



NBC/WSJ Poll: "Socialism" Not So Popular After All

Richard Morrison

February 3, 2020

NBC News and The Wall Street Journal just released a [new poll](#) that finds capitalism isn't underwater with the American public just yet. Registered voters have a generally positive view of capitalism (52 percent positive) and a generally negative view of socialism (53 percent negative), though [Democrats and younger voters](#) are more likely to be in opposition to the majority. These results, however, may tell us less than they seem to, given the lack of precision in the terms being polled.

The results are at least consistent with similar recent polls, including one from [September 2018](#), which Eric Boehm [wrote up for Reason](#) at the time. He made the point that supporters of capitalism should be encouraged, given that—when ranked against prominent politicians and entities like “the news media”—capitalism was among the most popular and socialism the least popular of everything respondents were asked to rate. The same was true this time, with capitalism outpolling Trump (45 percent positive) and socialism even less popular than Nancy Pelosi (33 percent) and Mitch McConnell (23 percent). Only former National Security Advisor John Bolton (14 percent) managed to be less popular than socialism.

The real question, though, is what do people—both for and against—think “socialism” means? The Cato Institute's David Boaz wrote [a great response](#) to a [2018 Gallup poll](#) for National Review in which he pointed out that the formal definition of socialism, in which the government centrally plans an economy and controls the means of production, is not the definition most self-declared socialists are working with. The same is true of conservatives as well, of course, who have trained themselves to criticize any economic policy they don't like as socialism.

The real debate, much to the chagrin of the “Bernie would be a centrist in Europe” crowd, is more narrowly defined than that. Outside of a small rump group of [tankie](#) die-hards, almost no one in the United States wants the federal government to nationalize industrial production. There are no serious proposals for a government takeover of Exxon or Nucor. But there is a robust debate about whether the federal government should be dramatically expanding spending and regulation in areas like energy use, health care, and higher education. Increasing government control over the economy certainly takes us in the general direction of socialism, but the policies most people have in mind stop well short of the economics textbook definition.

But isn't this just semantic hair splitting? I don't think so. People want better outcomes for the big-picture issues in their lives, and if they're told that those solutions come in a box marked

“socialism,” we shouldn’t be surprised when they repeat that association to pollsters. But it’s important not to fall for illusion that a large part of America wants a government takeover of the economy. Americans want affordable health care and system of postsecondary education that leads to successful careers. If market-based policies can deliver those things, American voters will flock to whoever and whatever party is implementing them.

Why am I so sure that half of U.S. voters aren’t secretly Soviet sleeper agents, a la FX’s *The Americans*? Look at the 2018 Gallup [results](#), broken out into multiple phrases describing economic life. “Capitalism” only scored a 56 percent positive in that poll, but “free enterprise” brought home a 79 percent positive. And the results show that we love when people start new businesses: “entrepreneurs” came in with an 86 percent positive score, and “small business” has a 92 percent positive rating. As you might expect, “big business” wasn’t as popular, coming in with only a 50 percent positive score. But there was an entity that was 11 points less popular than that, and it was the federal government—only two points ahead of socialism itself.