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Trump brandishes anti-socialism message as political weapon in 2020 campaign

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President Trump's attacks on socialism and the "Green New Deal" could be a potent political weapon as he begins in earnest to try to undermine the field of Democratic presidential hopefuls.

"Where I think he's been delivered a huge political opportunity is the lurch to the far left by the Democratic Party coming out of the 2018 campaign cycle," Republican strategist Greg Mueller told the *Washington Examiner*. "This lurch toward socialism in all its forms in many ways has been a political gift."

Trump has already made Democrats' embrace of socialist policies a theme of his speeches, including his State of the Union address. The charge is driven in part by a crop of new lawmakers like Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., who are pushing the Democratic Party further to the left, and the entrance of self-described socialist Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., into the presidential race.

"Here in the United States, we are alarmed by new calls to adopt socialism in our country," Trump said during his State of the Union. "America was founded on liberty and independence — not government coercion, domination, and control. We are born free, and we will stay free."

It was a warning he echoed nearly one month later when delivering remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference, during which he accused Democrats of "embracing open borders, socialism, and extreme late-term abortion."

Trump's efforts to label his political opponents as socialists could play well among a bloc of voters outside of his primary base of support, namely those older than 65 years.

"Here is a message that could connect with voters over 65 who remember in their lives that socialism wasn't benign," John Zogby, senior partner at John Zogby Strategies and founder of the Zogby Poll, said. "Voters 65 and older are among the most conservative of voters. However, they're conservative to moderate, and for those especially who don't particularly care for the president's rhetoric, his behavior, his morality, this at least raises the specter for them that they should be on alert."

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who focuses on domestic policies, characterized Trump as an imperfect messenger to deploy the socialist label as a weapon, but he said working in the president's favor is the association of the term "socialist" with extremism.

"That's going to be heard by a lot of suburban Republican types, suburban Independents who don't like Trump but have traditionally voted Republican. And then the social issues pushed

them Democratic, but they don't exactly want the 'Green New Deal' either," he said. "To some extent, they're always going to be holding their nose. This is another reason they might hold their nose and vote for Trump."

Though the 2020 presidential campaign is still in its early stages — and more Democrats continue to enter the race — a number of candidates have already voiced their support for policies like "Medicare for all," a form of tuition-free college, and the Green New Deal, spearheaded by Ocasio-Cortez.

Democratic strategist Brad Bannon agreed that while the term "socialism" may raise eyebrows, invoking specific government programs can be a way to neuter Trump's charges.

"The reality is, as much as middle-class voters may be suspicious of the term socialism and Democratic socialism, they're scared to death of cuts to Medicare and Social Security, so I would say the president undermined his attacks with his attempts to radically reduce funding for two programs that are very important to the well-being of middle class voters," Bannon told the *Washington Examiner*.

Medicare and Social Security, he added, "are enshrined in the pantheon of middle-class America."

Zogby also encouraged Democrats to focus on the policies rather than the word "socialism."

"Democrats have to look at each of the elements that Bernie and AOC represent — the 'Medicare for all,' the \$15 an hour minimum wage, the free public education," he said. "Solid majorities of all voters support those, so they've got to focus on the bumper sticker policies and not the word."

Still, Mueller, the GOP strategist, said Democrats have given Trump a "political gift" with their embrace of "socialist" ideas.

"That only allows him to double down in terms of political attraction," he said. "The Democrats really have themselves divided and boxed in."