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Report

The Progressives' Empty Policy Agenda: Utopian Promises Are Not Backed Up with Serious Legislation

Brian Riedl

SENIOR FELLOW
Manhattan Institute

Executive Summary

Progressives built a national movement around enacting items like Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, drastic defense cuts, and massive tax increases on corporations and upper-income families. Yet they have not been able to develop serious legislative proposals to enact such policies. Instead, leading legislative proposals typically announce an unrealistic, utopian goal, and then simply declare that a future commission, office, or agency will come up with a plan to do the impossible.

The whole purpose of public policy is to turn aspirations into implementable outcomes. Relying heavily on slogans and vague (yet often aggressive) rhetoric, progressive leaders fail to do their homework and provide even basic information on how their proposals would work—likely because they cannot work. Congress cannot enact empty slogans, and it is self-defeating to build a national movement demanding the enactment of policies that do not even exist in any serious, implementable manner.

Introduction

Progressives built a massive national movement hoping to enact single-payer health care (dubbed "Medicare for All"). Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont has made it the centerpiece of two presidential campaigns. Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts endorsed it in her presidential campaign, as have at least 13 other Democratic senators and 122 House members.[1] Medicare for All has been endorsed by 300 organizations, including NAACP, National Organization for Women, and several AFL-CIO state chapters.[2] It has spawned groups such as Physicians for a

National Health Program and gained a rabid following on Twitter among progressive activists and leaders. This movement has invested massive resources into enacting Medicare for All. Yet there remains one minor oversight:

No comprehensive Medicare for All proposal even exists.

This may surprise Medicare for All activists. The oft-cited bills authored by Senator Sanders and Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) are vague skeleton bills that punt the difficult decisions and are too incomplete even to be implemented, if enacted. Consequently, it is fair to classify Medicare for All more as an aspirational talking point than an implementable proposal. Nor is this proposal failure unique to health care. Many policy promises that unite the progressive movement—including the Green New Deal, drastic defense cuts, and "tax the rich" plans large enough to finance their spending ambitions—do not actually exist beyond generic talking points. This is not a random oversight. A movement filled with millions of committed activists and led by ambitious academics, economists, scientists, think-tank fellows, and politicians did not simply forget to turn their bold aspirations into serious legislative proposals. Rather, the policy professionals surely dived into the policy specifics and then likely gave up after realizing that these progressive policy goals collapse under the weight of their internal contradictions, operational unworkability, political infeasibility, and even lack of basic arithmetic. Consequently, progressive experts consistently fail to produce specific legislation or even detailed non-legislative blueprints, instead writing bills and campaign plans that simply assign others to figure out a proposal later. This leaves the progressive agenda to exist primarily as rhetoric and talking points that could never be enacted and implemented, no matter how many elections their candidates may win.

This report dives into four of the leading pillars of progressivism—Medicare for All; large tax increases on the wealthy; substantial defense cuts; and the Green New Deal—and shows that there is nothing behind the curtain.

Medicare for All: Partial Proposals Punt on Key Specifics

The Medicare for All movement is led less by economists or health-care technocrats than by grassroots advocates endlessly repeating something like: Europe and Canada have shown that the single-payer model provides better health care at a lower cost, and we will replicate that.[3] It is certainly debatable whether other countries truly provide better health care than America does. However, American proposals promising virtually unlimited access to a vast array of health procedures and technologies that are completely free at the point of service are based on a caricature that reflects no actual national health system in the world. Every universal health-care system imposes some combination of care rationing, technology limitations, notable out-of-pocket expenses, and major coverage exclusions such as prescription drugs. American proposals are vastly more generous and therefore cannot be accurately portrayed as simply adopting the successful systems abroad.

Furthermore, America's health-care infrastructure is not compatible with single-payer health care. Nations such as the United Kingdom nationalized health care when it was a small portion of the economy, and then contained costs by building a modest health infrastructure over several decades. No country first built a massive, sprawling health system that consumes nearly 20% of the economy—with large and roomy hospitals, widespread expensive technologies, and an extensive drug research sector—and then decided to save money by drastically reducing payments below the cost to run this extensive system.

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52 Vanderbilt Ave.
New York, NY 10017
(212) 599-7000
INFO@MANHATTAN-INSTITUTE.ORG

A parallel would be demanding that Americans pay the same price for housing as Europeans, without taking account of the American housing infrastructure consisting of much larger, roomier homes than its European counterparts. The point is not that American health care is necessarily better than that of other countries. It is that we are constrained by the health infrastructure that has been built and relentlessly expanded over the past half-century. We cannot simply pay European prices for the more vast American health infrastructure that exists.

This presents a quandary for Medicare for All advocates. In theory, the increased utilization costs of promising "free" health coverage to everyone is supposed to be more than offset by the (claimed) substantial efficiency savings of limiting profits and overhead costs. Yet study after study has shown that the huge reduction in payments to health providers that would be needed to offset the increased utilization far exceed what many hospitals, clinics, and doctors can absorb.[4] This would constrain supply at the moment that demand is soaring, resulting in shortages and widespread rationing. In reality, the savings from reducing provider payments would be modest and may not even offset the higher utilization costs. Total national health expenditures would not fall significantly, and might even rise.

This brings up another challenge. Because America's health system is so large—roughly one-fifth of its GDP—and large net savings seem unlikely, financing the nationalization of such an enormous industry is extraordinarily difficult. Essentially, America would have to shift the $32 trillion scheduled to be spent over the next decade on private health-care premiums, out-of-pocket expenses, and state health programs into a federal "single-payer" tax.[5] Even if one accounts for the private-sector savings from no longer paying health premiums, designing a $32 trillion tax far exceeds any tax that has been considered in modern times. It would also create major winners and losers. And the losers would include the 80.5 million Americans currently on Medicaid,[6] who would continue receiving (mostly) free health care but would now be subject to staggeringly large and broad "single-payer" taxes. The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget has calculated that financing a generous, Sanders-style Medicare for All system would require choosing between a new 32% payroll tax, 25% income surtax, 42% value-added tax (VAT), $12,000 per-capita premium for those currently not on government plans, or more than doubling all individual and corporate income-tax rates.[7] It turns out that "free" health care is quite expensive.

In short, single-payer proposals are very specific about all the new health benefits that Americans should receive but face potentially fatal challenges in the two areas that would supposedly produce savings and finance the system: 1) the provider payment reductions that would supposedly provide most of the savings are not realistic under America's health infrastructure; and 2) designing a tax to replace private health premiums that is realistic, efficient, and equitable is nearly impossible.

So how do America's leading Medicare for All proposals answer the two fundamental questions of provider payment rates and financing? They have no answer. They punt. On challenge No. 1, the bills authored by Sanders and Jayapal simply direct the Department of Health and Human Services to come up with a payment system. This system could ultimately pay providers at Medicare rates, or more, or less. So on the central issue of whether Medicare for All would raise or reduce national health-care spending—whether it could actually squeeze out significant efficiencies—the most detailed congressional proposals are silent.

On challenge No. 2, how do these proposals pay for the $32 trillion cost of Medicare for All? How do they shift all the spending on premiums and out-of-pocket spending into a single-payer tax that is realistic and equitable? Again, they punt. The bills have no financing section whatsoever. Which means that, as written, the leading single-payer legislation proposes that the bulk of the American health system would not be funded by the private sector or with federal taxes. The entire $32 trillion cost of this new health-care system would be added to the budget deficit.

The Sanders and Jayapal bills are basically skeleton bills. They guarantee significant new health benefits to the American people but do not even show how much to pay providers (and whether it would actually save money over the current system) and provide no system to shift the financing of health care to the federal government. The bills are so vague and incomplete that the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) cannot even score their budgetary effects, and the Department of Health and Human Services would almost surely be unable even to implement these bills if enacted.

For example, a *Health Affairs* analysis notes that while the Jayapal bill promises countless new benefits, it simply defers to the implementing agencies to come up with "policies, procedures, guidelines, and requirements related to eligibility, enrollment, long-term care eligibility, provider participation standards and qualifications, levels of funding, provider payment rates, planning for capital expenditures and health professional education, and regional planning mechanisms."[8] In other words, the bill distributes new benefits like candy, with scant consideration for how to actually operate or finance this generous new health-care system.

Similarly, the Sanders bill promises enormous new health benefits at no new cost, and then simply tells the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services to figure out how to make it all work. The phrase "The Secretary shall…" appears 62 times in the Sanders bill (and 58 times in the Jayapal bill).[9]

This punting of the difficult decisions extends beyond the Sanders and Jayapal bills. In my years of research, I have never seen a single tax proposal that would cover the "premiums-to-taxes" shift in order to finance single-payer health care. In 2020, Sanders offered a campaign proposal that would finance only $13 trillion of the $32 trillion cost—while using up tax proposals that had also been promoted to finance other spending items.[10] Senator Warren's Medicare for All proposal also includes taxes that come up approximately $20 trillion short of the new spending over the decade.[11] Progressive think tanks, economists, lawmakers, and activists have all failed to come up with a specific financing plan. And that is surely not because no one thought to try to design one.

In 2011, Vermont became the first state to enact legislation mandating the creation of a state-level single-payer health system. In 2014, the state gave up and repealed the law because it could not design a tax financing system that was remotely acceptable to voters, even in this deep-blue state that elected Bernie Sanders to the Senate.[12]

With progressives failing to answer basic questions on how single-payer health care would work and be financed, CBO, Urban Institute, and others had to create their own single-payer health-care models to analyze.[13] They found that, with realistic payment rates, the savings in national health expenditures would be marginal, at best. For example, CBO determined that national health expenditures might actually rise instead of falling and that "the increase in demand for personal health care would exceed the increase in supply, resulting in greater unmet demand than the amount under current law" that "would correspond to increased congestion in the health care system, including delays and forgone care."[14] A separate CBO economic analysis found that a Sanders-style single-payer system—when including the financing needs—would reduce the projected 2030 GDP by 6%–10%, depending on the tax structure implemented. That means an annual GDP $3 trillion smaller than otherwise by 2030.[15]

These complications are not minor, pedantic details. The whole idea of Medicare for All is to pay for a more generous health system by significantly reducing provider payments and then financing the remaining costs with new taxes instead of private premiums and out-of-pocket costs. Yet the entire movement has failed to provide a plan to do either.

Essentially, the vast Medicare for All movement is demanding congressional enactment of a proposal that does not even exist—and likely cannot exist. All the rallies, letters, endorsements, and public campaigns are ultimately irrelevant until advocates can design a comprehensive proposal that overcomes its own contradictions and answers basic implementation questions. Until then, Medicare for All will continue to be just another empty talking point.

Medicare for All's Fictitious Health Savings

Senator Sanders's "Medicare for All Act of 2022" (S. 4204) supposedly achieves trillions in health savings through a new system of provider payments that is significantly cheaper than what they currently receive, yet still generous enough to keep providers in business. Health economists question whether such large savings are feasible.

Yet the bill text provides no specific, creative blueprint to achieve any such savings. It simply directs the Department of Health and Human Services to figure out a new payment system. Similarly, the bill provides no tax or mechanism to finance the $32 trillion 10-year cost of nationalizing health care.

SEC. 612. PAYMENTS TO INDIVIDUAL PROVIDERS THROUGH FEE-FOR-SERVICE[16]

(a) Medicare for All Fee Schedule.

(1) ESTABLISHMENT.—Not later than 1 year after the date of the enactment of this Act, and in consultation with providers and regional office directors, the Secretary shall establish and annually update a national fee schedule that establishes amounts for items and services payable under this Act, furnished by—

(A) individual providers;

(B) providers in group practices who are not receiving payments on a salaried basis described in section 611(a)(3);

(C) providers of home- and community-based services; and

(D) any other provider not described in section 611.

(2) AMOUNTS. In establishing the fee schedule under paragraph (1), the Secretary shall take into account—

(A) the amounts payable for such items and services under title XVIII of the Social Security Act and other Federal health programs; and

(B) the expertise of providers and the value of items and services furnished by such providers.

Taxing the Rich: Basic Math Always Wins

Perhaps no economic issue unites the progressive movement like its support for dramatic tax increases on upper-income families and corporations. More than a stand-alone issue of economic justice, the extensive cost of progressive spending ambitions requires enormous new tax revenues. Promising to limit the bulk of new taxes to millionaires and major corporations allows progressives to tell the middle class that they can have European-size social welfare benefits as a free lunch.

Such promises are required because polls[17] have long shown that less than half (and sometimes far less)[18] of Americans are willing to pay much higher taxes, even for more government services. And when the new taxes are specified, support often drops further. For example, despite the general popularity of fighting climate change, a 2019 survey showed that less than half of Americans are willing to pay even $2 per month in new taxes or utility costs as part of a climate agenda (and only a quarter of Americans would pay $10 per month).[19] Polls by the Associated Press and Reuters produced nearly identical results.[20] In fact, the mere possibility of new taxes has reduced support for spending trillions on the Green New Deal to 30%.[21] Similarly, support for Medicare for All falls when respondents are reminded that it would require massive new taxes to replace private health premiums and copays.[22]

This tax resistance is not limited to conservatives and moderates. Even two-thirds of Bernie Sanders supporters would not be willing to accept more than $1,000 in new taxes to ensure universal health coverage or free public-college tuition (66% and 64%, respectively).[23] The revolution is acceptable only if funded by "the billionayas," not "the people."

However, this promised "tax-the-rich" utopia has no basis in mathematical reality. Which is why most progressive spenders never back up the "tax the rich" rhetoric with specific, scored tax proposals. Sanders's most recent presidential campaign promised $97 trillion[24] in new spending over the decade, with taxes that would barely cover one-quarter[25] of the costs. Sanders's Medicare for All legislation simply excludes all necessary taxes, and his campaign proposal showed taxes financing just $13 trillion of the $32 trillion 10-year cost. Similarly, Senator Elizabeth Warren's 2020 tax proposals came up far short of her spending promises.[26] Even President Biden's promise of paying for the more ambitious $4–$5 trillion version of Build Back Better was never backed up by that degree of specific tax proposals.

A common progressive sleight-of-hand is recycling the same tax proposals to finance various new expenditures. One week, marginal tax rates would be maximized to close the Social Security funding gap. The next week, those same taxes are proposed to finance Medicare for All or the Green New Deal.

Let's do the math. Over the next decade, the projected baseline budget deficit totals $15 trillion.[27] This budget deficit—and the need to pay for current promises before adding new ones—deserves the first claim on any new taxes. Beyond that, progressive proposals include Medicare for All ($32 trillion over 10 years, as shown in the previous section), Green New Deal (as much as $16 trillion depending on the proposal),[28] free public college tuition and full student loan forgiveness ($3 trillion), Social Security expansion ($1 trillion), extending the recent child credit expansion ($1 trillion), and various funding expansions for K–12 education, preschool and child care, welfare benefits, housing, infrastructure, and family/medical leave (up to $3 trillion).[29] In total, that is a $15 trillion baseline deficit and more than $50 trillion in progressive 10-year costs.

Now let's add up the progressive "tax the rich" proposals using data from CBO and other nonpartisan sources (**Table 1**).[30] On the individual side, eliminating the wage cap for Social Security taxes ($2.2 trillion),[31] imposing a 50% income-tax bracket on singles earning over $200,000 and couples earning more than $400,000 ($1.6 trillion), and eliminating all itemized tax deductions ($1.7 trillion), would altogether raise $5.5 trillion—while pushing the combined federal, state, and payroll marginal tax rate to approximately 70% (depending on the state) for families earning more than $200,000 (single) and $400,000 (married). For investors and corporations, taxing millionaire capital gains as ordinary income, including taxing unrealized capital gains at death ($370 billion), restoring the 35% corporate tax rate ($1.4 trillion), imposing a tax on financial transactions ($750 billion), and a "bank tax" on large corporations ($100 billion), would altogether raise $2.6 trillion while imposing the highest business and investor tax rates in the developed world. Sanders's proposed 8% wealth tax—widely considered unworkable and long abandoned across much of Europe[32]—would bring in $2.3 trillion, while his proposed 77% estate tax would raise $380 billion over a decade.

Table 1

The Full Roster of Progressive Tax Hikes Could Not Even Balance the 10-Year Budget

$15.7 Trillion Baseline Budget Deficit Is Forecast over Next Decade

Progressive Tax Proposal	10-Year Revenue
50% Income-Tax Rate over $200K (single), $400K (married)	$1,593
Eliminate All Itemized Tax Deductions	$1,718
Eliminate FICA Cap—15.3% Payroll Tax on All Wages	$2,180
Raise Corporate Tax Rate from 21% to 35%	$1,390
Tax Capital Gains/Dividends as Income for Millionaires, End Step-Up Basis	$373
Financial Transactions Tax of 0.1%	$752
Financial Institutions Tax of 0.15%	$103
Sanders's Wealth Tax as High as 8%	$2,263
Sanders's Estate Tax Rate as High as 77%	$383
Total Revenue over a Decade	**$10,755**

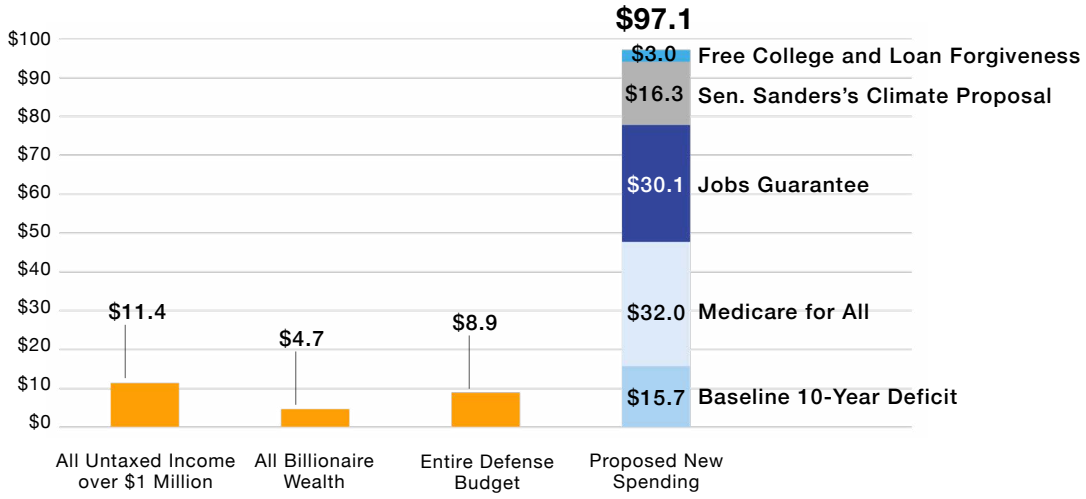
Source: CBO Options Book; Social Security Administration; Tax Policy Center
Notes: All figures in $billions; total marginal tax rates including federal income, FICA, and state taxes would exceed 70% for some families; due to interactions and economic effects, combining tax proposals would surely shave off much of the added revenues.

Under this scenario, the U.S. would combine nearly every progressive tax proposal and build the highest individual, investor, corporate, wealth, and estate tax rates in the developed world. The total revenue? Just $10.8 trillion over the decade, which is not even enough to close the more than $15 trillion baseline deficit, much less the $50 trillion in promised new spending. Moreover, the actual revenues would come in far below these estimates because of the economic and revenue losses that result from layering so many new taxes on top of one another. Families facing 70% tax rates would reduce work or hide income, investors facing similar tax rates on their inflation-adjusted gains would invest less, corporations facing 35% tax rates (plus the base-broadening that paid for much of the 2017 corporate rate reductions) would move abroad, and the (likely unconstitutional) wealth tax may be avoided by moving wealth overseas or into difficult-to-value assets, as occurred in Europe.

We can go a step further (**Figure 1**). Even seizing every asset of billionaire wealth (a one-time collection that also means liquidating much of the stock market) and imposing a 100% tax rate for millionaires—while implausibly assuming that they continue working, investing, and happily paying this tax rate—would raise $11.4 trillion over the decade, which is not enough to balance the budget, much less pay for current federal promises.

Figure 1

Cost of Progressive Wish List Far Exceeds Potential Funding Sources



Source: Author's calculations, based on data from CBO, Internal Revenue Service, progressive candidate public statements, and Tax Policy Center
Note: All figures are 10-year totals; all figures in $trillions.

The massive gap between progressive rhetoric and reality is political as well as mathematical. Today's unified Democratic government has proved unable to raise income taxes on wealthy individuals and has achieved just under $300 billion in 10-year tax hikes on corporations (much of which was given back in new business-tax cuts).[33] Progressive lawmakers, with very few exceptions, remain vague on their tax agenda, unveiling most proposed taxes in a piecemeal fashion, in order to avoid the staggering cumulative tax burden. Progressives brag that new spending proposals can be financed by taxing the rich, yet the comprehensive tax proposals almost never appear.

The reality is that America already has—by far—the most progressive tax code in the entire OECD.[34] The highest-earning 20% of taxpayers will earn 60% of the income this year, yet pay 76% of all federal taxes, including 93% of all income taxes. The much-maligned top 1% of earners will earn 19% of the income, yet finance 29% of all federal taxes, including 43% of all income taxes, according to U.S. Treasury data.[35] Annual capital-gains tax revenues—which are disproportionately paid by high-earners—have doubled since 2016.

Many progressives still claim that the wealthy are undertaxed by citing the 91% income-tax rates of the 1950s. Yet that tax rate was easily avoided through tax deductions, income shifting, and income limiting. President Reagan told stories about leading 1950s actors working only two films annually because a third film would be taxed in the 91% bracket. Economist Lawrence Lindsey has noted that in 1960, only eight taxpayers in America actually paid the 91% tax rate.[36] Overall, Washington collected only 7.2% of the economy in income taxes in the "tax the rich"

1950s—the lowest of any post–World War II decade.[37] And data by left-wing economist Gabriel Zucman concede that the top 1% paid much lower effective income-tax rates in the 1950s than in subsequent decades.[38]

Progressives can always name a company or an individual who is undertaxed. But the cold mathematical reality is that their spending ambitions dramatically exceed the potential revenue that could be raised from upper-income families and corporations. Even the European nations that they claim to emulate fund their welfare states primarily through middle-class payroll and value-added taxes. Progressives continue to sell American socialism as a free lunch to be funded on the backs of the wealthy. However, this "tax the rich" utopia must inevitably remain an empty talking point because the math simply does not add up.

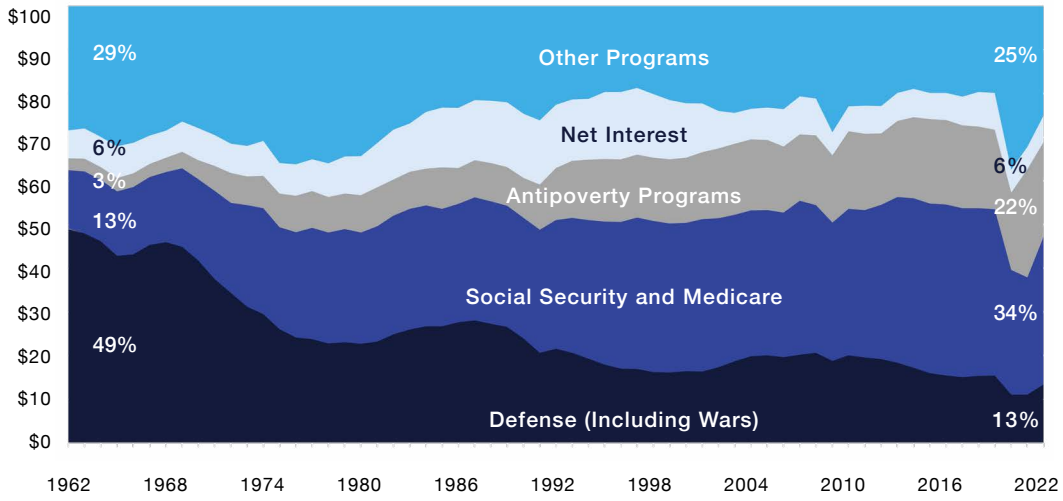
Large Defense Cuts: Pledges Without Proposals

Another leading progressive cause is decrying America's "bloated" defense budget. Indeed, progressives regularly assert that Washington spends more on defense than the "next nine countries combined"[39] and that much of the progressive wish list could easily be financed by drastically paring back military expenditures. For example, over the past year, progressive activists and leaders asserted that trillions in Build Back Better spending could be financed out of the $9 trillion in defense spending that is projected over the next decade.

As background, defense spending is not driving America's soaring budget deficits (**Figure 2**). In fact, defense has long been the slowest-growing major category of federal spending, declining from half of all federal spending in 1962 to just 13% in 2022.[40] Since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, annual defense spending has expanded by only $154 billion faster than inflation—compared with entitlement-program spending leaping $2.5 trillion faster than inflation. Even within discretionary spending, defense has risen by 26% since 1991, compared with a 139% surge in nondefense discretionary spending (again, these numbers are adjusted for inflation).[41] Nor did all these savings take place during the 1990s. According to CBO, inflation-adjusted spending on defense is set to remain essentially flat from 2008 through 2032.[42]

Figure 2

Decline of Defense Spending as a Share of Federal Spending



Source: OMB Historical Tables 3.2, 8.5, and 10.1

The perception of spiraling defense spending results from the occasional generous budget increase garnering much more media coverage than the more common years of modest increases and even reductions. Critics also regularly compare the *total* defense budget ($760 billion) against the proposed *increases* in social spending (hundreds of billions annually), even though total social spending dwarfs defense spending. Finally, America's reported international dominance in military expenditures is partially influenced by factors such as America's troop compensation (salary, health care, housing) median costs of $113,000 per enlisted service member, as well as purchasing power and currency differences between nations.[43] Measured as a share of national income, America's 3% of GDP defense budget is lower than that of Russia's 4% and somewhat above the (approximately) 2% of GDP spent by much of Europe, China, and Australia.[44]

Even those figures overstate America's military spending dominance. China, Russia, and some other nations understate their reported defense spending by excluding major categories such as research and development, foreign weapons procurement, and entire categories of fighting forces. The U.S. defense budget reports not only all those costs but also includes nondefense policies such as environmental restoration, climate programs, security assistance, humanitarian aid, and troop recreation funding.[45] Many of these policies are championed by Democrats who otherwise criticize defense spending levels.

Because (inflation-adjusted) defense spending has already gradually declined for most of the past 15 years,[46] achieving steep additional savings is not a straightforward case of reversing recent increases. It requires fundamentally reorganizing, repurposing, and reimagining America's military apparatus and national security strategy. Decisions such as whether to abandon full ground-war counterattack capabilities, skip a generation of weapons technology, revisit international security commitments, or eliminate the jobs of hundreds of thousands of active-duty personnel are not merely budgetary decisions to impose haphazardly in an appropriations bill. They require true national security and military expertise and planning, not to mention democratic buy-in from voters.

So where is the specific progressive proposal to achieve the promised defense savings of 10%, 20%, or 30%? It doesn't exist. There is no proposal that specifies this degree of military savings or reforms in any level of implementable detail.

Consider the House Democrats' "Defense Spending Reduction Caucus," led by cochairs Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Mark Pocan (D-WI). Their People Over Pentagon Act of 2022 is nothing more than a 333-word bill setting the goal of an immediate $100 billion reduction in defense spending without a single instruction of where in the Pentagon to find such savings.[47] Instead, the bill merely instructs the secretary of defense to ask CBO for ideas. Needless to say, this is not how a serious nation overhauls its national security structure. Punting all reforms to the defense secretary also represents an extraordinary abandonment of Congress's responsibility to determine how the Pentagon should allocate its resources, particularly when it involves crafting a new national defense strategy.

On the Senate side, in 2020 Sanders offered a proposal to immediately slash military spending by 10% and reallocate those funds to new social spending. Did the senator lay out an implementable proposal to reorganize the Pentagon and amend America's national security framework to incorporate these new spending levels? Of course not. This fundamental entire defense overhaul was offered in a vague, 140-word instruction in an amendment to an appropriations bill.[48] Again, this is not a remotely serious, responsible, or plausible way to overhaul America's national security apparatus. The amendment simply demanded that nearly every defense account endure an equal across-the-board reduction. Rather than reorganize and set new priorities (such as targeting a specific weapons system or operational strategy), every defense account would continue operating under the Pentagon's current long-term strategic plan but with 14% less funding (a larger cut to balance Sanders's exemption of personnel and health-care costs).

To explain and defend his proposal, Sanders penned an op-ed[49] and gave a nearly 3,300-word speech[50] on the Senate floor. Both presentations detailed all the benefits of new social spending while treating the required overhaul of the Pentagon as an afterthought. There was no serious exploration of the defense budget, how to cut it, or how to repurpose America's national security to meet the ambitious budget target.

In response, Sanders's liberal colleague Jack Reed (D-RI), Senate Armed Services Committee ranking member, chastised Sanders for his lazy and unserious amendment, telling him: "This across-the-board approach, it's good for a headline, it's good to make a point, but we're here to make policy, and I hope we do make policy."[51] Sanders's amendment, as well as the House companion proposal, was soundly rejected in a bipartisan vote.[52]

Rather than provide any legislative substance to his own proposals, Sanders eventually asked CBO (rather than the Pentagon) to provide options to reduce defense spending by $1 trillion over the decade. CBO's illustrative scenarios included policies such as laying off 400,000 members of the active military (25% of all active personnel)[53] and essentially abandoning America's ability to repel an aggressor's military forces with a full-scale counterattack—instead relying on deterrence, limited counterattacks, and diplomatic and economic sanctions in hopes of persuading the attacking nation to back down.[54] It is noteworthy that not even progressive lawmakers have publicly embraced these reforms that would result from their own savings targets.

On the think-tank side, the progressive Center for International Policy offered a 75-page report heavily critiquing American foreign policy and defense spending levels.[55] The report spent only 10 pages briskly walking through a series of recommendations, ranging from the modestly specific to the gimmicky, that would—even if all enacted—save, at most, 10% from the current defense baseline.

Other progressive think tanks are more realistic. The Center for American Progress (CAP) recommended immediately trimming the defense budget by merely 2.3%, or $16 billion from the previous year's level.[56] CAP and the left-wing Economic Policy Institute proposed a defense budget that gradually declines to 2.0% and 2.3% of GDP, respectively, in 30 years.[57] Those figures correspond to (inflation-adjusted) annual spending increases of under 1%—a much more realistic and sustainable budget path than dramatic 10%, 20%, or 30% cuts.

Progressives regularly assert that America spends far too much on its military, and they offer detailed fantasies of the massive social expansions that could result from cutting defense spending by trillions of dollars over the decade. Yet the movement has abjectly failed to offer any specific blueprint for large defense cuts, or any vision for restructuring American national security to align with these cuts. Ultimately, progressive lawmakers and leaders have refused to do their homework and acquire the defense-policy expertise necessary to design such a massive overhaul. Instead, the U.S. military is treated as a budgetary black box, a piggy bank that can be raided for social programs with no concern over how to achieve the cuts or the resulting national security implications. America's military may be able to absorb some degree of savings, but that requires an actual legislative blueprint, rather than empty progressive rhetoric.

Phoning It In on Major Defense Cuts

The House Democrats' "Defense Spending Reduction Caucus" brought together numerous lawmakers promising to fundamentally redesign the Defense Department to achieve major budget savings while preserving national security.

Below is the entire text[58] of the "People Over Pentagon Act of 2022 (H.R. 8040)." It contains no specific savings or reorganization directions. Instead, it asks the secretary of defense to overhaul America's entire armed forces and national security strategy—including potentially laying off more than 20% of active troops—by reading a short CBO report.

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "People Over Pentagon Act of 2022."

SEC. 2. SENSE OF CONGRESS.

It is the sense of Congress that—

(1) many of the most urgent threats to the national security of the United States are not military in nature;

(2) the Federal budget should reflect the national priorities of the United States; and

(3) in order to better protect the security of all people and address the national priorities of the United States, the budget of the Department of Defense should be reduced and the associated savings should be reallocated.

SEC. 3. REDUCTION IN AMOUNTS AUTHORIZED TO BE APPROPRIATED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE FOR FISCAL YEAR 2023.

(a) In General.—The amount authorized to be appropriated for the Department of Defense for 2023 is—

(1) the aggregate amount appropriated for the Department of Defense for fiscal year 2022 in division C of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (Public Law 117–103), reduced by

(2) $100,000,000,000.

(b) Funding for Certain Accounts.—The amount authorized to be appropriated for each of the following accounts of the Department of Defense shall be the amount authorized to be appropriated for such account for fiscal year 2022:

(1) The Defense Health Program.

(2) Each military personnel account.

(3) Each account providing for pay and benefits for persons appointed into the civil service as defined in section 2101 of title 5, United States Code.

(c) Application of Funding Cuts.—In reducing funding for Department of Defense programs in accordance with subsection (a), the Secretary of Defense shall take into consideration the findings and recommendations contained in the CBO report entitled "Illustrative Options for National Defense Under a Smaller DefenseBudget" and dated October 2021.

Green New Deal: Promise to Plan a Proposal Later

While the climate crisis may be real, the progressive movement to combat it consists mostly of hot air. Progressive lawmakers, leaders, and activists can cite chapter and verse on climate doomsday scenarios and the need to slow the rise in global temperatures. Yet when pressed for specific solutions with three basic but fundamental questions—1) Which policies must be enacted? 2) How would families, businesses, and the economy incorporate these policies? and 3) How much temperature savings would be achieved from those policies?—the progressive movement is rarely able to provide a sufficient, detailed response. The "plan" is usually to assign someone to come up with a plan.

As background, man-made and natural factors have combined to increase global temperatures by 1.1 degree (Celsius) since the late 1800s.[59] The United Nations and other international organizations suggest that total warming could reach 4 degrees by the end of this century, without a substantial reduction in the projected carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere.[60] While the 2015 Paris Agreement[61] saw numerous nations pledge emissions restrictions, with the goal of limiting the total temperature rise to "well below 2 degrees," the environmental movement has since settled on a 1.5-degree target, which is just 0.4 degrees above current levels. The United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change claims that meeting this target—which is as much as 3 degrees below a baseline[62] of no climate reforms—requires steadily reducing global anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions to net zero by 2050.[63]

A major challenge is that the U.S. is no longer the dominant driver of global carbon dioxide emissions moving forward. The U.S. today produces one-seventh of all global CO_2 emissions, which is second to China and may eventually be passed by India as well.[64] While China, India, and many other developing nations have pledged to limit emissions moving forward, such economic restrictions may well prove to be a luxury that those developing nations cannot afford.

In other words, a coordinated global push to severely limit CO_2 emissions is unlikely to be sustained. That means that—absent an international agreement to implement policies together—a full-scale reorganization of the U.S. economy around carbon emissions restrictions could significantly burden families, businesses, and the economy while slowing the growth of global temperatures by the year 2100 by 0.1–0.2 degrees Celsius—an estimate not statistically significant from zero, according to an American Enterprise Institute analysis of the EPA climate model.[65] If that is the case, the enormous economic and budgetary cost of climate restrictions may be better spent on other global priorities (such as eradicating poverty, malaria, or AIDS) until a more effective and comprehensive global approach to the climate emerges. For instance, investing in R&D to develop less economically painful climate solutions may make more sense than immediate, draconian restrictions within one nation or a limited group of nations.

But subjecting various climate approaches to these cost/benefit tests requires first developing comprehensive proposals and measuring their costs and benefits. And such proposals have been few and far between. The American people hear a lot of apocalyptic hysteria but few specific solutions.

The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act included climate-related provisions costing $391 billion over the decade,[66] making it perhaps the most significant environmental legislation in three decades. This legislation abandoned the typical approach of painful mandates and taxes by instead leading with tax credits and incentives for energy efficiency and pollution reduction.

However, very little modeling was released quantifying the reduction in carbon emissions and global temperatures from this new approach. Typical was a Department of Energy "fact sheet" promising significant carbon reductions from IRA "in combination with other enacted policies and past actions," meaning that it did not include a stand-alone analysis of IRA.[67] Additionally, the fact sheet emphasized that its analysis was preliminary and its methodology portion was presented more as narrative than checkable databases. Still, this represents the peak of detail from climate legislation.

One of the most well-known and debated recent climate proposals was not even a bill but rather a nonbinding resolution. The "Green New Deal" resolution was authored by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) and cosponsored by 101 representatives and 14 senators.[68] The first five pages of this 14-page resolution merely offered a rhetorical case for addressing climate policy—with random digressions to unrelated issues like income inequality, gender pay equity, and health policy. From there, the resolution simply set vague goals such as reducing carbon emissions, upgrading building energy efficiency, and reducing transportation pollution—with additional digressions into unrelated progressive goals such as health reform, strengthening unions, retirement security, "democratic" reform, paid vacations, and family and medical leave. Nowhere does the legislation offer anything resembling a blueprint to accomplish any of its goals. It is simply a wish list.

Other leading bills include the "100% Clean Economy Act of 2019" authored by Representative Donald McEachin (D-VA) with 170 cosponsors,[69] and the similar "Clean Economy Act of 2020" authored by Senator Tom Carper (D-DE) with 33 cosponsors.[70] Both bills simply direct the federal government to come up with a plan to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. They offer no substantive blueprint whatsoever.

In search of a more comprehensive blueprint, Congress in 2019 established the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis to "investigate, study, make findings, and develop recommendations on policies, strategies, and innovations to solve the climate crisis."[71] This 16-member bipartisan congressional committee has held dozens of hearings over the past three and a half years.[72] Surely, one would hope that a congressional committee with significant financial resources and the ability to summon the nation's top experts could produce specific, implementable legislation to solve the climate crisis.

Instead of legislation, the committee wrote a report[73]—just one more of the hundreds of annual congressional reports whose writers typically outnumber their eventual readers. This report's lead recommendation was that "Congress should pass legislation to establish a national goal of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by no later than 2050."[74] The recommendation called on the president to agree to ambitious emissions-reduction targets, develop a strategy to that end, and "assess the country's progress."

In other words, a select congressional committee spent three and a half years investigating legislative climate solutions. Rather than produce legislation to reduce emissions, it merely released a report—and that report's main recommendation was for someone else to draft legislation. And that future legislation would simply set a nonbinding goal to reduce emissions. Then perhaps a federal agency would begin looking for ideas of exactly how to reduce emissions.

Essentially, Congress created a special committee that wrote a plan to assign someone to draft a legislative plan that would, in turn, ask someone else to come up with a plan.

In fairness. this legislative recommendation was included in a 547-page report analyzing the climate crisis and offering various approaches to curbing CO_2 emissions across industries. Surely, many of those recommendations could become the basis for a comprehensive emissions-reduction bill (even if too many recommendations consist simply of giving money to a federal

agency to develop a plan, and much of the report again digresses into unrelated progressive goals). However, after decades of environmental activism warning that sweeping measures are needed immediately, and with an entire industry of economists and climate scientists working on this issue, Congress should be past the initial brainstorming stage and able to craft a comprehensive legislative proposal that can be analyzed and enacted.

Again, progressives cannot ask voters to essentially redesign the industrial economy and endure massive costs and job shifts without knowing specifically what the program entails and how it will help the climate. This requires: 1) a specific and detailed proposal; 2) an economic and scientific analysis of what would replace the carbon-producing technology, how the transition would work, and how it would economically affect families, businesses, industries, and the overall economy; and 3) the ultimate effect on global temperature projections. Projections need not be exact, obviously. But the American people will require a basic understanding of the costs and benefits before they agree to this program.

It may be that progressives have determined that the specific steps necessary (such as banning the internal combustion engine, limiting air travel, and imposing extraordinarily expensive building regulations) must be hidden from congressional legislation lest they create a voter backlash. However, there is no getting around the democratic processes, and even agency-imposed restrictions are accountable to presidents and Congresses that will, in turn, be held accountable by voters.

Members of the climate movement lecture Americans that they must accept a full redesign of the industrial economy, or they will be responsible for "destroying the planet." Yet when pressed for solutions, most progressive leaders cannot even provide a blueprint of the necessary reforms and the resulting effect on global temperatures. Progressive legislative proposals consist largely of promises to come up with a plan later. Critics should not be blamed for blocking comprehensive climate legislation that does not actually exist.

On Climate, Planning to Plan a Plan

Congress in 2019 established the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis to "investigate, study, make findings, and develop recommendations on policies, strategies, and innovations to solve the climate crisis." One would hope that a 16-member bipartisan congressional committee with significant financial resources and the ability to summon the nation's top experts could produce specific, implementable legislation to solve the climate crisis.

But after three and a half years and dozens of hearings, instead of writing an actual climate bill, this congressional committee's main legislative recommendation[75] was for someone else in Congress to draft legislation that would, in turn, direct someone else to come up with legislation to reduce greenhouse emissions.

From page 30:

Recommendation: Congress should pass legislation to:

• Establish a national goal of achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by no later than 2050;

• Direct the President to set ambitious interim targets for 2030 and 2040 and frontload emissions reductions as much as possible;

• Develop a strategy for climate restoration and net-negative greenhouse gas emissions for the second half of the century; and

• Direct the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine to continually assess the country's progress toward meeting these climate goals; assess distributional impacts, including the impacts of climate policy on the cumulative effects of multiple pollution sources in environmental justice communities; and identify policy recommendations to remedy any unintended distributional impacts.

Conclusion: The Lure of Utopian Fantasies

Few would describe the market for public policy ideas as "efficient." However, it is fair to assume that most "easy answer" policies that would dramatically help nearly everyone with no serious drawbacks have already been enacted by now. What remains on most issues is a menu of policy solutions that involve trade-offs between costs and benefits, and the relative popularity of each policy option depends on individual values in assessing those trade-offs. The progressive movement largely rejects this framing, selling astonishingly bold solutions as nearly utopian fantasies with virtually no drawbacks—solutions that are stopped only by a cabal of sinister, bad-faith actors.

Yet extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. When pressed for specifics on how all such trade-offs can be defeated—such as government providing virtually unlimited healthcare treatments for "free" at the point of service, sharply reducing global temperature growth while protecting the economy, deeply slashing defense spending without compromising national

security, or financing a European-size welfare state solely through upper-income taxes—progressives largely fail this basic test of detail and evidence. As a movement, progressives promise enormous benefits, and then wave away basic questions of how the programs would work or be financed. But Congress cannot enact empty slogans, and the movement's leaders simply have not done their homework turning aspirations into workable legislative proposals, often because their promises are contradictory, unworkable, or mathematically impossible. Progressive proposals are not defeated by a cabal of sinister, bad-faith actors but rather by their own reliance on promising utopian solutions that even their leading advocates cannot turn into coherent legislation.

About the Author

Brian Riedl is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, focusing on budget, tax, and economic policy. Previously, he worked for six years as chief economist to Senator Rob Portman (R-OH) and as staff director of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Fiscal Responsibility and Economic Growth. Riedl also served as a director of budget and spending policy for Marco Rubio's presidential campaign and was the lead architect of the 10-year deficit-reduction plan for Mitt Romney's presidential campaign.

During 2001–11, Riedl served as the Heritage Foundation's lead research fellow on federal budget and spending policy. In that position, he helped lay the groundwork for Congress to cap soaring federal spending, rein in farm subsidies, and ban pork-barrel earmarks. Riedl's writing and research have been featured in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, *and* National Review*; he is a frequent guest on* NBC, CBS, PBS, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, *and* C-SPAN.

Riedl holds a bachelor's degree in economics and political science from the University of Wisconsin and a master's degree in public affairs from Princeton University.

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