

Opinion **US politics & policy**

Why young America is trending socialist

Democrats need to show they can deliver for a disaffected Gen Z

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Supporters of Zohran Mamdani attend a campaign rally during the New York mayoral election last year. His success was powered by the young and the blue collar © Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

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Published JUN 2 2026

“When they go low, we go high,” is a Democratic mantra. But it only works if people think liberals have the credibility to trumpet high morals. Not enough of America does. To Gen Z voters, such virtue signalling comes straight from the self-serving “boomer” playbook. The young are no likelier to respect Democratic ethics appeals than they are to take up bridge. Coming to grips with America’s volatile politics is futile without engaging with the deep scepticism of its young.

Among the best-known younger Democrats, two — Zohran Mamdani, New York's mayor, and New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — call themselves socialists. A third, James Talarico, a Democratic Senate nominee, describes himself as a Christian progressive. But he is running in Texas, so is treated as a socialist regardless.

More than a third of Americans under 30 have a favourable view of “communism”, according to a Cato poll last year. Almost two-thirds look kindly on socialism. It is easy to dismiss this as standard youthful misguidedness. Gen Z is variously written off as work-shy, entitled, unambitious and ignorant. But there is nothing in their politics that is nearly as drug-inspired as the late 1960s radicalism of their grandparents. It is not hippie to wish for affordable housing or to fear AI's impact on your earnings potential. Nor is it Stalinist to want universal health insurance.

That explains why the 41-year-old likely Senate candidate in Maine, Graham Platner, is staving off scandals that would have finished off candidates in earlier cycles. He once had a skull-and-bones tattoo of a symbol used by Hitler's Waffen-SS and has been caught sending extramarital sexts. Yet his poll lead is sufficiently large to have forced Maine's competent and scandal-free governor, Janet Mills, to drop out of the race. Mills is 78. And she, unlike Platner, had no plans for single-payer healthcare or, until she flip-flopped, to tax America's ultra-wealthy. Platner's seeming immunity from scandal shows that Bernie Sanders-style left populism is still potent.

The Democratic split over Platner betrays a much deeper philosophical divide. Campaign professionals and mostly older elected Democrats are terrified of squandering their moral capital against Donald Trump because of Platner's nomination. They also fear that a Platner contest against Susan Collins, the state's veteran moderate Republican, could imperil the party's chances of winning the Senate in November.

But Platner is appealing to precisely those groups that Democrats most urgently need to win back, especially the young and working class. Those who have done it, such as Mamdani, tend to get written off as irrelevant to middle America. Mamdani's socialist campaign to run the city that is still the headquarters of global capitalism was powered by the young and the blue collar. Some say he won in spite of his hostility to Israel. It was likelier to have helped. Reflexive loyalty to Israel is seen as another establishment trait.

That same chasm is also visible on the right. Younger Maga Republicans — beyond so-called podcast populists like Tucker Carlson and Candace Owens — are routinely hostile to Israel. Older Republicans tend to be Israel right or wrong. The same root that feeds flirtation with communism on the left is also fuelling antisemitism on the right. It is no use telling a generation that their views are un-American. The most striking often-pollled finding about Gen Z is their lack of flag-waving patriotism. More than any previous generation at that or any age, Gen Z rejects the idea of America as morally special.

Such alienation is angrier than the “peace and love” of the flower power generation. Luigi Mangione, the man accused of murdering a healthcare executive in New York in late 2024, is still a vigilante folk hero to many young Americans on the left and right — and not just because of his looks. Members of Gen Z are far more likely to approve of violence to settle political disputes than their elders. They are also far less trusting of democracy.

The more thoughtful Democrats are aware that simply opposing Trump is not enough to win the loyalty of younger Americans. Trump’s well-earned unpopularity may well be enough for them to regain the House of Representatives, and maybe the Senate, in November. But that will be insufficient in 2028. The party has an ingrained habit of postponing serious thought until after the next election, which, like tomorrow, never comes.

Democrats will not get many more chances to show they can make the system deliver for the majority. Overlooking the sometimes troubling but largely rational complaints of America’s Gen Z would assure their failure.

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