Bernie Sanders's Presidential Bid Represents a Long Tradition of American Socialism

written by Peter Dreier | May 8, 2015

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Now that Bernie Sanders has entered the contest for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Americans are going to hear a lot about socialism, because the 73-year-old U.S. senator from Vermont describes himself as a "democratic socialist."

"Ever since I was a kid I never liked to see people without money or connections get put down or pushed around," Sanders explained in making his announcement. "When I came to Congress I tried to be a voice for people who did not have a voice—the elderly, the children, the sick, and the poor. And that is what I will be doing as a candidate for president."

We can expect the right-wing echo chamber—including Fox News hosts, Tea Party politicians, and Rush Limbaugh—to attack Sanders for espousing an ideology that they'll likely describe as foreign, European, and un-American.

But Sanders's views are in sync with a longstanding American socialist tradition. Throughout our history, some of the nation's most influential activists and thinkers, such as Jane Addams, John Dewey, Helen Keller, W.E.B. DuBois, Albert Einstein, Walter Reuther, Martin Luther King, and Gloria Steinem, embraced socialism.

Of course, America's right-wingers say there's already a socialist in the White House. For the past seven years, Barack Obama's opponents—the Republican Party, the Tea Party, the right-wing blogosphere, and conservative media gurus like Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh—labeled anything Obama proposed, including his modest health-care reforms and his efforts to restore regulations on Wall Street, as "socialism."

In March 2009, two months after Obama took office, the ultra-conservative *National Review* put a picture of the new president on its cover over the headline, "Our Socialist Future." In 2010, Newt Gingrich authored *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular-Socialist Machine*. Stanley Kurtz, a regular contributor to conservative publications and frequent guest on Fox News, published *Radical-in-Chief: Barack Obama and the Untold Story of American Socialism*. These are only a few of the many right-wingers fulminating against Obama's alleged socialist views.

Obama joked about this in his recent speech at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner. "I like Bernie. Bernie's an interesting guy," said Obama, referring to Sanders. "Apparently, some folks want to see a pot-smoking socialist in the White House. We could get a third Obama term after all."

President Franklin Roosevelt faced similar allegations. His conservative enemies, including some members of Congress, consistently called him a socialist. In a speech defending his New Deal goals, FDR said: "A few timid people, who fear progress, will try to give you new and strange names for what we are doing. Sometimes they will call it 'Fascism,' sometimes 'Communism,' sometimes 'Regimentation,' sometimes 'Socialism'. But, in so doing, they are trying to make very complex and theoretical something that is really very simple and very practical."

When big business and conservatives attacked FDR as a radical, FDR boasted: "They are unanimous in their hate for me. And I welcome their hatred."

Labeling someone a "socialist" has long been conservatives' convenient way of attacking anyone who espouses even liberal views. In Sanders's case, however, the label fits. He is a socialist. But don't expect him to call for government ownership of banks and drug companies. His views fall squarely within the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, similar to those of his Senate colleagues Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Dick Durbin of Illinois, Sherrod Brown of Ohio, and Barbara Boxer of California and the late Paul Wellstone of Minnesota.

In fact, times have changed. Most Americans, even if they're not socialists themselves, don't have the same knee-jerk, vitriolic hostility to the idea that was widespread during the hysteria of the Cold War.

A Pew Research Center survey recently found that while only 31 percent of Americans had a positive reaction to the word "socialism," barely 50 percent of Americans had a positive view of capitalism, and 40 percent had a negative response. That's hardly a ringing endorsement.

The Pew poll found that young Americans are about equally divided in their attitudes toward socialism and capitalism. Among 18-to-29 year olds, 49 percent had a positive view of socialism, while 47 percent had a positive view of capitalism. Similarly, only 43 percent had a negative view of socialism, compared with 47 percent who had a negative view of capitalism.

"Many young people associate capitalism with inequality, big corporations, and poverty," Joseph Schwartz, a Temple University political scientist, told me in an interview.

"During the Cold War, socialism was identified with Communism, which meant totalitarianism and dictatorship. It wasn't a very positive image," said Schwartz. "But things have changed since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. If people now in their 20s and 30s have any image of socialism at all, it is probably northern Europe, particularly Scandinavia. They know that northern Europe has less poverty, more equality, and more social mobility. And they know that Canada, which has a strong socialist party [called the New Democratic Party], is a more equal and humane society than the United States."

Dick Flacks, a sociologist at the University of California at Santa Barbara, thinks that right-wing attacks on Obama may have backfired, especially among the Millennial generation, which gave Obama 66 percent of its vote in 2008, and 60 percent four years later.

“Young people generally like Obama, even if they are somewhat disappointed in what he’s been able to accomplish in the face of such strong Republican opposition in Congress,” said Flacks. “So when Republicans and conservative radio talk show jocks attack Obama as a socialist, many young people react by saying, ‘Well, then maybe socialism can’t be that bad,’ and it makes them at least skeptical of those who demonize the word socialism.”

Still, such lukewarm feelings toward capitalism haven’t led to a groundswell of socialist activism. Few Americans consider themselves socialists. But a majority share Sanders’s outrage about the growing concentration of wealth and income, excessive executive compensation and corporate profits side-by-side with the epidemic of layoffs and foreclosures, and the undue political influence of billionaires like the Koch brothers, the Walton family, and Rupert Murdoch.

The Pew Research Center pollsters found that most Americans (77 percent)—including a majority (53 percent) of Republicans—agreed that “there is too much power in the hands of a few rich people and corporations.” (Not surprisingly, 83 percent of 18-to-29 year olds shared that view.) Pew also discovered that 61 percent of Americans believed that “the economic system in this country unfairly favors the wealthy.” A significant majority (57 percent) thought that wealthy people don’t pay their fair share of taxes.

In light of those views, Sanders believes he can tap into Americans’ growing frustrations with our political and economic troubles and offer bold ideas to address our declining standard of living and the role of big money in politics.

He made a calculated decision to run in the Democratic primaries rather than as an independent third party candidate. He does not want to be seen as another Ralph Nader, whose third party campaign in 2000 took crucial votes away from Democratic nominee Al Gore and helped elect George W. Bush. By running in the Democratic primaries, Sanders will be able to debate Hillary Clinton on national television and gain wide exposure for his populist views about the undue political influence of what he calls America’s corporate “plutocracy.”

Sanders hopes to appeal to liberal Democrats who are dissatisfied with Hillary Clinton’s ties to Wall Street, her reluctance to support strong government regulations to protect consumers, workers, and the environmental from irresponsible corporations, higher taxes on the super-rich, and her support for U.S. military adventures overseas.

The Vermont senator pledged to run a positive campaign. The former mayor of Burlington (1981 to 1989), who was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1990 and the Senate in 2006, said that he has never run a negative ad in any of his campaigns.

Sanders won't have anything close to Clinton's war chest to pay for TV ads, consultants, and campaign staff. The major liberal constituency groups—labor unions, environmental groups, and organizations promoting the rights of women and LGBT people—are unlikely to pour big bucks into his campaign. As an organized political force, America's socialist movement won't be much help. Democratic Socialists of America, the nation's largest socialist organization, has only 6,500 dues-paying members.

But within a day after Sanders announced his candidacy, more than 100,000 people signed up as supporters on Sanders's website; 35,000 made contributions, and the candidate raised $1.5 million. That's more than Senators Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Rand Paul raised in their campaigns first 24 hours.

Sanders knows that his candidacy is a long shot. But his campaign will certainly help inject his progressive ideas into the public debate, influence public opinion and media coverage, and push Clinton, the likely Democratic nominee, to the left. In this, Sanders is part of America's long-standing radical tradition. Since the early 1900s, few American socialists have been elected to office, but their ideas—and the movements they've helped organize—have been influential nevertheless.

When the Socialist Party was formed in 1901, many Americans were outraged by the widening gap between rich and poor, and the behavior of corporate robber barons who were exploiting workers, gouging consumers, and corrupting politics with their money. Workers were organizing unions. Farmers joined forces in the Populist movement to leash the power of banks, railroads and utility companies. Progressive reformers fought for child labor laws, against slum housing and in favor of women's suffrage.

Socialists played influential roles in all these Progressive Era movements and gained many new converts. Among them were labor leader Eugene V. Debs, philosopher and educator John Dewey, Francis Bellamy (the Protestant minister from Boston who wrote the "Pledge of Allegiance" in 1892), settlement house founder and peace activist Jane Addams, novelist Jack London, sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois, poet Katherine Lee Bates (who penned "America the Beautiful"), journalist Walter Lippmann, public health pioneer Alice Hamilton, working women's rights activist Florence Kelley, crusading attorney Clarence Darrow, feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger (founder of Planned Parenthood), and "Big Bill" Haywood (leader of the miners' union). Helen Keller (1880-1968) is best known for overcoming her blindness, but she was also a lifelong radical. She connected the mistreatment of the blind to the oppression of workers, women, and other groups, leading her to embrace socialism, feminism, and pacifism.

Other prominent socialists included muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens (who exposed municipal corruption in his articles in *McClure's Magazine*, collected in *The Shame of the Cities)*, writer Upton Sinclair (whose 1906 novel *The Jungle*, about the harsh conditions among Chicago's meatpacking workers, led to the enactment of the first consumer protection law, the Meat Inspection Act), and Lewis Hine, whose photographs exposed the brutal conditions faced by child laborers to an outraged public. Two socialist newspapers—*The Appeal to Reason* (based in Kansas) and the *Jewish Daily Forward* (based in New York)—each reached at least a quarter of a million readers around the country. New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, and other cities had their own weekly socialist papers.

In 1912, Debs, the Socialists' presidential candidate, won more than 900,000 votes, 6 percent of the total. He would have garnered more, but two other candidates—Democrat Woodrow Wilson and Progressive Party candidate (and former president) Theodore Roosevelt—stole some of the Socialists' thunder, diverting the votes of workers, women, and consumers with promises of such progressive reforms as women's suffrage, child labor laws, and workers' right to organize unions.

That year, Milwaukee voters elected Socialist Victor Berger to Congress; two years later, he was joined by another Socialist, Meyer London of New York. Berger sponsored bills providing the abolition of child labor, self-government for the District of Columbia, a system of public works for relief of the unemployed and federal ownership of the railroads, the withdrawal of federal troops from the Mexican border, and women's suffrage. Berger also sponsored the first bill to create "old age pensions." To promote the Socialists' campaign for direct election of U.S. Senators (who were then chosen by state legislators), Berger called for the abolition of the upper chamber, which he and others labeled the "millionaires' club."

At the Socialist Party's high point in 1912, about 1,200 party members held public office in 340 cities, including 79 mayors in cities such as Milwaukee, Buffalo, Minneapolis, Reading, and Schenectady. In office, they pushed for public ownership of utilities and transportation facilities; the expansion of parks, libraries, playgrounds, and other services; a living wage for workers, and a friendlier attitude toward unions, especially in time of strikes.

Milwaukee was the center of American socialism in the early 1900s. Dominated by the brewery industry, the city was home to many Polish, German, and other immigrant workers who made up the movement's rank and file. In 1910 Milwaukee voters elected Emil Seidel, a former patternmaker, as their mayor, gave Socialists a majority of the seats on the city council and the county board, and selected Socialists for the school board and as city treasurer, city attorney, comptroller, and two civil judgeships.

In office, the Socialists expanded Milwaukee's parks and library system and improved the public schools. They granted municipal employees an eight-hour day. They adopted tough factory and building regulations. They reined in police brutality against striking workers and improved working conditions for rank-and-file cops. They improved the harbor, built municipal housing, and sponsored public markets. The Socialists had their own local newspaper and sponsored carnivals, picnics, singing societies, and even Sunday schools. Under pressure from city officials, the local railway and electricity companies—which operated with municipal licenses—reduced their rates.

Grateful for these programs, Milwaukee voters kept Socialists in office. They elected Daniel Hoan as mayor from 1916 to 1940, under whom Milwaukee was so frequently cited for its clean, efficient management practices that they boastfully called themselves "sewer socialists." Milwaukee voters

elected another Socialist, Frank Zeidler, as their mayor in 1948, and, remarkably, he remained in office for 12 years at the height of the Cold War.

In 1932, in the depths of the Depression, Norman Thomas, a Protestant minister, ran for president on a Socialist Party platform that called for old-age pensions, public works projects, a more progressive income tax, unemployment insurance, relief for farmers, subsidized housing for working families, a shorter workweek, and the nationalization of banks and basic industries. Thomas figured that in such desperate times, his message would appeal to voters. But many voters who may have agreed with Thomas's views did not want to "waste" their vote on a Socialist who had no chance to win and who might even take enough votes away from the Democratic candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt, to keep Republican Herbert Hoover in office. Thomas had little regard for FDR, whom he considered a wealthy dilettante and a lackluster governor of New York. He believed FDR's 1932 platform offered few specifics except vague promises of a "New Deal."

Thomas did not expect to win, but he was disappointed that while FDR garnered 22.8 million votes (57 percent), he had to settle for 884,781 (2 percent). When friends expressed delight that FDR was carrying out some of the Socialist platform, Thomas responded that it was being carried out "on a stretcher." He viewed the New Deal as patching, rather than fixing, a broken system.

Following the success of his popular muckraking book, *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair moved to California and ran on the Socialist Party ticket for the House of Representatives (1920), the Senate (1922), and for governor (1926 and 1930), winning few votes. In 1934, Sinclair figured he might have more influence running for office as a Democrat. He wrote a 64-page pamphlet outlining his economic plan—*I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty*—and entered the California Democratic gubernatorial primary.

Much to Sinclair's surprise, his pamphlet became a bestseller across California. His campaign turned into a popular grassroots movement. Thousands of people volunteered for his campaign, organizing End Poverty in California (EPIC) clubs across the state. The campaign's weekly newspaper, the *EPIC News*, reached a circulation of nearly one million by primary day in August 1934. The campaign allowed Sinclair to present his socialist ideas as commonsense solutions to California's harsh economic conditions.

Sinclair shocked California's political establishment (and himself) by winning the Democratic primary. Fearing a Sinclair victory, California's powerful business groups joined forces and mobilized an expensive and effective dirty-tricks campaign against him. On election day, Sinclair got 37 percent of the vote—twice the total for any Democrat in the state's history. Sinclair's ideas pushed the New Deal to the left. After the Democrats won a landslide midterm election in Congress that year, FDR launched the so-called Second New Deal, including Social Security, major public

works programs, and the National Labor Relations Act, which gave workers the right to unionize.

During the red scare of the 1950s, American socialism fell on hard times. Few Americans distinguished between the European social welfare systems and the communism of the Soviet Union or China. Across the nation, universities, labor unions, public schools, movie studios, and other major institutions purged themselves of their left-wingers.

But some socialists keep alive their radical critique of American militarism, big business, and racial injustice. In a 1961 article for *Mademoiselle* magazine titled "Who Are the Student Boat-Rockers?", Tom Hayden, a leader of the burgeoning student New Left, listed the three people over 30 whom young radicals most admired. All were socialists—Norman Thomas (a principled anti-war radical and labor ally who headed the Socialist Party), C. Wright Mills (the maverick Columbia University sociologist whose many books, including *The Power Elite* and *The Causes of World War Three*, exposed America's power structure and warned about the dangers of the Cold War arms race), and Michael Harrington (whose book *The Other America* inspired President Kennedy and then Lyndon Johnson to wage a war on poverty).

As the civil rights movement gained momentum, Southern racists and right-wing groups like the John Birch Society insisted that the movement was led by Communists, in whose ranks they included Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. On that count, they were wrong; King was no Communist. But he was a socialist. Growing up in a solidly middle-class family in Atlanta, King saw the widespread human suffering caused by the Depression, particularly in the black community. In 1950, while in graduate school, he wrote an essay describing the "anti-capitalistic feelings" he experienced as a result of seeing unemployed people standing in breadlines. In 1964, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, King observed that the United States could learn much from Scandinavian "democratic socialism." He began talking openly about the need to confront "class issues," which he described as "the gulf between the haves and the have-nots."

"There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism," King told his staff in 1966.

Since then, only a handful of elected officials and prominent public figures have identified themselves as socialists, but their radical views continue to influence public opinion.

A few years ago, when a small group of New York radicals took over Zuccotti Park and the Occupy Wall Street movement quickly spread to cities and small town around the country, Frank Luntz, an influential GOP pollster, spoke at a Republican Governors Association meeting. He warned: "I'm so scared of this anti-Wall Street effort. I'm frightened to death. They're having an impact on what the American people think of capitalism."

Luntz offered tips for fighting back and framing the issues that the Occupiers have raised. For example, he urged Republican politicians to avoid using the word "capitalism."

"I'm trying to get that word removed and we're replacing it with either 'economic freedom' or 'free market,'" Luntz said. "The public still prefers capitalism to socialism, but they think capitalism is immoral. And if we're seen as defenders of 'Wall Street, we've got a problem."

On that point, at least, Bernie Sanders and Frank Luntz agree.