

Bernie Sanders, “Democratic Socialism” and the Redistribution of Wealth in America

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Like most western democracies, for many decades the US government has been operating with some socialist programs – within an undeniably capitalist economic system. But what are we really talking about? We clearly don't have the state running the economy. It can barely manage itself. But we have adopted programs designed to increase economic equality – and sometimes programs that have done the opposite.

In other words, we've had redistribution of wealth. As Bernie Sander has been arguing in his presidential campaign, during the last few decades it's largely been redistribution toward the top.

What do socialists believe?

Most would probably agree that capitalism unfairly concentrates power and wealth, creating an unequal society. Basically, a no brainer so far. Where they disagree is about how much and what type of government intervention will work. A few advocate complete nationalization of production. But more prefer some state control of capital within a market economy, while democratic socialists often talk about selective nationalization of key elements in a mixed economy, along with tax-funded social programs. On the other hand, libertarian socialists don't favor state control and prefer direct collective ownership – workers coops, workers councils, basically workplace democracy.

Libertarian socialists, like libertarians in general, weren't happy about the 2008-2009 financial bailouts. Democratic socialists, in contrast, felt they didn't go far enough. And most capitalists? Well, many decried the situation but went along. Some even chirped that “we are all socialists now” – at least as far as losses are concerned.

The truth is, Americans have been adopting socialist ideas – although not living in a socialist society – for many years, and the sky hasn't fallen. But this doesn't matter to the politicians and talking heads who hawk “out of control” government and a hostile takeover of the country.

The attempt to stir up fears about socialism, and link it to xenophobia and un-American activity, is a cheap but tried-and-true political ploy. That's probably why it appeals to Donald Trump. It's also the latest incarnation of an ongoing culture war based on resentment, ignorance, and selfishness.

The subtext is that we are not equal, that being “truly American” includes a very narrow set

of values, and that the government shouldn't be a force for equality. Will it work? How Sanders defines the issue — and handles the topic from here on — may determine whether voters decide he's electable or ultimately just a protest candidate.

But let's give a conservative the last word. During the 2008 presidential campaign, George Will put it this way:

"Ninety-five percent of what the government does is redistribute wealth. It operates on the principle of concentrated benefits and dispersed costs. Case in point: we have sugar subsidies. Costs the American people billions of dollars but they don't notice it it's in such small increments. But the few sugar growers get very rich out of this. Now we have socialism for the strong - that is the well-represented and organized in Washington like the sugar growers. But it's socialism none the less and it's not new."

Greg Guma worked with Bernie Sanders in the 1970s and 80s, and wrote The People's Republic: Vermont and the Sanders Revolution.

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