ALBANY — Move over California and Massachusetts, New York has emerged as a national leader in battling climate change.

With the Trump administration shelving Obama-era climate plans and embracing the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure, efforts to cut carbon emissions are now pushed almost entirely at the state level, especially in statehouses controlled by Democrats. And while Gov. Andrew Cuomo has long touted his green credentials, the 2018 election put Albany under full Democratic control for only the second time since the 1930s. The power shift has pulled the Empire state to the left on a range of policy areas — including climate change.

The result: The sweeping emissions reduction and renewable energy measure Cuomo signed into law Thursday is the most ambitious legal mandate for cutting greenhouse gases in the nation, requiring an 85 percent reduction from 1990 levels over the next three decades and a carbon-free electric system by 2040.

“Cries for a new green movement are hollow political rhetoric if not combined with specific aggressive goals and a realistic plan on how to achieve them,” Cuomo said at the signing of the measure at Fordham Law School in Manhattan. “And that is much easier said than done — but that, my friends, is the challenge for our great state of New York. To lead not just with rhetoric but with results.”

The win has advocates optimistic about what more liberal Democrats can achieve on climate when they gain power.

The New York law “is the most ambitious piece of climate legislation we’ve seen thus far — in terms of its ambitious goals, its sweep, the economywide nature of it and the equity and environmental justice goals,” said Natural Resources Defense Council’s Kit Kennedy. “It reflects the moment where we are in climate politics where grassroots, environmental justice groups, youths are increasingly demanding bold climate action and will hopefully push the agenda forward at the federal level.”

Still, the battle to codify many of Cuomo’s climate goals into law — and the economic impact of transitioning the state’s economy away from fossil fuels — has in many ways mirrored the national debate over the Green New Deal, with more moderate politicians raising concerns about feasibility and costs while newly-elected progressives backed swift action on climate.

California has undoubtedly led the pack in setting ambitious goals to address greenhouse gas emissions and bringing more renewables online. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee is framing his 2020 presidential campaign around his climate efforts. Massachusetts codified its own emissions reduction goals into law more than a decade ago. But New York’s measure goes further than those states’ efforts, as well as electric-sector mandates in states including New Mexico, Colorado and Hawaii, in part by requiring the state’s electricity to come from 100 percent carbon-free resources by 2040.
Progressive activists, under the banner of a coalition called NY Renews, credit the aggressive climate bill to a sustained, multi-year campaign.

“What NY Renews did is validate that you can have this broad-based coalition of groups win incredibly tangible wins through legislative and policy means,” said Ryan Madden of the Long Island Progressive Coalition. “The federal Green New Deal has a lot to learn and take from a lot of statewide organization and broad-based coalitions. I think we’ve only added to the crescendo.”

But the bill had been in the offing for years only to languish in the Republican-controlled state senate. After progressive challengers took down members of the state’s Independent Democratic Conference, a splinter group of Democrats who aligned with Senate Republicans to give them a stronger majority, in primaries, the table turned.

With Democrats running the show, the climate legislation joined a number of top-line priorities for the left — including rent-reform, criminal justice and abortion rights — that finally came to fruition in the recently concluded legislative session.

“It’s unthinkable that this would’ve passed without the demise of the IDC,” said Matthew Miles Goodrich, the New York state director for the Sunrise Movement.

Cuomo, initially reluctant to embrace a hard deadline for emissions reductions and leery of requirements for money to flow to environmental justice communities, ultimately backed legislative action after securing significant changes that left some unhappy.

Instead of a 2050 goal of absolute zero emissions as pushed by the NY Renews coalition, the bill targets net zero by that date with strictly controlled offsets permitted. The measure also requires 35 percent of future clean energy and energy efficiency spending to “benefit” environmental justice communities, rather than a 40 percent mandate for direct investment in those areas.

“It’s a victory that is a bit bittersweet in some ways and it was the most vulnerable communities that got pushed aside,” Goodrich said.

The Sunrise Movement has been at the forefront of the push for the federal Green New Deal, which targets net zero emissions by 2030 and focuses on economic transformation. The Green New Deal has been embraced in various forms by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and many of the leading Democratic presidential candidates.

The federal debate over the Green New Deal echoes the battle that played out in New York, with more moderate politicians urging restraint while newly-elected progressives backed swift action on climate.

For activists, that highlights the importance of electing more progressive newcomers who prioritize climate change as a top issue.
“One of the priorities of Sunrise is electing champions in 2020 that can really push for sweeping legislation over corporate Democrats that want to push the brakes,” Goodrich said. “The leaders — the people that will be implementing this — need to be champions of the Green New Deal and racial and economic justice because we see how Cuomo scuttled this.”

One California Democrat who has advocated strongly for aggressive climate action said that while the national Green New Deal was an important proposal, states still need to act.

“The Green New Deal is important in articulating what can happen, what is possible,” said Sen. Scott Wiener, who represents San Francisco. “But we also know federal action on big issues is difficult and it’s important for states to get ahead on these issues to show what’s possible and then to put upward pressure on the federal government.”

Wiener said New York’s measure outstrips California’s plan. Former Gov. Jerry Brown issued an executive order targeting carbon neutrality by 2045, but that does not have the force of law. The state did enshrine a “zero-carbon” 2045 goal for the electric sector into law last year.

“I’m thrilled that New York is doing this and this makes clear that a state can go in this direction because in California we get a lot of pushback,” Wiener said. “It’s a fight here every time and it’s great that New York state is getting ahead of us and I hope this creates momentum in California.”

While New York now has loftier goals in place, California is well ahead in the race to increase the amount of renewables on the grid. More than 22 percent of electricity in that state comes from solar and wind. New York gets only a fraction of its electricity from those resources, with the bulk of its carbon-free generation coming from large-scale hydropower and nuclear plants.

Cuomo upped the ante for renewables by raising the 2030 goal from 50 percent to 70 percent, adding resource-specific targets for offshore wind, solar and storage, and setting a “carbon free” 2040 goal. Those mandates were all incorporated into the final climate package he signed.

The state faces a host of challenges in achieving those goals, including issues with siting large onshore wind installations and solar projects and transmitting those resources from upstate to downstate load centers around New York City.

“Meeting the goals will require breaking a lot of eggs to make the omelette,” said Michael Gerrard, director of the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University. “A massive increase in distributed solar will raise hackles in some places. Offshore wind and the necessary transmission lines will raise other hackles. There are going to be a lot of fights along the way and we’re going to have to see how much gumption the state has to fight those fights.”

Achieving drastic emissions cuts will also require tackling transportation, the largest source of emissions in the state, and buildings where natural gas and other fuels are the primary source of heating.

The massive shift envisioned by advocates and policymakers poses risks for the state’s economy, business groups have warned.
Unshackle Upstate’s Michael Kracker, who advocates on behalf of businesses in a large swath of the struggling region, said utility costs for businesses and residents will rise. New York often wants to lead on progressive issues, he said.

“I think New York state businesses and ratepayers are going to be the victim of that desire to beat Washington or beat another state on these lofty goals and you may see people flee for states that don’t have these burdensome energy mandates,” Kracker said.

**CaliforniaGeo Responds**

Congratulations to New York State for outlasting those forces aligned against climate defense measures. California has had democratic majority government for over eight years with serious climate policies, yet fossil interests have prevented universal progress. This includes the abolition of fracking and its fracking wastewater injection wells near our breadbasket for the U.S. (the San Joaquin Valley).

As long as money drives our elections, those wanting to protect their business interests centered on the status quo will continue to buy the political favors of those who see success defined by their incumbancy. Under such conditions, principle has a tough time besting politics—even if the nation or world cannot afford a delay in climate protection measures.

—Bill Martin