

## Why Younger Americans Misunderstand True Socialism

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“Socialism does not mean government owns everything,” Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez explained earlier this summer during an Instagram live stream. “I disagree with that notion because I think it is undemocratic. I think that it is very easily corrupted, and I don't think that that's a good thing.”

Three months prior to Ocasio-Cortez's declaration, a Harris Poll provided exclusively to [Axios](#) showed that 61% of Americans ages 18 to 24 have a positive reaction to the word “socialism,” while 58% responded similarly to the word “capitalism.” Conversely, only 27% of people age 65 and older had a positive reaction to the word that most of them still associate with the Red Scare.

The [poll](#) also showed that millennials and Gen Zers are more likely than previous generations to accept socialistic policies and values. These younger generations, for example, overwhelmingly believe that government should provide universal health care and tuition-free college. Half of millennials and Gen Zers claim they would prefer living in a socialist country.

In response to this trend, economists Robert Lawson and Benjamin Powell recently discussed their new book, “Socialism Sucks: Two Economists Drink Their Way Through the Unfree World,” at the Cato Institute. Powell said it's not surprising that socialism is popular now in the United States, though he added that this favorability comes from an illusion.

Much of America's youth, Powell continued, has been led into a state of confusion by Sen. Bernie Sanders, who has repeatedly cited Nordic countries as examples of socialism. “When you hear Bernie and others say this, they don't mean real socialism in the way that Bob and I defined the term of the government owning most of the means of production,” Powell said. “However, Bernie and AOC and the rest of them do want to march you down the road of serfdom ... moving to Medicare for All.”

After visiting Sweden, Lawson and Powell concluded that it's more capitalist than socialist. They continued on their exploration to Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, China, Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia – all places where socialism does or has existed to varying degrees. Finally, Lawson and Powell made their way back to a convention in Chicago for “the largest gathering of American socialists” on the weekend of Independence Day.

Lawson was surprised by how many young leftists at the conference were calling one another “comrade” but were unclear of the definition of socialism in a classical sense. Many of the attendees expressed their desire to fight for more justice in America: Be more pro-immigration,

more antiwar, and roll back policing. Powell, however, argued that the real solution to these problems is not socialism, as the younger generations have been talked into believing.

“The young socialists ... many of them just don’t identify with abolishing private property,” he said. “A lot of them think in aspirations and goals, rather than means of achieving them.”

According to Gary Wolfram, the director of economics at Hillsdale College, one of the reasons younger generations think more abstractly in this regard is because the average person is not taught about how markets work in their K-12 education: “They think that somehow this stuff just magically shows up. And AOC can start providing free stuff for everybody, and it will all be there.”

This lack of education, Wolfram said, has caused many of America’s youth to look at economic inequality differently than their predecessors do. Inequality of income is one of the foundations of liberalism and a driving force behind innovation, he pointed out. Based on young people’s misunderstanding of this concept, however, it’s no surprise that many of them think idealistically about ending what it a societal necessity.

Matt Kibbe, president of the libertarian organization Free the People, added to the rea discussion by referencing Friedrich Hayek’s 1949 essay “Intellectuals and Socialism” to explain the appeal of socialism to America’s youth. He argued that younger generations care less about logic, economics, or empirical evidence than human-based values. Young intellectuals are attracted to the message of Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, Kibbe said, because the two have crafted a vision and imagined a utopian future that appears better than the status quo.

“Socialism, in the narrative of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, is a belief in community, a belief in people at the local level working together to solve problems and respecting each other. And somehow, that bottom-up process is a way that we can solve all of the problems. ... She uses that word ‘dignity’ a lot. Community, dignity, bottom-up, peaceful cooperation; these are not socialist concepts,” Kibbe explained.

Kibbe emphasized that anyone who supports free market economics should take the time to understand why younger generations think in terms of values and experiences but not facts. Ocasio-Cortez made the observation that her generation has never known true prosperity. Millennials and Gen Zers, after all, grew up watching Wall Street being bailed out and are now facing more college debt than previous generations.

“Those of us that crunch numbers ... by any conceivable measure, we are living in the most prosperous, most opportunistic, most beautiful times in the history of the universe, but ... there’s a lot of reasons, from [Ocasio-Cortez’s] perspective, that things could suck, even though things are the best they’ve ever been,” Kibbe observed.