can foster rather than impede job growth. It aims to help America transition to a zero-carbon economy by investing in things like smart public transportation which is good for the environment, good for people and good for jobs too.

Of course passing legislation won't be easy so long as Republicans hold the Senate and continue to back the president. But the Democrats in this Congress are already changing the political discourse on climate issues, and importantly, they

have control over some key committees like the Committee on Science, Space and Technology. Democrats and Republicans can now have conversations about climate issues in a public space which I think really matters.

State governments and municipalities representing areas that account for almost \$10 trillion in GDP have committed to taking bold action on climate change, with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announcing a state plan for building a zero-carbon economy. How significant are Trump's policies with such commitments at the state level?

It is true that cities, states, a number of influential individuals – Mike Bloomberg and John Kerry for example – state governors, university presidents and all sorts of organizations have gotten on board to push America to meet the targets that were negotiated in Paris in 2015. This has created a lot of positive momentum in states and cities. The

corporate sector also understands the benefits of environmentalism and can see the growth potential in clean energy.

But it would be foolish to underestimate the influence of the president – for example when it comes to deregulation. We've seen this administration roll back environmentally-friendly regulations and that has very significant consequences.

Some of these setbacks are temporary and can be reversed by the next US government, but it will take a lot of work, and time matters when it comes to the environment. Things do not stand still and there is a lot of potential for damage in the short term. Cities, states, universities and corporates are all part of the solution but, inevitably, if you don't have everyone on the same page you're pitching at a lower level.

The impacts of climate change will force more and

more state governments, including those run by Republicans, to deal with the reality of its effects. Could this eventually change the conversation over climate change in the Republican party?

This must be the case, especially in states that experience extreme weather like wildfires and hurricanes, for example. Some of these states are already quite progressive on environmental matters. But the pressure to respond to extreme environmental effects that are so clearly linked to changes in the climate can't be underestimated. The facts on the ground are becoming increasingly difficult to deny.

In many respects, the public is ahead of politicians when it comes to environmentalism, and when Americans witness a hurricane or wildfire or a change in the coastlines, this is a pretty serious counter to a climate denier in Washington.

The second volume of the 4th National Climate

Assessment warns that the effects of climate change could cost America billions of dollars, **damaging as much as 10 per cent of the US economy and disrupting trade significantly**, by the end of the century.

How prepared are US voters to have tough conversations around funding green solutions and is this likely to change as the effects of climate change increase?

The publication of the second volume of the 4th National Climate Assessment last year was resounding in its endorsement of the negative effects of carbon emissions. More than 300 experts and 13 federal departments and agencies contributed to the study. The effort to bury the results of this report were shocking – it was released on 23 November 2018, the day after Thanksgiving, which is America's biggest holiday and when many Americans are still out shopping

or on vacation. But it still got a lot of attention.

Still, the Trump administration continues to be a thorn in the side of progress on the environment. At last year's UN climate negotiations in Poland, the US along with Russia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait succeeded in watering down approval of the landmark IPCC report which made evident why the world needs to keep global warming to below 1.5C.

A lot of people in the US are living on limited resources. We have witnessed middle class wage stagnation since the early 1990s so it is hardly surprising that a lot of people are frightened by the idea that environmentalism might be expensive. There is a lot of creative thinking about how to square this circle but communicating this is difficult in the current political climate.

The idea behind the Green New Deal, or the idea that growth can be de-linked from resources, is

compelling but these ideas sometimes gets lost when they are translated into concrete policies and shared with the public.

Climate change action is becoming a Democratic talking point, following calls, as mentioned, for a Green New Deal to be potentially funded by **a tax on the rich**, which has opened a debate between elite and progressive Democrats.

Given that bold action will be needed in coastal cities to prepare for the changing climate, which include Democratic strongholds, what trade-offs will need to be made within the Democratic party to sufficiently address climate change?

There's a general question for the Democratic party and then there's one that plays out in the climate change arena. Can progressives, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and moderates, like Kirstin Gillibrand and Nancy Pelosi, unite around a common agenda with a vision that's realistic but

inspired and holds the party together? This is especially relevant when it comes to questions of climate change.

Taxing the wealthy at extremely high rates is always going to face a wall of resistance in the United States. But I am quite optimistic. There is a growing recognition of the scale of the problem and the political discourse in Washington is going to be different over the next two years.

Why 'Green New Deal' Has Washington in Such a Lather

By [Ari Natter](#)

February 17, 2019, 6:00 PM GMT+13

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal created a sprawling range of public-works programs to address the Great Depression. Eighty years later, some present-day members of his party say a program no less grand in scope is needed to address a new crisis -- the existential threat of global warming. A band of self-described progressive Democrats energized by the party's successes in last year's midterm elections have unveiled a wish list of government actions they've packaged as the "Green New Deal." It's long on ambition but short on details.

1. What is meant by 'Green New Deal'?

The term has kicked around for more than a decade among advocates of a concerted government effort to turn environmentalism into an economic engine.

Thomas L. Friedman of the New York Times, in a 2007 column, called for "a Green New Deal — one in which government's role is not funding projects, as in the original New Deal, but seeding basic research, providing loan guarantees where needed and setting standards, taxes and incentives that will spawn 1,000

G.E. Transportations for all kinds of clean power.” In its most recent incarnation, Green New Deal is the name adopted by Democrats led by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts in a bid to dramatically shift the U.S. away from fossil fuels and other sources of the emissions that cause global warming.

2. What would it do?

The group’s manifesto, in the form of a non-binding resolution offered in both chambers of the U.S. Congress, calls for a “10-year national mobilization” to shift the nation to 100 percent “clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources” -- a highly ambitious goal, given that fossil fuels (petroleum, natural gas and coal) accounted for 80 percent of U.S. energy consumption in 2017. Weaving together what had been a hodgepodge of progressive proposals and aspirations, the plan calls for upgrading “all existing buildings” for maximum energy efficiency and removing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions “as much as is technologically feasible” from manufacturing, agriculture and transportation. For

manufacturing, agriculture and transportation. For good measure, the program calls for steps to expand educational opportunities, increase “high-quality union jobs” and provide health care and housing for all Americans -- a progressive wish list not directly connected to renewable energy.

Fossil Fuels Still Rule

U.S. energy consumption by source, 2017

Data: U.S. Energy Information Administration; graphic by Bloomberg QuickTake

3. How would the plan accomplish all that?

Answers to that question, and how much it would cost, are largely absent for now. Green New Deal proponents say their immediate goal is to change the debate about the climate, to inject a greater sense of urgency and ambition. What’s been put down on paper is akin to a “request for proposals,” Ocasio-Cortez explained on Twitter. “We’ve defined the scope and where we want to go. Now let’s assess + collab on projects,” she wrote.

4. How has that been received?



Ernest Moniz Photographer: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg

With lots of doubt. Ernest Moniz, U.S. energy secretary under President Barack Obama, called the plan “impracticable” and “unrealizable.” Washington Post columnist Catherine Rampell said it’s an example of “lazy sloganeering.” To Bloomberg Opinion columnist Noah Smith, it “overreaches in its desire to deliver a raft of expensive new entitlements -- guaranteed jobs, benefits, health care, housing, education, income and more.” The Economist called it “a deeply unserious proposal.” Others praised the plan as a welcome first step. “No matter what you think of the specifics, or lack of them, this is a conversation that is long overdue and necessary.”

conversation that is long overdue -- and necessarily begins with a shout, not a whisper," Liam Denning wrote in Bloomberg Opinion. Former Vice President Al Gore, an early champion of action to address global warming, praised the document as "the beginning of a crucial dialogue."

5. How much support does it have?

The resolution's 68 co-sponsors in the House and 11 co-sponsors in the Senate (as of Feb. 15) are all Democrats (or caucus with them, in the case of Senator Bernie Sanders). They include announced or potential 2020 presidential candidates Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Kamala Harris of California, Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Cory Booker of New Jersey, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Sanders of Vermont. But so far it has received a lukewarm response from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and plenty of Democrats from the party's more moderate wing, along with strong opposition from Republicans and industry leaders who say it's technologically impossible and would cost tens of trillions of dollars. Some environmental groups said it doesn't go far enough.

6. What are its chances?

Even if Pelosi gets the House on board, broad legislation based on the Green New Deal would certainly never pass in the Republican Senate (controlled by a majority leader, Mitch McConnell, from a coal state, Kentucky) or be signed into law by President Donald Trump. (Certain pieces like proposals to clean up polluted sites, if offered on their own, might at least stand a chance.) Such political realities don't discourage Green New Deal backers who are looking further down the road beyond the 2020 presidential elections. "We ought to have strong legislation on climate change ready to go so when we have the right president they can sign it," said Representative Ro Khanna, a California Democrat.

7. Is there a risk for those who support the Green New Deal?





John Barrasso Photographer: Zach Gibson/Bloomberg

Republicans certainly hope they'll benefit from any hard turn to the left by Democrats on climate issues, and they're already featuring the plan in attack ads. "It's a socialist manifesto that lays out a laundry list of government giveaways, including guaranteed food, housing, college, and economic security even for those who refuse to work," said Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming, chairman of the Senate's environment committee. Trump himself weighed in to mock the proposal: "I think it is very important for the Democrats to press forward with their Green New Deal. It would be great for the so-called 'Carbon Footprint' to permanently eliminate all Planes, Cars, Cows, Oil, Gas & the Military - even if no other country would do the same. Brilliant!"

The Reference Shelf

The text of the Green New Deal resolution.

How the climate-change debate has shifted.

Germany's version of a Green New Deal actually

Germany's version of a Green New Deal actually works, writes Bloomberg Opinion columnist Leonid Bershidsky.

Bloomberg Opinion's Noah Smith offered an alternative plan "that isn't over the top."

How Republicans are using the plan against Democrats.

Disagreement over nuclear power contributed to a rough rollout for the Green New Deal.

— With assistance by Jennifer A Dlouhy

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal Could Cost \$93 Trillion, Group Says

By [Ari Natter](#)

February 26, 2019, 6:13 AM GMT+13 *Updated on February 26, 2019, 7:43 AM GMT+13*

Republican-aligned think tank estimates cost of proposed plan

Plan backer Markey says analysis relies on 'lazy

.....',

assumptions

McConnell Plans Vote For Green New Deal

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Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's ambitious plan to fight climate change won't be cheap, according to a Republican-aligned think tank led by a former Congressional Budget Office director.

The so-called Green New Deal may tally between \$51 trillion and \$93 trillion over 10-

years, concludes American Action Forum, which is

years, concludes AMERICAN ACTION FORUM, which is run by Douglas Holtz-Eakin, who directed the non-partisan CBO from from 2003 to 2005.

That includes between \$8.3 trillion and \$12.3 trillion to meet the plan's call to eliminate carbon emissions from the power and transportation sectors and between \$42.8 trillion and \$80.6 trillion for its economic agenda including providing jobs and health care for all.

“The Green New Deal is clearly very expensive,” the group said in its analysis. “Its further expansion of the federal government's role in some of the most basic decisions of daily life, however, would likely have a more lasting and damaging impact than its enormous price tag.”

Why 'Green New Deal' Has Washington in Such a
Lather: QuickTake

Backers of the plan say cost of inaction would be more expensive. The resolution itself, released earlier this month by Ocasio-Cortez and Massachusetts Democratic Senator Ed Markey points to a major report on global warming released by the United Nations last October that says catastrophic climate change could cost more than \$500 billion annually in lost economic output in the U.S. by 2100.

“Any so-called ‘analysis’ of the #GreenNewDeal that includes artificially inflated numbers that rely on lazy assumptions, incl. about policies that aren’t even in the resolution is bogus,” Markey said on Twitter. “Putting a price on a resolution of principles, not policies, is just Big Oil misinformation.”

Representatives of Ocasio-Cortez, a New York Democrat, didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

Republicans have embraced the sweeping plan because they think they can use it to cast Democrats as extreme, take back seats in Congress and possibly keep the White House in 2020.

Could 'climate delayer' become the political epithet of our times?

Already we argue over whether to call them climate deniers, skeptics or doubters. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez might have hit on a more devastating attack

Matthew Cantor *in Oakland*

@CantorMatthew

Fri 1 Mar 2019 06.00 GMT

Last modified on Fri 1 Mar 2019 06.11 GMT



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez warned on Twitter: 'Climate delayers aren't much better than climate deniers.'
Photograph: Andrew Kelly/Reuters

I

t's a fantastic time for verbal abuse in American politics. Donald Trump loves a schoolyard nickname, insulting everyone from "Crazy Bernie" Sanders to "Little Marco" Rubio. In turn, the president's opponents, and sometimes his allies, have called him a **moron**, a **motherfucker** and mocked **his tiny hands**.

But is there a way of using name-calling, not just to insult, but to introduce a

new political idea. It seemed like **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez** was doing that this week when she used the term “climate delayer” to call out those dragging their feet on climate change.

Ocasio-Cortez used the term to describe Senator Dianne Feinstein, who was filmed telling a bunch of children that when it comes to the looming apocalypse, she knows better than they do, because she has spent a long time in the Senate not fixing the problem. While they called for immediate action on the Green New Deal, she argued that change wasn’t going to come anytime soon. After all, when it comes to averting a **global catastrophe** on an **unprecedented scale**, endangering hundreds of millions and fundamentally **altering the human experience**, you don’t want to rush into things.

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)

Play Video

3:18

Dianne Feinstein rebuffs young climate activists' calls for Green New Deal – video

The **clip went viral**. In the ensuing days, Ocasio-Cortez **warned on Instagram and Twitter** of the threat of “climate delayers”: people who appear to accept that something needs to be done about climate change, but don’t seem to grasp its urgency. These people, she pointed out, aren’t much better than people who deny climate change exists.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez



@AOC

Climate delayers aren’t much better than climate deniers.

With either one if they get their way, we’re toast.

Erin Biba



@erinbiba

Replying to @erinbiba @AOC

AOC JUST SAID "CLIMATE DELAYER" AND THAT IS THE BEST NEW TERM OF 2019.

49.5K

3:13 PM - Feb 25, 2019

[Twitter Ads info and privacy](#)

13.2K people are talking about this

The term isn't entirely new. "Global warming delayer" appeared on sites like [ThinkProgress](#) more than a decade ago; it appeared in the Guardian at least as far back as [2011](#). And out of context, it sounds like a badge of honor. A climate denier denies climate change, so a climate delayer ... delays it? Like by buying a Prius?

But that's getting into the weeds: we should celebrate the phrase's emergence in mainstream political debate. Trump's political success has proven that a label can be as effective a thousand nuanced arguments. Sure, "Delayin' Feinstein" might not have quite the same ring as "Lysin' Ted", but it's getting there. And given the scale of the issue, we badly need an arsenal of labels for people standing in the way of climate progress.



 : How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez beat everyone at Twitter in nine tweets

[Read more](#)

Labels for people who reject the scientific evidence of climate change have a tortured history. A debate has raged as to whether “climate denier” or “climate skeptic” should be used to describe such people, the latter term aiming to soothe the egos of officials who just aren’t quite sure they can believe basically every scientist.

Scientists who consider themselves genuine skeptics – in the sense of seeking “scientific inquiry, critical investigation and the use of reason in examining controversial and extraordinary claims” – didn’t like the term “skeptics” for people who rejected expertise; they wanted to call them deniers, according to the [Associated Press](#), purveyors of one of journalism’s leading style guides.

But those “deniers”, understandably, didn’t like the language’s resemblance to Holocaust denial. So in 2015, the AP [put forward](#) another option, “climate doubters”, advising writers to ditch “deniers” and “skeptics” entirely.

The Guardian’s own [style guide](#) takes a different view: “The OED defines a sceptic as ‘a seeker of the truth; an inquirer who has not yet arrived at definite conclusions’. Most so-called ‘climate change sceptics’, in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence, deny that climate change is happening, or is

caused by human activity, so denier is a more accurate term.”

On top of all that, there are “climate contrarians”, who make it their business to fight the scientific consensus – “often with substantial financial support from fossil fuels industry organizations and conservative thinktanks,” as summarized in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#).



Global warming should be called global heating, says key scientist

[Read more](#)

And yet none of these labels have managed to target a fundamental obstacle to climate change action: powerful people who profess to understand climate change, yet are curiously immobile on the issue. Perhaps the popularization of “delayer” will finally put the pressure on. When it comes to politically productive name-calling, it’s a lot snappier to dismiss someone as a “climate delayer” than to chastise them as a “person who apparently believes the science but is unwilling to acknowledge the urgency of the situation”.

It’s worth noting in all this that the very phrase “climate change” is mired in labelling warfare. As anyone who has seen the movie *Vice* knows, the Republican pollster Frank Luntz encouraged the George W Bush administration to use the phrase “climate change” rather than “global warming”. [Yale researchers recount](#) a secret memo in which he pointed out that a focus group participant felt “climate change ‘sounds like you’re going from Pittsburgh to Fort Lauderdale’,” whereas “global warming has

catastrophic connotations”. Perhaps if we’d all stuck with “global warming” – or even tried “**global heating**” – concern would have grown faster.

Luntz **knows messaging**: he turned the estate tax into the “death tax” and health reform into a “government takeover” of healthcare. Fortunately in Ocasio-Cortez, it seems the left has a messaging expert of its own. And whether denier or delayer, she points out, “if they get their way, we’re toast”.