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Young people forget socialism is still radical to some older Americans

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Thirty years ago on Nov. 9, 1989, communist officials in East Germany made a bewildering decision to open border crossings in Berlin that had divided the capital city's communist east and democratic west sectors since the sixties. Overnight, the Berlin Wall was transformed from a deadly Cold War battleground to a jovial gathering place as Berliners welcomed long-separated family and friends and tore chunks from the monolith.

The fall of the Berlin Wall promised more freedom for a divided Germany, but also heralded the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War with the United States as its victor.

My mom remembers those days vividly. We discussed the events during Thanksgiving break.

"I mean, Reagan telling Gorbachev to tear down that wall ... it was heroic," she said.

I can tell from her tone that she is still optimistic. After all, 30 years isn't that long ago.

However, younger generations who didn't experience the Cold War have distinctly different collective memories. The Great Recession, a free market failure, looms larger in the past than the fall of the Iron Curtain, capitalism's great triumph.

Indeed, a [November Gallup survey](#) showed only half of young Americans had a favorable view of capitalism, down from nearly two-thirds a decade ago. Furthermore, young Americans viewed socialism about equally as favorably as capitalism.

While the end of the Cold War could help explain older generations' faith in capitalism, the Great Recession helps explain younger generations' distrust of it. [The Economist quotes a professor](#) at the University of Southern California asserting the very 21st Century idea that capitalism has "sucked the life out of democracy" because of the inequalities and disparities in power it has created since the recession.

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This sentiment is not widely shared by our parents' generation. As young people, we must understand older generations' perspectives on socialism and why many Americans are deeply skeptical of it.

Young people often associate socialism with an idea of generous financial safety nets for less fortunate people and more proactive government regulation. Yet, socialism still connotes government control and a stagnated society for many Americans.

David Boaz at the Cato Institute gives context to what young people imagine when they think of socialism. He says most young people likely don't think the government should seize all means of production, but "you get vague and lovely answers" about making life more secure for poorer folk.

Bernie Sanders is fond of making Nordic countries like Sweden and Denmark examples of how democratic socialism can work wonders, but The Economist goes on to point out that those nations have very lax regulation, hardly a hallmark of state control.

Thus, we have a conundrum of political vocabulary. "Socialism" has been thrown around in political discourse so much that multiple definitions have arisen for each subsequent generation, and it has lost its original meaning.

Some younger Americans view socialism as a proactive, energetic response to growing inequality. Many people of older generations remember socialism as the sluggish malaise of pre-Thatcher Britain at best and as the oppressive regime of East Germany at worst.

Compassionate safety nets versus stifling overreach: That is the heart of our generational disconnect.

Therefore, it's no wonder appeals for "democratic socialism" often fall on deaf ears. For many, socialism, not capitalism, inhibits freedom and democracy. Those different feelings are direct consequences of consequential world events, which we must understand to inform our politics today.

When the Berlin Wall crashed down, the world changed overnight. The end of the Cold War endorsed the idea that free markets lead to a freer, more prosperous society, and people like my mom who lived through that time largely think the world changed for the better. Young Americans would do well to understand why older generations are skeptical of socialism and remember that it is still a radical idea.