

The term “socialism” is a fighting word in American politics. Donald Trump hoped that the Democrats would nominate Bernie Sanders as their presidential candidate in 2020, so he could smear him with the charge that “Socialist equals Communist.” When Sanders lost the nomination to Joseph Biden, Trump tried to stick label on Biden. Luckily voters understood that Biden has a long record in government, and frequently not of a very liberal one, and Trump’s absurd attempt fell flat.

Americans are generally unaware of the differences between Socialist and Communist, a mistaken equivalence that is now part of popular culture.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx applied “science” to socialism, arguing that industrialization had unleashed developments that inevitably led to violent revolution that would create an equitable society. When the promised revolution did not occur, Eduard Bernstein in Germany tried to “revise” Marx, reasoning that the economic developments Marx foresaw in had not come about and that a violent revolution was not in the cards. Socialist party leaders in other countries came to the same conclusion empirically and believed that socialism could be achieved gradually, by democratic means, through parliaments, a movement known as “social democracy.” In Germany, the SPD adopted Bernstein’s tactics in practice while rejecting them in theory. This tactic papered over what had become a major internal dispute in all European Marxist parties with leftist factions that stuck with Marx’s analysis forecasting violent revolution. In 1917, the Bolshevik success in Russia gave proponents of revolution control of a major country. This is the origin of the confusion between “Socialists” and “Communists” that has come down to haunt contemporary American politics and brings us to Sanders and Biden.

Sanders was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1941, of working class Jewish parents of East Europe extraction. He was educated for a year at Brooklyn College, a New York City public university, and then transferred to the elite University of Chicago. As an activist student, Sanders supported civil rights, working with several radical and pacifist organizations of the 1960s and 1970s. He joined the youth affiliate of the Socialist Party of America. Under leaders such as Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas, Socialists had an outsize cultural presence in the country and achieved their greatest success in

local, not national elections. They were painted as traitors during World War I and racked by internal dissention during the early twentieth century.

Tired of living in New York, Sanders went to Vermont, a conservative state but tolerant of political mavericks like him. Sanders proclaimed himself a Socialist and ran for Mayor of Burlington, serving four terms and winning praise for his accomplishments. In 1990 he won election to the House of Representatives, becoming the second Socialist to do so after Vito Marcantonio, last elected in 1948. He was elected to the Senate running as an Independent in 2007, caucusing with the Democrats, and has been reelected ever since.

Sanders has consistently declared himself a Social Democrat of the kind that rose to power in many European countries after World War II, and especially of the Nordic variety. He has been a strong union supporter and has vigorously advocated policies such as universal health care, racial and economic equality, equitable taxation, opposition to the economic elite, and strong welfare programs designed to blunt the harsh realities of capitalist societies. The big surprise of Sanders' recent political activity is the enormous amount of youth support he has attained. This fact suggests that the new generations are responding to the kind of policies championed by social democrats.

Joseph Biden has trodden a more traditional path to political power. Born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1942 into a Catholic family buffeted by economic hardship and that later moved to Delaware, Biden graduated from a state university and later received a law degree from the University of Syracuse. Biden's entrance into politics was less flamboyant than that of Sanders. He even flirted with the Republicans until his distaste for Nixon and Republican policies made him decide for the Democrats. A stutter threatened his career, but he overcame it. In 1972, he won election as a Senator from Delaware on a liberal platform in a surprise victory. Shortly after his election, his wife and daughter were killed in an automobile accident, and he contemplated resignation. He settled for commuting to Washington D. C. by train every day, making certain to join his two surviving sons for dinner. This commuting and his outgoing personality have made him attractive to lower middle class voters.

In 1977, he married his current wife Jill (of Italian extraction), who he credits for renewing his political career. In 2015, his son Beau died of brain cancer but not before extracting a promise from his father that he would run for President. The shock of his son's death blocked him from challenging Trump for the office in 2016.

The area in which Biden was born and grew up has strong industrial and union ties, and he has never forgotten them. The Democrats chose him to be their candidate hoped that he could appeal to lower middle class voters who had voted twice for Barak Obama but had abandoned the party for Trump. In contrast, progressive Democrats resented some of his more conservative stands as Senator in which he supported crime measures that disproportionately affected Blacks, and his treatment of a prominent Black woman during congressional hearings. However, he also exhibited liberal tendencies as a Senator and especially as Obama's Vice President, such as supporting gay marriage. Unlike Hillary Clinton, he wooed Sanders and his supporters after he defeated Sanders in the primaries. He successfully put together a coalition of conservative white lower middle class, Black, and college educated, suburban, white women voters to defeat Trump in 2020. He presided over a massive get-out-the-vote campaign among ethnic groups whose voting percentages were low, turning out a record electorate that defeated Trump. However, progressives had low expectations for him as President.

Instead, the opposite has occurred. Sanders has become *persona grata* at the White House and has worked well with the new President. Biden's Executive Orders have reversed whatever Trump had been able to accomplish through his own orders. He has rolled out liberal legislation such as the American Cares Act and his infrastructure proposals that have pleased liberals and progressives alike. He has put into place enhanced unemployment benefits and payroll protections. He is attempting to broaden the meaning of "infrastructure" to include broadband, education, and even childcare, and intends to pay for such measures by increasing taxation on the wealthy and reducing the benefits the Republicans gave to companies when they reduced corporate taxes in 2017. The Biden Administration is planning to spend \$4 trillion on new initiatives—if he can get them past the Republicans and their filibustering techniques in Congress.

There has been speculation that Sanders is a Socialist and Biden is Franklin Delano Roosevelt *redux*. The similarity is supposed to be that both men favor greater government intervention in the economy and American society; the alleged difference is that Sanders wants to make this policy permanent and Biden temporary, like FDR. Yet Biden's policies are designed to change the US for the foreseeable future, by addressing major economic and social inequities and thereby eliminating the threat of Trumpism.

The suggestion that Sanders wants permanent change while Biden seeks temporary solutions is misleading, because all indications point to agreement on changing the system for the long haul. The American political structure might not allow the implementation of Biden's policies, but certainly a surprisingly social democratic trend is challenging American authoritarianism. Biden's European trip demonstrates that he is supporting it abroad as well in order to stem the march of populism.

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