

RIPPED APART



How Democrats Can
Fight Polarization to Win

Steven Stoft

Chapter 23

Sanders's Socialism Myths


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Sanders' Socialism Myths

I am against private socialism of concentrated private power as thoroughly as I am against governmental socialism. The one is equally as dangerous as the other.

—Franklin Delano Roosevelt, March 12, 1935

FDR would surely be the Democrats' patron saint if we had one. In his day, he was known for saving American capitalism from socialism by humanizing capitalism. Socialists have long hated him for that. So why has Sanders, a lifelong socialist, now adopted FDR as *his* patron saint?

What's Sanders Up To?

Since 2015, Sanders has been faking a lane change, politically speaking. As late as 2009, he posted on his Senate website: "I doubt that there are any other socialists in all of the Congress." And he used to publicly back nationalization of all utilities, the oil industry, banks and what have you.

There's no way he can explicitly back away from this now. Socialism is highly unpopular with the broad electorate, and the socialist tradition he's part of has had an uninterrupted string of failures since its beginning. To win the Democratic primary he needs a new identity. So he has started pretending he is FDR's successor. This has had a huge and divisive impact on the Democratic Party, so it's worth looking into.

How Sanders Fakes a Lane Change

There are two major lanes on the liberal side of politics: the socialism-not-capitalism lane and the capitalism-not-socialism lane. I'll call them the socialist lane and the FDR-liberal lane.

Essentially everyone has been clear on the difference until now, except for the far right, which has pretty much called every Democrat, and even Teddy Roosevelt, a socialist, communist or pinko-commie.

All of the Democrats' heroes—the two Roosevelts, LBJ, and Obama—strongly oppose(d) socialism. And all the socialist heroes—Eugene V. Debs, Norman Thomas, Michael Harrington and Bernie Sanders—oppose(d) capitalism.

To remind you of the forgettable socialists, Sanders' lifelong hero, Eugene V. Debs, ran for president six times and scored a record-breaking 6% in 1912. Like Bernie, he was a bit over-optimistic, saying in 1904: "Capitalism is dying and its extremities are already decomposing."

Debs' successor, Norman Thomas, famously quipped when asked by a reporter whether Franklin D. Roosevelt was actually carrying out his socialist program: "Yes, he is carrying it out in a coffin." Michael Harrington is considered the founder of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), an organization that rejects an economy based on profits—i.e., based on capitalism.

The first figure accurately depicts the two lanes, with Sanders in the socialist lane. Democratic socialism shows up as just another name for socialism, as explained in the previous chapter. None of the socialists were Democrats, and none of the Democrats approved (or currently approve) of socialism. However, in one respect the two lanes are not so different. Both want full employment and far less inequality.

The second figure shows Sanders' attempted solution to his identity crisis. Sanders pretends the socialist lane simply does not exist by never mentioning any of it except for democratic socialism which he incorrect-

Reality

Socialist Lane	FDR-Liberal Lane
Socialism (not capitalism) aka Democratic Socialism Eugene V. Debs Norman Thomas M. Harrington (DSA) Bernie Sanders	Regulated Capitalism (not socialism) FDR's 2nd Bill of Rights Teddy Roosevelt Franklin Roosevelt Lyndon Johnson Barack Obama

Sanders' Socialism Myth

Socialist Lane	FDR Lane
Sanders pretends the socialist lane never existed. So he was never in it.	Democratic Socialism Bernie Sanders' Bill of Rights Teddy Roosevelt Franklin Roosevelt Lyndon Johnson Bernie Sanders DSA

ly moves into FDR's lane. In fact, he no longer openly advocates any socialist ideas, but instead claims FDR's ideas are democratic socialism. Finally, he removes the word "liberal" from FDR's lane, even though FDR spent his entire presidency establishing that as his brand. So far, Sanders has been amazingly successful with this con game.

If you read his two democratic socialism speeches (November 2015 and June 2019), you will notice that he does not mention any socialists, not even his hero Debs, whom he made a documentary about. He figures (correctly) that if people forget the lane existed, they will forget he was in it. He's counting on his followers being low-information voters.

He also rebrands all the Democrats' heroes as democratic socialists, except for Obama, who is still alive and would deny it the way the president of Denmark did when Sanders called him a socialist. And of course, Sanders inserts himself in place of Obama and claims he is the true successor to the line of Democratic heroes. He also moves DSA into FDR's liberal lane, even though it is an explicitly socialist organization. As a result, its membership ballooned from about 7,000 to about 50,000.

You must admit that's a brilliant strategy. It depends on four myths, but as I've said, people are human, and we fall for such deceptions quite easily.

Sanders' Four Socialism Myths

Embedded in Sanders' redefinition of the FDR Liberalism lane are four specific myths, which Sanders has been selling successfully and which are having a powerful effect on the Democratic Party.

Sanders' Socialism Myths

1. Sanders is a "democratic socialist," *not an actual socialist*.
2. "Democratic socialism" means all the best programs and proposals of the Democratic heroes.
3. FDR and LBJ were democratic socialists.
4. Bernie has Democratic roots, not socialist roots.

Myth 1: *Sanders is not an actual socialist.* Just as a Bartlett pear is a pear, a democratic socialist is a socialist. But his followers don't get that. Politicfact.com was receiving enough criticism for assuming the two were the same that it published and debunked one of the complaints:

Would you kindly clarify your statements that Bernie Sanders self-identifies as a socialist? He says 'democratic socialist.' There is a whopping difference, and your misstatement plays into the Republican candidates' demeaning statements too perfectly.

Obviously, the poor Berniecrat knew that socialism really was a bad idea but thought that Bernie was a good “democratic socialist.” In the book Sanders published right after the 2016 election, he called himself a plain old “socialist” four times, and he’s been calling himself that for fifty years. Sanders is not confused. He just confuses his followers because a lot of them would be quite upset to learn that he was a real socialist.

Myth 2: *Democratic socialism means FDR’s policies, such as Social Security.* “When Trump screams socialism, Americans will know that he is attacking Social Security,” says Sanders. In this way, he convinces his followers that Social Security is socialism—because Trump calls it that. Is Trump the authority on socialism?

If FDR’s policies were democratic socialism, wouldn’t some other socialist have noticed this? But Sanders never cites a real socialist. Instead, he cites the most unbelievable sources—Donald Trump, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, Herbert Hoover and so on.

Every single source who he cites to prove something is socialist is a conservative who hates socialism! They call everything they don’t like socialism. He wouldn’t trust these people to tell him the time of day. So why does he think we will believe them? Because we’re blooming idiots? Actually, that might be it. Sanders does not have a high regard for the political intelligence of others, especially it seems, his own followers.

All real socialists knew FDR’s policies were not socialist policies, and that’s why Sanders only cites right-wingers. No socialist agrees with him.

Myth 3: *FDR and LBJ were socialists.* As this chapter’s lead quote shows, FDR hated socialism. And LBJ waged the Vietnam War to prevent the spread of socialism.

Myth 4: *Sanders has Democratic roots.* No, he has shown nothing but contempt for Democrats. Writing in *The New York Times*, he discussed the “ideology of greed and vulgarity perpetuated by the Democrats and Republicans.”

In 1963, Sanders volunteered for a socialist kibbutz in Israel. In 1971, he ran for the Vermont Senate as a socialist candidate. In 1974, he said, “All necessities of life must be provided free for people.” Food? Housing? Clothes? Cars? You figure it out.

In 1979, he made a documentary of his lifetime hero, Eugene V. Debs. In 1981, he was a functionary in the Socialist Workers Party. In 1985, he visited Nicaragua and praised socialist leader Daniel Ortega, who later became a dictator. In 2006, he brokered a deal with socialist Hugo Chavez. Recently, he has refused to call Chavez’s successor, Maduro, a dictator. To this day he will not call himself a Democrat.

There is no way Sanders will be able to back away from his socialism during the general election. But in the primary, where Democrats now treat socialists as part of their team (while socialists knife them in the back), being accepted as a Democrat requires only chutzpah.

The Most Cunning Feature

Sanders has convinced millions of Democrats that FDR was a democratic socialist and that his policies are democratic socialism. But all Democratic candidates (including Sanders) and millions of well-informed Democrats know this is false and that socialism is highly unpopular. This polarizes the Democrats between two factions:

1. **“Socialist” Berniecrats:** Those who praise democratic socialism and support FDR’s Second Bill of Rights.
2. **FDR-liberal Democrats:** Those who reject (democratic) socialism and support FDR’s Second Bill of Rights.

Notice that both factions support FDR’s Second Bill of Rights. As I mentioned, FDR is basically the Democrat’s patron saint and they have been implementing parts of his Second Bill of Rights whenever they got the chance, right down to Obamacare in 2010. And Sanders has claimed that bill of rights as his own in both of his “democratic socialism” speeches. So there’s no practical reason for either faction to hate the other.

However, those who join the Berniecrats see that Democrats reject socialism/democratic socialism and conclude (falsely) that they are rejecting FDR’s Second Bill of Rights. Then they conclude non-socialist Democrats are shills for Wall Street or throwbacks to “neoliberalism” by which they mean Hoover’s libertarian view of liberalism!

If you remain an FDR-liberal Democrat, you are not so polarized. You know that Sanders' Berniecrats have just been duped by Sanders, but they are still actually good FDR liberals and not socialists at all (except for a very few).

This polarization is good, even lifesaving, for Sanders. Otherwise, everyone would see that he's in the socialist lane that's never gone anywhere. But it is devastating for the Democratic Party, which, of course, means it's good for Trump.

Sanders knows how bad this is for Democrats and says, "I and other progressives will face massive attacks from those who attempt to use the word 'socialism' as a slur." They won't just "attempt to," they *will* use it as a slur. And they will be right about Sanders. But you know, and Sanders knows, that the whole Democratic Party will be hurt by these attacks.

None of this would happen if Sanders would honestly admit that he is a socialist and FDR was a capitalist who found socialism of any variety to be dangerous. Even better, he could become the candidate that most of his followers think he is—a true FDR liberal and no longer a socialist, democratic or otherwise. But Sanders wants to destroy the Democratic Party, so we must admit, his strategy is brilliant.

What an Obama Democrat Taught Sanders

Sanders' message is that he alone is the true heir to FDR's liberalism, and today's Democrats are establishment shills who have betrayed FDR. Ironically, Sanders learned to appreciate FDR's liberalism from a moderate Democrat, someone he views as an establishment shill. That certainly gives the lie to his message that Democrats have abandoned FDR's liberalism. Here's the story.

Sanders bases his definition of democratic socialism on FDR's Second Bill of Rights, which in 2015 he called "my vision today." Before he started hiding his true socialism, he never said anything like that. So where did this vision come from?

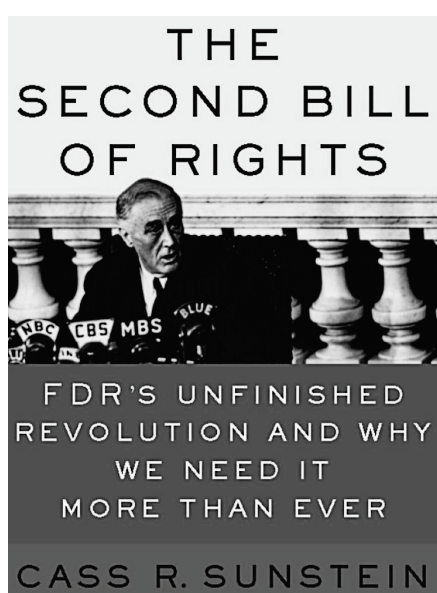
Take a look at the cover of Cass Sunstein's book, published in 2004. Sunstein was Obama's regulatory "czar." He is all for a "revolution" to finish implementing FDR's Bill of Rights, just like Bernie. Coincidence?

FDR's Second Bill of Rights drew international attention for a couple of years after he proposed it in 1944. Then it dropped out of sight for the next 60 years until Sunstein wrote his book, which was reviewed in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. In 2006, the book was re-

viewed by Thom Hartmann, a prominent left-wing talk-radio host. That review contained a prophetic prediction.

If a Democratic candidate for the presidency in 2008 were to take up Sunstein's modern update of Roosevelt's Second Bill of Rights, he or she would certainly win the election.

Hartmann was hinting to Sanders that he should run for president on what he called "Sunstein's modern update of Roosevelt's Second Bill of



Rights." Sanders' June 2019 socialism speech, as posted on his website, is entitled, "Sanders calls for 21st Century Bill of Rights."

There can be no doubt Sanders got this idea from Hartmann. Starting two years before Hartmann's prescient review, and continuing for a decade, Hartmann hosted Sanders for an hour each week on Hartmann's Friday morning "Brunch with Bernie" national radio show. It's impossible that Hartmann did not tell Bernie about both the book he was so excited about and his idea for a radical winning the presidency.

Sanders spoke with Sunstein just before Sunstein's confirmation hearing in the Senate and decided he was such an establishment shill that he refused to vote for his confirmation.

But Sunstein (via Hartmann) opened Sanders' eyes to the notion that he could win the presidency by pretending to jump on FDR's Democratic-liberalism bandwagon. And if an establishment shill like Sunstein could call for a revolution right on the cover of his book, and still get appointed by Obama, why couldn't Sanders be just as daring?

Conclusion

Sanders' strategy is brilliant. It's helped him cover his socialist past by pretending that a democratic socialist is just someone aligned with FDR. In this way he paints himself as just a good FDR democratic socialist, even though there's no such thing.

Because all knowledgeable Democrats—including all the candidates he's running against—know that socialism has a bloody track record internationally and has been a persistent failure domestically, they reject democratic socialism. And because Sanders has convinced his followers that rejecting democratic socialism means rejecting FDR liberalism, they mistakenly view all knowledgeable Democrats as hostile to FDR liberalism. In fact, FDR is still our hero.

This mistake, fostered by Sanders, is why Berniecrats hate the Democratic Party, just as Sanders always has.

This polarizes the Democratic Party, weakens it internally and makes it vulnerable to Republican attacks. That's okay with Sanders. He's always hated the Democrats. His only goal is socialism.

- FDR was no democratic socialist.
- Bernie Sanders has always been a socialist, and he still is.