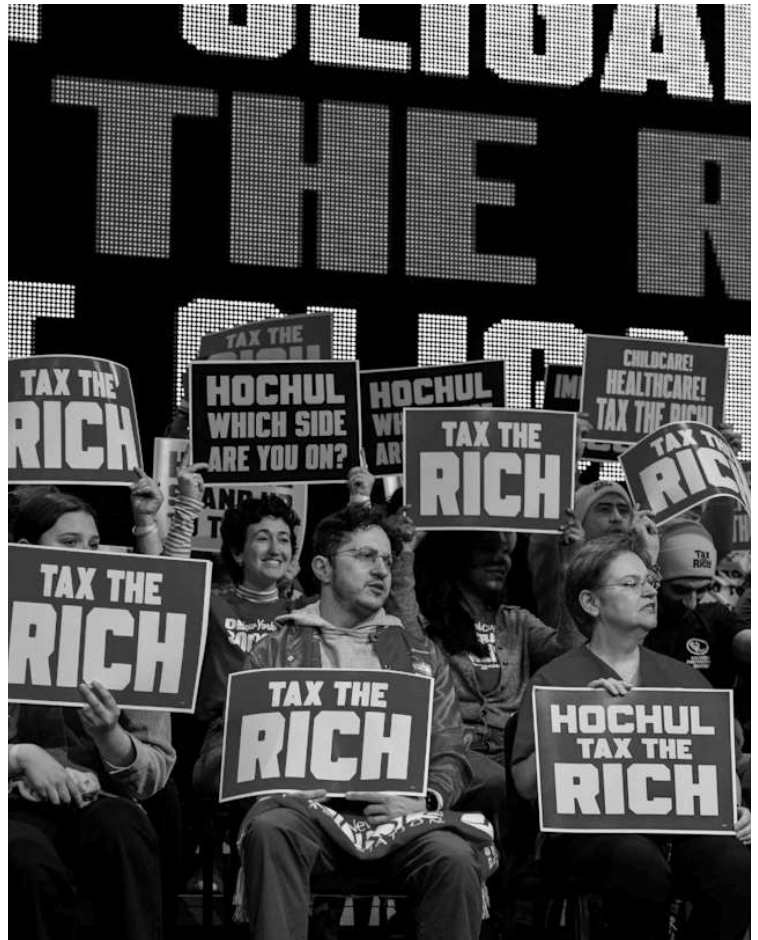


US politics & policy

'Capitalism's not working': why Democrats are turning to socialism

Democratic socialist candidates are winning primary battles in the US as voters turn to progressive policies



People attend a 'tax the rich' rally hosted by the Democratic Socialists of America in the Bronx © Jason Alpert-Wisnia/Hans Lucas/Reuters

Guy Chazan in New York

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If you thought American socialism was all Marxist reading groups and picket lines, think again. These days, it is just as likely to be softball leagues, crafting clubs and “cocktails with comrades”.

These are the inducements the Democratic Socialists of America are offering curious Gen Zers looking for a new political home. They seem to be working.

Once the fringe of marginal groups, the DSA now has close to 130,000 members, up from 5,000 15 years ago. And its members are winning Democratic primaries across the country.

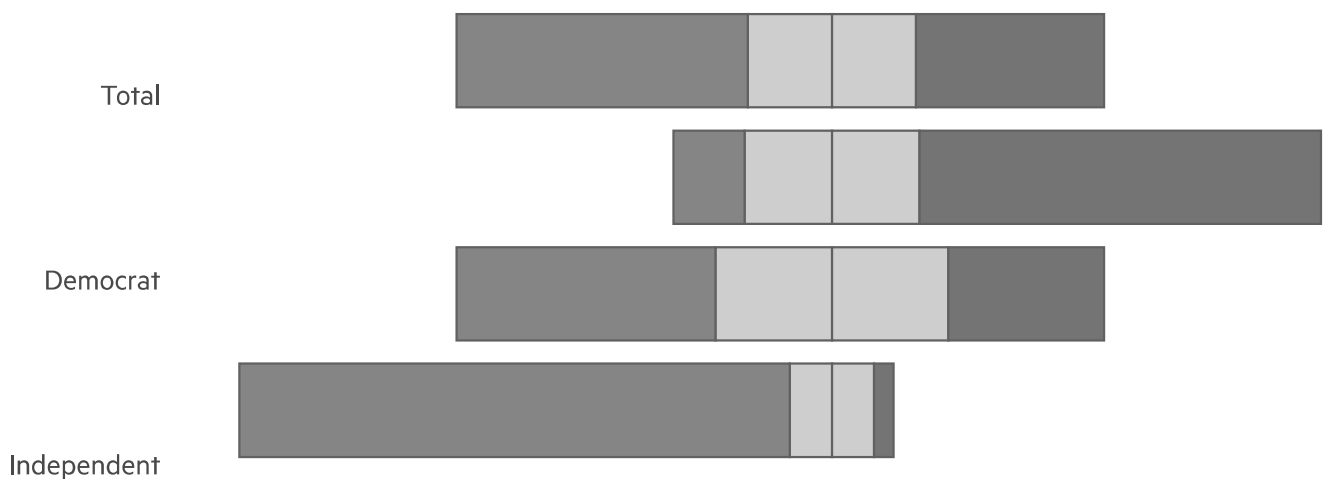
Megan Romer, national co-chair, said its growth reflected a deep frustration with a system she said was failing young people. “People are, like, well, OK, capitalism’s not working,” she said in an interview. “So what else is there?”

With apologies to Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, a spectre is haunting America — the spectre of socialism. Its platform — affordable housing, universal healthcare, free college for all and higher taxes on billionaires — is increasingly popular with younger voters sick of the traditional remedies for America's ills.

Most Democratic voters would support a democratic socialist candidate

Willingness to vote for a candidate who identified as a democratic socialist (%)

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure



A Gallup poll from last year found 66 per cent of Democrats viewed socialism positively, up from 50 per cent in 2010. Meanwhile, a survey by The Economist/YouGov in June found 62 per cent of Democrats would vote for a candidate who identified as a democratic socialist.

It is a surprising turnaround for an ideology that used to be a dirty word in the US. For many, socialism seemed like an affront to the rugged individualism and muscular self-reliance that defined the American ideal.

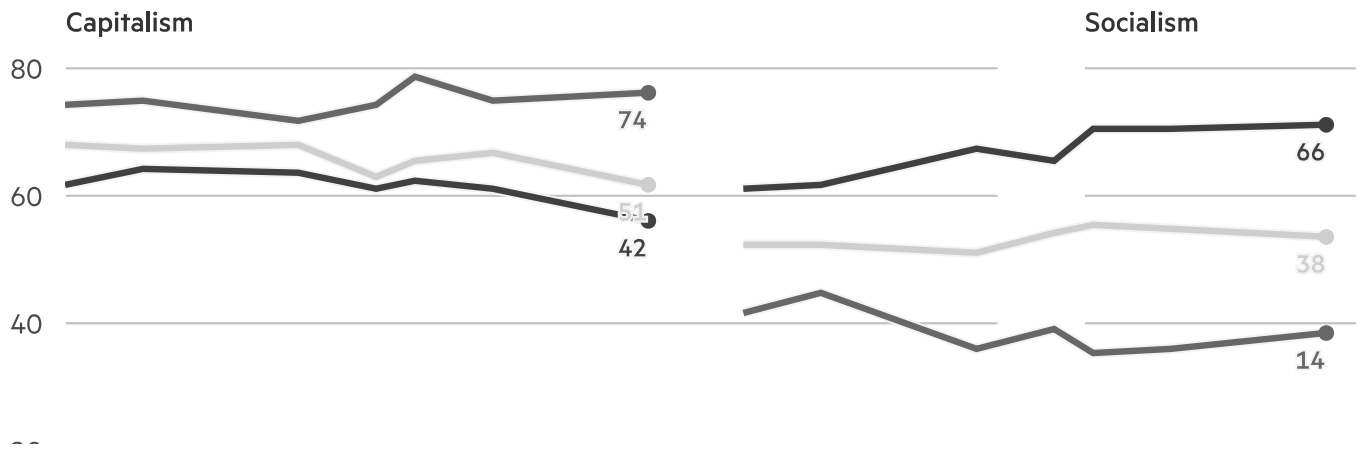
But its renaissance is real. Zohran Mamdani's victory in New York's mayoral election last year was the breakthrough. This year, DSA members have won Democratic primaries in New York, Denver, Philadelphia and Washington DC, often beating moderates backed by the party leadership.

Earlier this month the progressive Abdul El-Sayed, whose policy ideas overlap with the DSA's agenda, sent shockwaves through the Democratic establishment by winning the Michigan Democratic Senate primary.

More Democrats have a positive view of socialism than capitalism

% positive views on capitalism and socialism by political party

□ Republican □ Independent □ Democrat



It is not the clean sweep that some had been predicting, however. This week, DSA member Francesca Hong lost her bid to become Democratic candidate for governor of Wisconsin to a moderate rival. Hong's campaign had hit turbulence after an old tweet emerged in which she advocated cancelling Thanksgiving.

Such “woke” excesses have allowed Republicans to paint the DSA as dangerous radicals. They have ample ammunition: the group's platform calls for abolishing the police and prisons, removing the presidency and Senate and overturning America's capitalist free-market system.

Speaking in Las Vegas earlier this month, President Donald Trump said the Democratic Party was now full of “communists” who “want to take their ruinous and deadly ideology of misery and squalor to every state in America”.

But ironically, some Republicans, too, are beginning to espouse views that would not seem out of place in a DSA manifesto. Trump, for example, has said his administration was considering taking equity stakes in leading AI companies. He has also moved to ban large institutional investors from buying single-family homes, part of his response to the affordability crisis.

Vice-president JD Vance, who describes himself as “pro-labour”, has gone further, saying the US should strengthen trade unions. “You have to give workers some seat at the bargaining table,” he told podcaster Joe Rogan in July. “Our workers don’t have enough bargaining power.”

Despite this overlap between the economic populism of the right and left, the success of the DSA’s message is causing consternation in the Democratic Party. Centrists worry DSA candidates will prove a turn-off to mainstream voters and harm the party’s hopes of regaining control of Congress in the midterms.

“The Democratic Socialists are bomb throwers, not problem solvers,” lawmaker Josh Gottheimer, a Democrat, wrote on X in June. “They’ve declared war on common sense Democrats, which will only lead to more deadlock, dysfunction and hard-working families paying the price.”

Experts agree such candidates hold little appeal for the middle-of-the-road voters in swing states who increasingly determine the outcome of national elections in the US.



Zohran Mamdani's victory in New York's mayoral election last year was the breakthrough for the DSA © Yuki Iwamura/AP

“Some of the more far-out so-called democratic socialists were elected in some extremely liberal districts in New York . . . by people with college degrees, not by working-class people,” said Theda Skocpol, professor of political science at Harvard University.

Her conclusions are borne out by a nationwide poll conducted this month by the FT and Focaldata. When asked about their top priorities, Democrats named bread-and-butter economic issues such as inflation, jobs and protecting federal entitlement programmes such as social security and Medicare.

Progressive topics were less popular. Less than one in five said lawmakers should end US military aid to Israel, abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement or raise the federal minimum wage.

Indeed, there are many who believe that the socialists' recent electoral success reflects more a deep sense of frustration with the status quo than a sudden embrace of progressive shibboleths.

“[Voters] are angry at Trump, but not just Trump — they’re angry generally, and some of them are flipping over the tables by voting for people on the radical fringe,” said Matt Bennett, co-founder of the Third Way think-tank. “But that is not the same as saying they want socialism.”

Matt Dallek, professor of political management at George Washington University, compares the electorate’s mood with Howard Beale, the TV news anchor in the classic 1976 movie *Network*, who urges viewers to shout out their windows: “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!”

“It’s a primal scream,” he said.

Socialism is not entirely alien to the US tradition. In 1912, the Socialist Party’s candidate Eugene Debs garnered more than 900,000 votes in the presidential election, or 6 per cent of the total.

But the Red Scare of the 1920s and the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s pushed the movement into near-irrelevance.

Michael Kazin, professor of history at Georgetown University and an expert on the American left, said socialism failed to make the same kinds of inroads in the US as it did in Europe because of the success of American capitalism, the absence of a feudal past in the US and the early entrenchment of a two-party system, which squeezed out fringe parties.

More importantly, “the major dividing line in terms of consciousness in America socially has been race, not class”, he said.



DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's primary victory in 2018 helped seal socialism's revival in the US © Rick Loomis/Getty Images

But socialism's appeal has grown as the allure of capitalism has faded. Gustavo Gordillo, co-chair of the DSA's New York chapter, identifies the global financial crisis of 2008 and the difficulties people of his age had in finding a job during the ensuing Great Recession as the turning point.

"So many millennials grew up with the expectation that if they worked hard . . . they could have a better life than their parents," he said. "Nobody experienced that, basically."

Frustration with what he calls the "broken promise of the US economic model" fed into the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011. Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016 and DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's shock primary victory in 2018 sealed socialism's revival.

Some saw it as inevitable. “If you have a society that’s grossly unequal, [it’s] going to have some sort of egalitarian response,” said Bhaskar Sunkara, editor of Jacobin, a socialist magazine. “And since the middle of the 19th century, the most common name for that egalitarian response has been socialism.”



Senator Bernie Sanders identifies as a democratic socialist but is not a member of the DSA © Frederic J Brown/AFP/Getty Images

Perceptions of leftwing politics were also changing. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the demise of communism, socialism lost much of its negative historical baggage.

“It’s not as scary to people, especially young people who grew up after the cold war,” said Kazin. “If you ask them what socialism actually means, they’ll say a bigger welfare state, the government taking care of people. It doesn’t mean doing away with capitalism.”

The DSA's enthusiastic support for Palestinian rights and denunciation of Israel's war in Gaza also ensured it a legion of new fans. But it was Mamdani's mayoralty that has perhaps done the most to improve socialism's image, said Grace Mausser, co-chair of the DSA's New York chapter. Since coming to power, the 34-year-old has delighted his base by expanding free childcare and overseeing a wide-ranging rent freeze.

"We can point to New York City and say a socialist mayor has followed through on his promises," Mausser said. "We've made real progress and that's only in seven months."

Already, the DSA's influence is spreading far beyond its stronghold in the "commie corridor" of Brooklyn and Queens. It is opening up new branches in conservative areas such as North Carolina and West Texas. There are DSA city councillors in San Antonio and Corpus Christi, Texas, and a democratic socialist represents a suburb of Atlanta in Georgia's state legislature.

It is also trying to counteract its austere image and widen its reach with more fun social activities — beach parties, grill-outs and movie nights. Films such as *The Hunt for Red October* that depict communists as "the worst, most ridiculous caricatures of bad guys ever", were particularly popular, Romer said.

"We're competing with Netflix, right?" she said. "Building that social cohesion is a big part of building the movement."

Additional reporting by Ian Hodgson

Letter in response:

Red-baiting has long been used as a US political scare tactic / From Marc Chandler, Ocean Grove, NJ, US

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