

NATIONAL REVIEW

The Sanders Youth

What do they understand by ‘socialism?’

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For decades, politicians and the media, especially on the right, have used the term “socialist” as an epithet to vilify political opponents. Yet somehow Bernie Sanders has managed to bring socialism back into style. The quirky 74-year-old senator from Vermont explains that he’s not a regular socialist but rather a new, improved “Democratic socialist.”

Sanders’s railing against wealth inequality and his calls for dramatically expanding government provision of services seems to be working for him among America’s rising generation. Sanders has won more than 70 percent of the under-30 vote in twelve of the first 25 primaries for which we have exit-polling data. And it’s not just young Democrats; regardless of party affiliation, most Americans under 30 have a positive impression of Sanders, according to a recent poll by Harvard’s Institute of Politics (IOP).

For many young people, socialism is not a label representing a bad history. A *Reason-Rupe* poll found Millennials were the only age cohort of which a majority (53 percent) had a favorable view of socialism, compared with only a third of Americans over 30.

A possible explanation of this difference is that younger Americans don’t know what socialism is. A CBS/*New York Times* survey found that only 16 percent of Americans 18 to 29 years old could define socialism accurately in their own words. While two out of three Americans over 30 couldn’t define it either, three out of four of them oppose it nonetheless. Their reaction to it is visceral.

Older Americans remember the Cold War, during which the concept of socialism merged with their fear of the Soviet Union. Americans could see that the USSR had long bread lines, poor-quality consumer goods, little innovation, and low productivity. All that reduced its standard of living. The USSR also had forced-labor camps, campaigns against religion, and myriad forms of political repression. Americans came to see its ideology — that everyone should be rewarded equally regardless of achievement — as a demoralizing force that undermined individuals’ self-efficacy by reducing the incentive to work hard, excel, and innovate.

In part because they did not live through the Cold War, Millennials find the “socialism” label less alarming. “Socialism” to the Millennial mind doesn’t mean the Soviet Union; it means Scandinavia, a place far gentler.

Scandinavia, however, isn't socialist so much as socialistic, in that its governments provide generous social services, impose value-added taxes, or VATs, and collect high income taxes. What Millennials like is the large social-welfare state that provides for people's needs.

Young Americans support this Scandinavian version of "socialism" for several reasons. First, Scandinavia shows them that large social-welfare states need not be politically repressive. Second, the Great Recession, not the Cold War, has defined their youth. Financial insecurity may incline them to see value in activist government. Finally, over the past year Sanders has told us repeatedly that we ought to be more like Sweden, which people naturally associate with his "Democratic socialism."

Sanders's use of the label has helped legitimize socialism and the Scandinavian model specifically. Political scientists have found that, rather than choose a candidate whose views match their own, voters often change their views to align with the candidates they've chosen. A recent Harvard IOP poll shows that over the past year Millennials have moved slightly but significantly toward the left on welfare spending and government guarantees of health insurance. Sanders may have contributed to that movement.

But it's not just Sanders. Many young people are predisposed to find his message compelling because of certain conventions in the culture they were raised in. Take sports. *Reason-Rupe* finds college-age Millennials to be the only cohort with a majority (51 percent) supporting participation trophies, with most older Americans saying that trophies should be reserved for those who win their events.

Many on the right have bemoaned Millennials' ostensible embrace of a failed economic and political philosophy. Others hope Millennials will begin to reject socialism when they get jobs, pay taxes, and assume adult responsibilities, as some evidence suggests they will. But advocates of limited government should not be complacent. Most Americans think our economy is still in recession, and young people may take longer to find their footing in a good career with higher pay. Moreover, not all of them will eventually pay high taxes, and those who will not may need to hear stronger arguments before they reject socialistic policies.

The time has come to start explaining to the next generation how socialistic economic planning hurts people.

But first we must correct the perception, promoted by Sanders, that Scandinavia is socialist. It's not. Although Norway, Sweden, and Denmark have social-welfare states, they outrank the United States on a variety of other economic-freedom indices calculated by the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute; they have, for example, less business regulation, lower corporate tax rates, and more trade freedom. Their liberal markets are what enable them to accommodate massive social-welfare spending. If Sanders says that America should be more like Sweden, he should acknowledge what it takes to be more like Sweden: freer markets, not more government control.

While the Scandinavian countries are not socialist, they are socialistic in that their governments exercise a high degree of control over the provision of health care, higher education, and other

services. *Reason-Rupe* has found that, the label “socialism” aside, Millennials prefer, by a ratio of two to one, a “free-market economy” over a “government-managed economy.” If they chafe at the idea of government’s running businesses, they may be open to arguments that government guarantees of health care and college necessarily lead to government control in those sectors and to the inefficiency and rigidities that come with it. The key is to highlight that government control often leads to insufficient supply, rationing, and reductions in innovation and in quality of services.

We see this in the health-care systems of Scandinavian countries. The United States far outranks them in health-care innovation and in wait times for surgery and to see specialists. In recent decades, U.S. companies have developed about half of the major new medicines introduced worldwide. Americans have better access to medical technology and to new versions of pharmaceuticals with fewer side effects. By some measures, survival rates in the U.S. are higher for breast cancer and heart attacks after hospital admittance.

The social-welfare state also comes with costs to productivity, economic growth, and, ultimately, standards of living. While the welfare state may offer certain benefits, we must acknowledge its costs. And even if we did decide to steer our economy in that direction, the lesson of Scandinavia is that we need to further liberalize our market economy, not bring it under more-centralized, bureaucratic control.

In research we are conducting at the Cato Institute, we are finding that people change their minds when presented with fact-based, reasoned arguments. The expression “If you’re explaining, you’re losing” is not only tired, it’s wrong. By explaining, we can correct people’s misunderstanding of how best to improve access, innovation, and quality in health care and education. And that way forward is not through increased government management of the economy but through the free-market model, which most Millennials recognize as the better system.

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