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The American Green New Deal: from local debates to (inter)national ambition

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On June 18, Donald Trump launched his campaign for the November 2020 U.S. presidential election, targeting a potential second consecutive term that would be rooted, among other things, in the United States' effective withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement the day after the election. At the same time, some Democrats propose to found a Green New Deal (GND), a major economic and environmental project inspired by the investment plan put in place in the aftermath of the Great Depression. In this post, IDDRI deciphers both the national political issues specific to the United States associated with this political project and its possible implications in terms of international climate and environmental governance.

A new approach to the climate and environmental crisis

For the first time, climate and the environment - two particularly politically polarised¹ - will be at the heart of an American campaign. Following the announcement of the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, the American community of climate protection actors focused on depoliticising and 'humanizing' the subject by addressing local issues (rising waters and hurricanes in Florida, floods in the Midwest, fires in California, drought in the Southwest, industrial renewal and job creation in the Rust Belt, energy security and competitiveness in Texas, etc.), hoping to generate a bipartisan consensus around specific entry points (innovation, jobs, energy independence).

However, since the beginning of the new term in Congress, this strategy of "localisation" has been overtaken by the push of a "transformational" current within the Democrats to bring a major social and environmental innovation to the top of the political agenda: the Green New Deal (GND). Promoted by the new muse of the American radical left, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (elected Democrat to the House of Representatives), the GND, a proactive project for the coming decade, has already aroused strong political and media interest, even a civic enthusiasm, even though it remains unclear and beyond the objectives, the content of the public policies envisaged to achieve them is far from being clear. It illustrates this change in strategy, according to the formula attributed to President Eisenhower: *if you can't solve a problem, enlarge it!* Inspired by President Roosevelt's 1933 major infrastructure programme in response to the impacts of the 1929 crisis (the New Deal), the GND² consists of mobilising a massive volume of public and private investment to initiate the transformation to a low-carbon economy, invest in innovation and advanced technologies, modernise the country's obsolete infrastructure and create millions of quality jobs.

The aim is to take advantage of the climate emergency as an opportunity to propose systemic change in the economy and society of this immense country, a change that focuses on issues of environmental and social justice in a country burdened by inequality. The massive investments needed to drastically reduce emissions in order to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030³ would also make it possible to address social protection, housing and taxation issues, which today generate inequalities. This is the American transposition of the vision of a just transition⁴ capable of responding to both climate imperatives and intrinsically linked social issues.

What ownership of the Green New Deal at the national and international levels?

If the maximalist vision represented by the GND generates certain tensions within the democratic movement itself and has led to the establishment of the party, embarrassed by its unexpected emergence, it seduces many Americans. Indeed, a growing number of citizens, both concerned about climate change and its impacts and wishing for more public action, are more attracted by an ambitious programme of massive investments than by a carbon tax, even if the income generated is redistributed to the population⁵. According to the think tank New Consensus, to the left of the Party, which is responsible for developing the content of the GND, a major plan would cost a minimum of \$10 trillion. This exorbitant figure would potentially pave the way for truly ambitious proposals, although it is still unclear how its supporters intend to finance it. But the GND is emulating, which has allowed several Democratic nomination candidates, such as Joe Biden, Beto O'Rourke and Elizabeth Warren, to position themselves in favour of massive climate investment plans worth over \$1,500 billion over 10 years. Or, like Jay Inslee (Governor of Washington State), to place these investments in the perspective of a total decarbonisation of electricity by 2030 and the achievement of carbon neutrality at the national level by 2045. In addition, the majority of candidates also assure that they will refuse financial contributions from the fossil fuel industry to their campaign.

It is not surprising that the GND, a program that is more similar to economic dirigisme than it is to a liberal vision, has generated a virulent reaction within the GOP⁶, often turning into a caricature of the project like elected officials who support it. However, behind these usual diversions of partisan politics, there is a strong sense of tension in their ranks between ideologues who give little credit to science and pragmatists who are well aware of the creeping concern among their electorate and who will, in turn, have to formulate at least some semblance of a response, if not a counter-proposal.

Beyond the figures and its virtuous intentions in the fight against climate change and, more generally, sustainable development, the Green New Deal raises many questions at the national - on its feasibility - and international - levels about its credibility:

- How to build a majority coalition capable of implementing a real structural transformation in a deeply divided country? What other vision than the Green New Deal would build it?
- How can we overcome institutional blockages and prevent filibuster, a technique that consists in preventing a vote on a bill almost indefinitely? Are Democrats ready to tackle the elimination of this practice (which requires a "super majority" of 60 senators) in order to legislate on climate change?
- How to get back into the international game and be credible with a view to a return to power of the Democrats? Returning to the Paris Agreement would indeed require the presentation of a new emissions reduction plan, which would be carefully analysed: President Obama's decisions having proved to be short-lived, since dismantled by his successor, the United States will have to demonstrate the credibility and sustainability of instruments to meet its commitments, if necessary.

The first debates between the Democratic candidates took place at the end of June and provided only a tentative insight into the scope of the proposals for the upcoming campaign. Some had already put forward their specific projects, others will still have to position themselves. Nevertheless, all have generally characterised the urgency of the climate crisis without really going into the details of the answers they intend to provide. It will be enlightening to see which ones will continue to make the link between climate and local issues to preserve a space for consensus, and which ones will support a form of Green New Deal, a long-term project that is both more ambitious but also more controversial and more risky.

¹ See two recent surveys from the Pew Research Center : : <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/19/how-americans-see-climate-change-in-5-charts/> ; <https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/14/majorities-see-government-efforts-to-protect-the-environment-as-insufficient/ps-05-10-18-report-10/>

² See the resolution supported by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey, which was presented to Congress but did not succeed: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text> -

³ The European Union, for example, is still trying to agree on carbon neutrality in 2050.

⁴ Read IDDRI blog posts "Investing in a just transition" <https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/billet-de-blog/investir-dans-une-transition-juste> and "Silesian Declaration on a just transition - The transition must be accelerated and allow to anticipate necessary reconversions" <https://www.iddri.org/fr/publications-et-evenements/billet-de-blog/declaration-de-silesie-sur-la-transition-juste-la>

⁵ Read the article from The Atlantic (<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/06/green-new-deal-may-be-more-popular-carbon-tax/592201/>) and consult the results of a recent political survey (http://filesforprogress.org/memos/wide_open_field.pdf)

⁶ Grand Old Party, nickname of the Republican Party