

As I wrote in a [post](#) last Thursday, there's little prospect that anything like a Green New Deal could pass the Senate even assuming the filibuster is eliminated. In the best case scenario, Democrats would have a one or two vote margin in the Senate. That's a very slim margin for passing a trillion dollar program, especially since one of those Democratic Senators will be Joe Manchin from West Virginia. The election map will be better for Democrats in 2022, but even if they add to their majority, it's very hard for a President to pass major legislation in the last two years of his or her term. Moreover, Democrats will be trying to do other big things as well, like a big healthcare overhaul.

Putting big proposals on the table has some value even if the odds of enactment are low. They can inspire supporters, dramatize the seriousness of the problem, and set the bar higher for compromises. But there are also some serious concerns to be considered — my topic for today.

One worry is that promising big things but failing to deliver can erode trust in the political process. If big promises have little result, there's a tendency to assume that either the process was corrupt, the evil political opposition engaged in sabotage, or that the existing legislative process is obsolete. All this can help build support for populist leaders claiming they can fix all of our problems if only the courts, the media, Congress, and the bureaucracy can be bludgeoned into cooperation. The risk, then, is that failure to deliver political miracles in Congress builds pressure for populist authoritarianism.

Another worry is backlash. Big promises may help build support for climate action. On the other hand, some voters may view the alternatives as either a trillion dollars of spending or doing nothing — and may opt for doing nothing at all. Thus, political support for more realistic actions could actually be eroded in the center. Meanwhile, politicians on the progressive wing may refuse to go along with anything less than their dream solution. The result of making unrealistic promises could result in less progress rather than more. Unrealistic promises may build polarization, as one side grows to see the other as increasingly radical.

Certainly, overpromising isn't just a behavior of American Democrats. Trump said trade wars were painless and easy to win. He had an amazing replacement plan for Obamacare. He was going to return U.S. manufacturing to its glory days. And across the ocean, Brexit advocates promised a painless separation from the EU that would free up billions of dollars for the National Health Service. At least none of the Democratic candidates is promising that the Green New Deal would be free or that it would miraculously solve climate change all by itself. By comparison with those examples, they have been the soul of responsibility. Still, there is reason to worry about the long-term repercussions of promising policies that

are so far away from likely political realities.