

February 15, 2016 Commentary

# Why So Many Millennials Are Socialists

By [Emily Ekins](#) and Joy Pullmann

This article appeared in [The Federalist](#) on February 15, 2016.

Since when did socialism become en vogue? It seems like only a few years ago being called a socialist in American politics was an insult. Today, however, presidential candidate Bernie Sanders—a self-avowed socialist—is quickly rising in the polls, and millennials are largely driving his support.

The Iowa caucus entrance poll found Sanders garnered an overwhelming 84 percent of the 30 and under vote. Exit polls from New Hampshire found 85 percent support for Sanders among voters ages 30 and younger. What is going on?

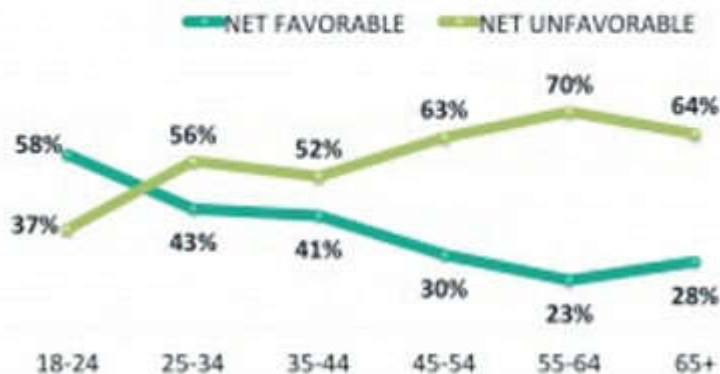
Millennials are simply not that alarmed by the idea of socialism. For instance, a national Reason-Rupe survey [found](#) that 53 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds view socialism favorably, compared to only a quarter of Americans over 55. A more recent [January YouGov survey](#) found that 43 percent of respondents younger than 30 viewed socialism favorably, compared to 32 percent thinking favorably of capitalism.

---

## College-Aged Millennials Only Group Favorable to Socialism

Would you say your opinion of Socialism is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?

### % Favorable or Unfavorable Toward Socialism



Source: REASON-RUPE AUG 2014

---

In fact, millennials are the only age cohort in which more are favorable toward socialism than unfavorable. Young people are also more comfortable with a political candidate who describes

him- or herself as a socialist. A May 2015 YouGov national survey [found](#) that 37 percent of millennials reported being “comfortable” (29 percent) or “enthusiastic” (8 percent) with the prospects of a socialist candidate. Among those older than 45, only about half that agree. So why are millennials so much more favorable toward socialism compared to older Americans?

### Millennials Don’t Know What Socialism Is

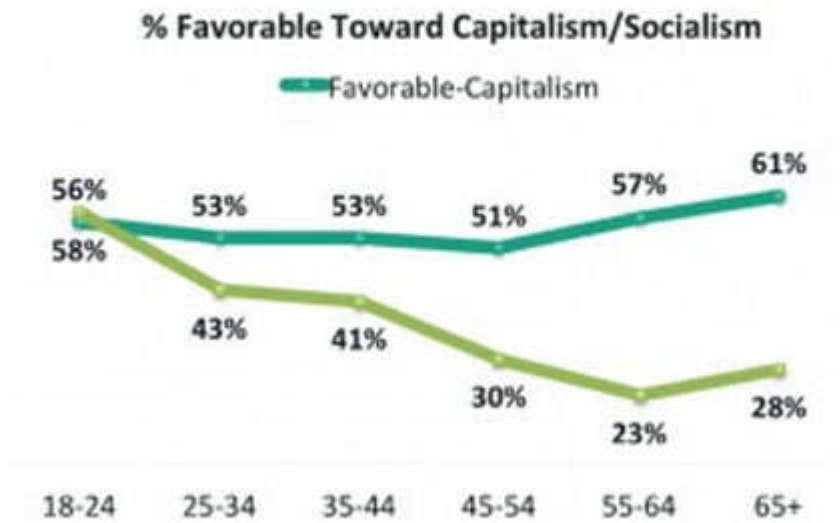
First, millennials don’t seem to know what socialism is, and how it’s different from other styles of government. The definition of socialism is government ownership of the means of production—in other words, true socialism requires that government run the businesses. However, a CBS/*New York Times* survey [found](#) that only 16 percent of millennials could accurately define socialism, while 30 percent of Americans over 30 could. (Incidentally, 56 percent of Tea Partiers accurately defined it. In fact, those most concerned about socialism are those best able to explain it.)

With so few able to define socialism, perhaps less surprisingly a Reason-Rupe national survey [found](#) college-aged millennials were about as likely to have a favorable view of socialism (58 percent) as they were about capitalism (56 percent). While attitudes toward capitalism remain fairly constant across age groups, support for socialism drops off significantly when moving to older age cohorts. Only about a quarter of Americans older than 55 have a favorable view of socialism.

---

### College-Aged Americans Like Capitalism About As Much As Socialism

*Would you say your opinion of Socialism/Capitalism is very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?*



Source: REASON-RUPE AUG 2014

---

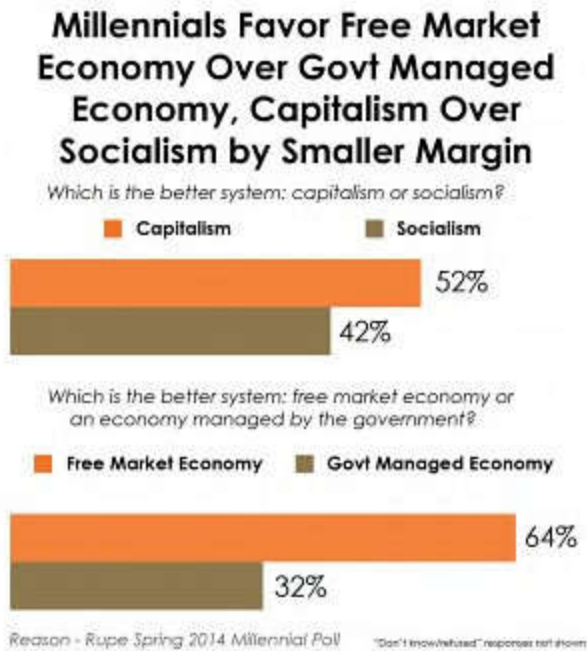
Conservatives often use the word “socialist” like an epithet, but they don’t realize that neither their audience nor even their political opponents really know what the word even means. This may help explain the inability of free-market advocates to communicate with them using phrases like “big government,” “socialism,” and “collectivism.”

So what do millennials think socialism is? A 2014 Reason-Rupe survey asked respondents to use their own words to describe socialism and found millennials who viewed it favorably were more likely to think of it as just people being kind or “being together,” as one millennial [put it](#). Others thought of socialism as just a more generous social safety net where “the government pays for our own needs,” as another explained it.

If socialism is framed the way Sanders does, as just being a generous social safety net, it’s much harder to undermine among millennials. This narrative says government is a benevolent caretaker and pays for everybody’s needs (from everybody’s pockets), along the lines of the Obama administration’s [Life of Julia montage](#).

### Millennials Don’t Want Government Running Businesses

However, young people do *not* like the true definition of socialism—the idea of government running businesses. If socialism is framed as government running Uber, Amazon, Facebook, Google, Apple, etc., it does not go over well. Notice the difference between [support](#) for “socialism” versus for a “government-managed economy” in a [millennial study](#) Emily conducted:



The margin of support for capitalism over socialism is only +10 points, but the margin for a free-market system over a government-managed economy is +32 points.

It's easy to contrast the difference in convenience, quality, and speed between calling a customer service line at Visa to report a card stolen or fraudulent activity versus calling the state's Department of Motor Vehicles to request a new license card or to report a stolen identity. Government is slow, rigid, and outdated, while businesses have to compete with each other and only make money if they serve the needs and desires of their customers, so businesses have to be more innovative, quick, and flexible. If not, they fail. Government does not face those same constraints.

Why don't millennials know what socialism is? First, Democratic leaders, whom millennials tend to trust, don't seem to have any idea themselves. Take Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, Sander's primary rival. Despite saying she's not a socialist, Clinton found herself unable to explain how Democrats and socialists are different in a recent MSNBC interview:

It's not just Hillary. Last August, Democratic National Committee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz also couldn't explain the difference between a Democrat and a socialist.

### **The Cold War Presented a Stark Contrast**

But there must be more to the story, because most Americans have an unfavorable opinion of socialism despite not being able to define it outright. So why might millennials have less negative *visceral* reaction to socialism? Partly because the Cold War has ended.

A major reason Americans internalized the dangers of socialism in the past was that it was linked to the foreign threat of the Soviet Union and tyranny—and that is something regular people can understand. Because Americans were already predisposed to associate socialism with their enemy, people were more willing to accept the reasons socialism is problematic. Thus, throughout the Cold War, socialism in the public mind became associated with clearly visualized economic, political, religious, and moral evils.

Septuagenarian presidential candidate Bernie Sanders has been capitalizing on young people's lack of knowledge and life experience to sell them a bill of rotten goods.

First, it was clear that Soviet socialism was at odds with the American-style free enterprise system. The USSR had a completely centrally planned economy with shortages, rationing, long lines, less innovation, less variety, lower-quality goods and services, and a lower standard of living as the consequence. Thus, free-market economists probably had an easier time convincing Americans that American capitalism was far preferable to Soviet socialism.

Second, the Soviet socialist system was a system of political repression that disregarded human freedom, particularly evidenced by it sending tens of millions to forced labor camps. Soviet socialism required utmost control not just over the economy but also over people's lives—it demanded conformity, not autonomy, as a centralized bureaucratic force attempted to achieve equality of outcomes. Thus Soviet officials sought to stamp out any source of possible opposition to state authority, including from artists, musicians, religious clergy, and even regular people making jokes or raising complaints about the government.

Third, Americans also internalized the moral dangers of socialism. For instance, in interviews with older Tea Party activists Emily conducted throughout the country for her research, many explained socialism in moral terms. They would reference the USSR and explain how socialism hurts the human spirit because it takes the drive out of people and makes them dependent, thereby undermining their self-worth and self-efficacy. They saw socialism as inherently demoralizing for punishing producers and achievers and rewarding indolence. Thus, socialism became a moral evil, as well as a political and economic one.

Fourth, many Americans came to view socialism as threat to religion. The USSR's state-sponsored anti-religious campaigns in efforts to promote atheism shut down most of the churches and decimated clergy. Given how the USSR treated religious groups, Americans came to view socialism as a system that attempted to replace faith and community with government.

Millennials reached adulthood after the Cold War ended, however, and they don't remember hearing much about Soviet socialism. Neither have they learned much about it in school. Also, without the obvious association between socialism and foreign threat, they have less of a reason to accept arguments for why socialism is economically and politically restrictive. Millennials are also [less religious](#) than previous cohorts, so they are less sensitive to the concern that socialism replaces God with government.

### **Millennials Think There's a Gentler Version of 'Socialism'**

Perhaps the most important reason millennials are less concerned about socialism is that they associate socialism with Scandinavia, not the Soviet Union. Modern "socialism" today appears to be a gentler, kinder version. For instance, countries like Denmark, Sweden, and Norway offer a far more [generous social safety net](#) with [much higher taxes](#).

In this view, government just covers people's basic needs (from everybody's pockets, of course), but doesn't seize all the businesses and try to run them, or overtly attempt to control people's consciences.

These countries actually are *not* socialist, but "socialistic." To [accommodate](#) their massive social welfare spending, these countries opened their economies to free-market forces in the 1990s, sold off state-owned companies, eased restrictions on business start-ups, reduced barriers to trade and business regulation, and introduced more competition into health care and public services.

In fact, today these countries outrank the United States on business freedom, investment freedom, and property rights, [according](#) to the Heritage Economic Freedom Index. So, if anything, the lesson from Scandinavian countries is that market reforms, not socialist ones, explain their prosperity.

### **Deferring Its Costs Increases Support for Socialism**

Unlike the USSR, this modern version of this quasi-socialism has also learned to defer its costs, effectively consuming the future to make things materially more comfortable for those in the present. Like the United States, European welfare states have racked up [huge debts](#) and [unfunded](#)

[liabilities](#). However, their populaces don't feel that immediately, because citizens haven't yet had to pay all the taxes that must come with it.

The consequences of [slower economic growth](#), [lower productivity](#), and [relatively lower standards of living](#) are opaque unless you have something to compare it to (Norway is an exception here, because they have oil to sell to support their welfare apparatus). Ironically, the consequences of socialist-type policies inside the United States include the very economic effects millennials are so angry about: high college tuition, a rotten job market (especially for those on the bottom rungs of the career ladder), expensive health care, and expensive housing.

If young people had to pay for all the socialist schemes they ostensibly support, their support might rapidly erode. Take, for example, Joy's brother, a millennial, who recently earned an \$8,000 year-end productivity bonus. He was incensed to learn that he would take home only \$5,000 of that after taxes. That's the way most of us feel at tax time, and it's a major reason politicians keep kicking the can down the road on things like Social Security and Medicare bankruptcy—because they understand people will be furious once they fully realize the costs of these government programs are too high for us all to afford.

Indeed millennials, like generations before them, become more averse to government social spending as their own income rises and have to pay more in taxes. The Reason-Rupe millennial study [found](#) that opposition to income redistribution and government social spending exceeds 50 percent as millennials start making more than \$40,000 a year.

## Millennials Are Less Willing to Pay More to Expand Social Safety Net the More Money They Earn

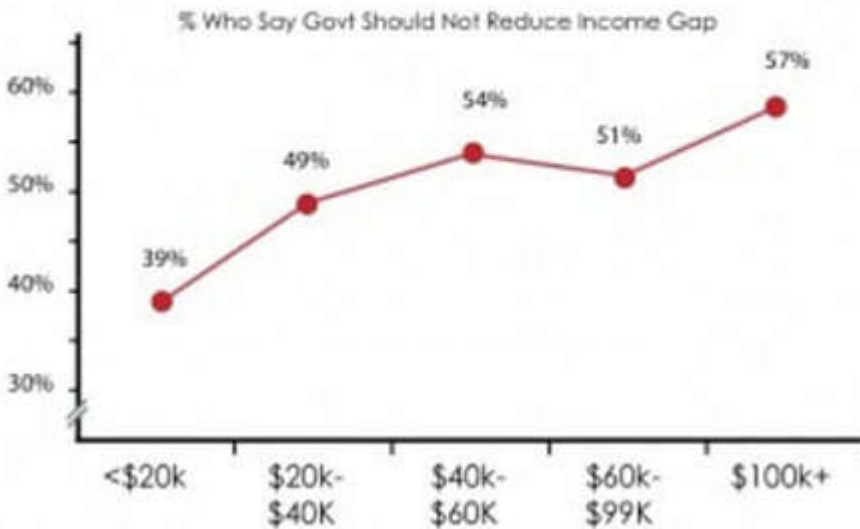
Should the government spend more on financial assistance to the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes?



Reason - Rupe Spring 2014 Millennial Poll

## Opposition to Income Redistribution Rises with Income

Does government have a responsibility to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes?



Reason - Rupe Spring 2014 Millennial Poll

Another reason millennials may be less concerned about socialism is that not only are some costs deferred, but some costs are [harder to see](#). For instance, while Scandinavia and much of Western Europe have achieved the noble goal of universal health insurance coverage, most have wait



times two to three times longer than U.S. health-care providers do for important [medical procedures](#) and [seeing specialists](#).

Survival rates are also often lower, for instance for [breast cancer](#) and [heart attacks \(AMI\) after hospital admittance](#). This is what we'd expect with a government-run health care system: rationing, shortages, long lines, and lower quality. (For further explanation, see [here](#).)

### **American Kids Don't Know Enough, Either**

Unfortunately, American schools teach very little about basic economic concepts such as the idea of tradeoffs or the drivers of economic growth and effects of growth and stagnation on ordinary people. Young people—along with more than enough of their elders—too often naively believe canards such as that “taxing the rich” can solve our country’s economic ills.

Neal Cavuto recently brought that point home in an interview with a millennial, in which the young lady demanded free college and student-loan forgiveness but couldn't explain how taxpayers could really afford this.

[We could confiscate everything from the wealthy](#) and only scrounge up enough to pay a small portion of the federal government's operating budget, much less the national debt worth many times more or gaping unfunded Social Security liabilities. Furthermore, three-quarters of twelfth graders [couldn't list two costs to a nation of high unemployment](#) on the most recent set of national tests. Almost half of young adults [could not guess](#) the effects of 2 percent inflation if their bank account provided 1 percent interest.

American youngsters are not only [economically ill-informed](#), but also [historically unread](#). A survey of recent college graduates, for example, finds vast majorities [know very little about American government and history](#). For example, a third could not name a single right guaranteed by the First Amendment. A [viral video last year](#) showed Texas Tech students unable to say who won the Civil War or name the current vice president. The follow-up (below) just emerged February 10.

This is key, because to maintain and expand American economic prosperity we need to understand the political and economic forces that created what we have today. Without knowing what role our institutions play, we risk undoing them and unraveling the recipe that fuels economic growth. This absolutely does not mean we should avoid improving our institutions, but rather that we need a careful understanding of our history, our political institutions, and economics before we transform our entire system.

### **Every Kid Gets a Trophy**

The concept of socialism stems from the idea that everyone, regardless of his or her achievements and efforts, should be rewarded equally or at least rewarded according to his or her needs—“From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” as Karl Marx popularized.



At its most basic level, this is similar to the debate over kids' participation trophies. Should all kids get a trophy regardless of what they do? Or should only kids who earn the trophies receive them? In the Reason-Rupe [national survey](#), college-aged Americans were the only age group who thought all kids should get a trophy. After that, older cohorts split in favor of the winners getting trophies.

The fact that millennials disproportionately think that all kids deserve a trophy regardless of achievement probably at least partly explains their disproportionate support for Sanders. While millennials could forever be a “everybody gets a trophy” generation, as young people take on more responsibilities—buy a house, get married, have kids, get a promotion, start paying noticeable taxes, and work long hours—they may start to think their hard work and sacrifices should be rewarded more.

### **The Lesson of the Twentieth Century**

Many find the popularity of socialism among young people alarming because a major lesson of the twentieth century has been that government economic planning (a.k.a. socialism) not only *does not work*, it *hurts people*. Another legitimate concern: socialism leads to cultural atrophy, government as an abusive caretaker, and *less* economic and social opportunities, not more.

While millennials' support for socialism may reflect their youth, there is reason to believe that our increasingly gutted civic and economic instruction has failed to prepare them to see the potential pitfalls of socialistic policies.

Previous generations debated and history ultimately revealed that free market capitalism does more good for people than Soviet socialism. However, the Scandinavian model raises a new question for our generation: is this form of Democratic soft socialism sustainable? Will this iteration of socialistic dabbling work despite socialism's many historical failures?

This is a major question of our time, and although young people are famous for believing this about things like drinking and driving or unplanned pregnancy, it's likewise highly unlikely regarding socialism that “this time, things will be different.”



[Emily Ekins](#) and Joy Pullmann

[Emily Ekins](#) is a research fellow at the Cato Institute. Joy Pullmann is managing editor of The Federalist.