

Is “Socialist” A Dirty Word?

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Newt Gingrich says Barack Obama sits at the helm of a “secular-socialist machine.” Sen. Jim DeMint calls Obama “the world’s best salesman of socialism.” Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele has decried Obama’s “radical socialist” healthcare policies. Rep. Mike Pence says Obama backs “European-style socialism.” Sarah Palin says some of Obama’s policies are based on “socialist principles.” And Mike Huckabee has declared, “The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics may be dead, but the Union of American Socialist Republics is being born.”

The Republican meme about Obama’s socialism has been around since the 2008 campaign, when even moderate Sen. George Voinovich said of his then-colleague, “The man is a socialist.” Sen. John McCain did not use the term himself, but frequently and approvingly cited surrogates like S. Joseph “Joe the Plumber” Wurzelbacher, who did.

Actual socialists, however, have scoffed at the claim. In the Washington Post last year, Socialist Party USA official Billy Wharton wrote, “Socialists understand him more as a hedge-fund Democrat — one of a generation of neoliberal politicians firmly committed to free-market policies.” (Though when Obama imposed \$500,000 caps on senior executive pay at bailed-out firms in his first days in office, the Socialists’ 2008 presidential nominee Brian Moore called it “a good start toward socialism.”)

At the other end of the spectrum, Rep. Ron Paul has said Obama is not a socialist but a corporatist, while Ed Crane of the libertarian Cato Institute has written that Obama “is not a socialist. He is a thoroughgoing statist, perhaps the worst in American history.”

Obama is not a socialist, in that he does not advocate the vesting of ownership and control of the means of production and distribution in the government or the community as a whole, nor does he back the abolition of private enterprise. But it is fair to say that there are socialistic attributes to some of his policies – the aforementioned healthcare law, for example, as well as his support of progressive taxation, government assistance for private business coupled with a governmental role in oversight, and massive stimulus spending. (This last is more Keynesian than Marxist, but it will do.)

A poll by the Democratic-leaning Democracy Corps this summer showed that 55 percent of Americans think the term “socialist” defines Obama accurately. But the issue is less whether Obama is a socialist or socialistic than it is why that should be a bad thing. Socialism is a brand of political and economic thought along with conservatism, liberalism, libertarianism, and the like. It is not inherently bad or evil, though many would say it is wrong. Many would say the same about each of these classifications.

For about a half-century following the election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, “conservative” was a dirty word. Then, with the rise of the New Right movement in the

late 1970s and the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, the tide turned against liberals. Rather than defiantly defending their beliefs as Barry Goldwater and others did during the right's dark days, liberals led themselves be cowed by their foes, with many rebranding themselves as "progressives". Few bothered to ask why "liberal" had gone from a valid classification to a political smear.

During an appearance on The Colbert Report earlier this year, George Will summed up the philosophical divide in American politics quite elegantly: "Conservatives tend to favor freedom and are willing to accept inequalities of outcome from the free market, liberals are for equality of outcome and are willing to sacrifice and circumscribe freedom in order to get it."

While Will defended his stance as a proponent of the conservative view, he did not trash-talk the liberal view. His simple summary makes great sense. If one believes freedom to be paramount, inequality is a necessary side-effect, as the government will not be intervening to boost some and hold others back. If one believes equality to be most important, restrictions on personal activity are required to keep those with certain advantages in check.

Due in part to economic dire straits and in part to his own beliefs and agenda, Obama is putting forth policies that have the chance of significantly realigning the balance between government and the private sector. Some may quibble over whether this is liberalism, Keynesianism, or socialism. But casting any one of the terms as a smear does not do credit to citizens who deserve a real debate.