



## Mike Vaughan: Who is a socialist?

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If you open a newspaper or turn on the television news, there is a good chance that you will hear someone use the word socialism. In some cases, Bernie Sanders describes himself as a democratic socialist. In other cases, the term is used simply to smear a person or program. If a Republican calls a Democrat a socialist, you can be sure that the term was not being used as a compliment. Yet, what does socialism really mean?

Many view social welfare programs as socialism. However, the conservative CATO Institute estimates the nation spends \$92 billion a year on corporate welfare, and these programs are seldom described as socialism. Some denounce food stamps as socialism, but the country spends more than \$20 billion a year on agricultural subsidies, most going to large corporate farms. Indeed, Forbes has reported that some of the largest payments go to those living in Manhattan and Beverly Hills. Former Sen. Orrin Hatch, a staunch critic of socialism, had no qualms asking the taxpayers to ante up \$2 million for a center honoring his legacy.

The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, attempts an unbiased look at capitalism and socialism through a measure called the Index of Economic Freedom. This index rates the degree to which the economies of various countries are economically free, or not (i.e., capitalist or socialist). The index does not make value judgments about the nature of government involvement; it simply examines the areas of the economy controlled by the government. Corporate welfare is treated the same as social welfare. Subsidies for agricultural are treated the same as government intervention in health care.

In ranking economic freedom, the United States is not near the top of the list. Indeed, the U.S. is behind Canada, Iceland, Ireland, Singapore and the United Kingdom, and these countries offer universal health care, a program many decry as socialist. At least one of the countries, Iceland, has a socialist government.

Why isn't the U.S. ranked higher? The aforementioned agricultural subsidies and corporate welfare are two factors cited by the Foundation as moving the country in the direction of socialism. The Foundation writes: "Leaders seem unable to resist the efforts of entrenched economic elites to enlist the power of government to maintain their current advantages in the marketplace."

The Trump administration's aggressive use of tariffs is another factor that lessens economic freedom. The Foundation notes: "The loss of trade freedom ... represents the triumph of short-term expediency."

The Foundation also notes that current practices allowing law enforcement agencies to seize an individual's assets without any judicial procedure reduces liberty. A related legal issue, not captured in the rankings, is the fact that the U.S. imprisons a larger proportion of its population than any other country.

Poor fiscal health is yet another factor accounting for the restriction of economic freedom. The U.S. has a tendency to spend more than it can afford. The Foundation writes: "A budget reflects a government's commitment (or lack thereof) to sound financial management of resources, which is . . . critical to the advancement of economic freedom."

At a personal level, I have spent my life avoiding debt, yet our government has deprived me of the freedom to be debt free. I, and every other U.S. taxpayer, am saddled with \$154,161 in debt. That is each individual's share of the national debt.

As a result of all this, the U.S. has less freedom than most assume and many desire. Republicans, as well as Democrats, have played an active role in the expansion of government.

The next time a politician uses the socialist label, they may want to look in the mirror.