

Nine principles that should guide the Green New Deal

Lessons drawn from the successes — and failures — of the first New Deal.

By Richard Walker

On the heels of the Democrats' sweep of the midterm elections has come a remarkable surge of support for a Green New Deal among the party's progressives. The Green New Deal is still mostly an outline, a set of potential policies and hoped-for outcomes. That's fine as a starting point. But for this program to succeed, it needs to take seriously the lessons of the original New Deal of the 1930s.

When President Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, it was the nadir of the Great Depression, and Americans faced the daunting challenge of renewing a badly divided, demoralized and drifting nation. Roosevelt and the New Dealers were hopeful idealists, but their genius lay in hard-nosed pragmatism and willingness to experiment at reforming all areas of American life, from industry to agriculture to the banking sector and even public life.

In fact, it was the sheer number of New Deal programs beyond the famous ones that developed social security, public infrastructure and agricultural reform that got millions of working families back on their feet, rebuilt the national infrastructure and transformed the American economy. The New Deal tackled problems of banking and finance, transportation and communication, farm overproduction and tenancy, housing and planning, labor rights and wages and environment and conservation — not to mention supporting the arts, education and public health.

The [Living New Deal](#) is a project to document and map all civilian public works built during the Roosevelt administration and to keep the legacy of the New Deal alive. From that work, we have distilled a few principles that can help guide a new New Deal, whether green or any other hue.

- **Create universal programs.** The New Deal succeeded by creating programs serving a wide range of Americans, rather than only targeted populations. All seniors could receive pensions; all jobless qualified for work relief; every state and county bid for projects. This brought visible benefits to the vast majority of people and places, and it made Roosevelt the most popular president in U.S. history. The New Deal's greatest failure was the National Industrial Recovery Act, which supported prices instead of people. And its most glaring error was to allow Congress to exclude farm and domestic workers (mostly black and brown) from the Social Security Act.

- **Reduce inequality at both ends.** Inequality drags down the economy, breeds popular resentment and rots the foundations of

democracy. The New Deal dramatically reduced inequality by placing heavy taxes on high incomes and corporate profits, while curbing financial speculation. At the same time, it lifted the fortunes of workers through the right to organize, fair wages from contractors and a federal minimum wage. The result? The emergence of a middle class made up of workers, ultimately making the postwar economy the most equal in U.S. history.

- **Create good jobs.** The Great Depression left a quarter of the workforce unemployed, so the New Deal put millions to work on public works and service projects. New Dealers understood that Americans did not want handouts; they wanted jobs that provided personal dignity, meaningful activity and a living wage. The Civilian Conservation Corps had 3.5 million young men improve parks across the country in exchange for income and educational programs. The Works Progress Administration turned 9 million unemployed workers into creators of beautiful public spaces, teachers of underserved children and caregivers for young mothers, among other useful jobs.

- **Modernize the economy.** The New Deal rejected the conventional wisdom about balanced budgets and used fiscal stimulus to spur the economy, relieve hardship and upgrade the country's lagging infrastructure. Projects that harnessed rivers for hydropower and stretched power lines into rural areas extended electrification far and wide. Workers built a vast network of new paved roads that advanced the automobile and trucking revolution in transportation. Around the country, thousands of new schools and college buildings opened, improving education for all.

- **Invest in lagging places.** The New Deal addressed the gulf opening up between urban and rural America as the cities powered ahead and the small-farm economy of the past went into rapid decline. It spawned many programs to aid rural areas, such as the

Farm Credit Administration, Soil Conservation Service and Tennessee Valley Authority, along with the work of the CCC, Rural Electrification Administration and Bureau of Public Health. These programs dramatically reduced the blight of rural poverty and instilled hope in forgotten places, as the entire country started to enjoy the advances of the 20th century.

- **Walk on two (well-built) legs.** The New Deal's public works programs functioned at all scales: large, small and in-between. The Public Works Administration (PWA) invested in the big, dramatic kind of modern infrastructure, such as LaGuardia Airport, Grand Coulee Dam and the San Francisco Bay Bridge. In so doing, it laid the foundation for prosperity far into the future for business, commerce and consumers, who still rely on many of these projects. Meanwhile, the WPA built what local communities needed, such as parks, sidewalks and water systems, letting local governments propose, plan and help fund hundreds of thousands of small-scale projects. A broad works program is both an economic boost and a way of improving everyday life.

- **Focus on the public good and public service.** By focusing on the public good, the New Deal left America with a rich endowment of public spaces that promoted community and civic values: playgrounds, community centers, schools, libraries, museums and more. It enlisted artists and artisans to beautify the public domain. Moreover, the New Dealers honored public service at all levels. They put public careers ahead of personal gain.

For millions of Americans, New Deal programs meant more than jobs and incomes; it gave them the means to rebuild their communities and reconstruct the nation, whether as humble WPA masons, PWA engineers or local civic architects. The spirit of public service pervaded a nation previously in despair.

- **Restore faith in government.** The New Deal revolutionized America's federalist system and rekindled Americans' belief that government could be by, for and of the people. This was achieved not only through programs that aided and mobilized the citizenry, but through the examples set by New Dealers. Roosevelt may have been a pragmatic and imperfect politician, yet his moral compass rarely failed him. He surrounded himself with people like as Harry Hopkins, Frances Perkins and Harold Ickes, beacons of good government who oversaw vast programs that suffered almost no corruption and malfeasance, because such bad acts were simply not tolerated.

- **Go green.** Although it is often forgotten, the conservation of resources and environmental improvement were central to the New Deal's agenda. It brought clean water, wonderful parks and mass tree planting to every corner of the country, utilizing the strategies of labor mobilization, public investment and community revival outlined here.

In short, the New Deal was a sweeping program of national reconciliation, reconstruction and renewal. We need the same kind of approach today, based on the same principles that made the New Deal effective, popular and even revolutionary. While the centerpiece of the Green New Deal is combatting climate change, it is encouraging to see that its advocates understand the need to do more, such as lessening inequality, providing meaningful jobs and reviving local communities.

The New Deal is not a blueprint, of course; too much has changed and things will have to be done differently today. But what cannot be lost is the broad vision and sense of building a new future. Those who say we should only focus on combatting climate change miss the crucial point that any program that does not address the needs of ordinary Americans is not just unjust but doomed to political

failure. Whatever we choose to do, this we know for sure: our great nation can rise to the challenge because it has done so before.

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