

American Political Culture

Socialism

As a political ideology, socialism emerged as a rival to classical liberalism in the 19th century. It was a political response to the often-horrific conditions of industrial workers in the advanced capitalist countries and laid claims to representation of the working class. Although it spawned many variants, socialism sets forth the following basic arguments. First, the free market (capitalist) system so adored by classical liberals is not free at all. Disproportionately few property owners wield true economic power and use their ownership of the means of production to exploit hired workers. Second, the democratic system is mainly a façade for the economic elite. Given the true foundations of power in society, formal legal and political opportunity is not enough. Only when those who work for wages wield economic power will society find true equality and freedom.

Origins of Socialism

Although it developed independently as the outgrowth of the practical concerns and political interests of industrial workers, socialism is influenced by the powerful theory of Karl Marx. Marxism views history as being driven by the struggle of economic classes. The socialist tradition splits into those designating themselves as Socialist or Communist. The main difference between the two groups lies in the Communists' claim to follow a more pure version of Marxism while the Socialists have greater openness to working within the political framework of liberal democracy, for example, by contesting elections and following constitutional processes. Communists were traditionally more likely to believe in the inevitability of armed revolution to establish an egalitarian society.

As its name implies, socialism holds that the economy should be managed in the interest of society as a whole. Where Adam Smith viewed market forces as an ultimately benevolent invisible hand, socialists see many market failures that are not self-correcting. Low wages, unhealthy or dangerous working conditions, pollution of the environment, unemployment, and insufficient vacation time are all problems that socialism sees as fit for state intervention. Like classical conservatism, socialism accepts the responsibility of government to take care of society's less fortunate but goes much farther by elevating equality as a cardinal value. Like

classical liberalism, socialism advocates the separation of church and state. Unlike classical liberalism, socialism endorses not only equality of opportunity but also equality of results. Socialists are more likely to accept the principle of progressive taxation, with higher income earners paying more in taxes, due to considerations of fairness. "Think about it," says the Socialist. "If you work for a large corporation are you in any sense equal to the CEO? Does the CEO work so much harder and efficiently than you that he deserves to make 350 times what the average salaried worker makes?" Such outcomes are neither natural nor the simple outcome of individual choices.

Socialism accepts the responsibility of government to provide a variety of services to the poor and working classes and so embraces the welfare state. Socialism supports government employment programs, universal health care, and generous payments to the unemployed or disabled. Although enthusiasm for such a policy has waned considerably in recent decades, socialism used to stand for the nationalization, or government ownership, of major industries in the economy. Marx's saying "from each according to ability, to each according to need" cogently captures the spirit of socialist ideology. Put another way, in striking a balance between equality and freedom, socialism favors equality while classical liberalism favors freedom.

Influences of Socialism

Socialism's influence on the politics and culture of most democracies, with the exception of the United States and Japan, is deep and persistent. European countries, in particular, reflect socialist policies. Europe's eastern half underwent an unsuccessful forty-year experiment with communism. More benignly, countries of Western Europe such as Sweden, France, and Germany implement socialist priorities through state ownership of major industries, high levels of public employment, strict legal requirements providing job security, and extensive welfare states. Workers in most European states get several weeks of guaranteed paid vacation. In France, most workers are limited to 35 hours of work per week. Tellingly, every country in Europe has an influential Socialist party that contests and wins elections. Once considered one of the most conservative states, Spain is currently run by the Spanish Socialist Party. Britain's socialist-inspired party, Labour, has governed that country since 1997. The developed world is not the only place where socialism's legacy is important. India spent decades of uninterrupted rule by a Socialist political party. Senegal's young democracy in Western Africa recently emerged from four decades of Socialist rule; its government still employs approximately forty

percent of the official workforce and controls major industries.

In America, by contrast, socialism's influence has been relatively feeble. Trade unions did and do exist in the United States but never came under the sway of Marxist doctrine. While a Socialist party does exist, and has even fielded candidates for the US presidency, it never achieved electoral success at the national or state level. The Roosevelt administration introduced welfare policies similar to, if less extensive than, those found in Europe during the 1930s, but only as a response to the Great Depression, war, and as a matter of pragmatic politics. Marxism has never flourished in the United States outside of the university subculture. Socialist ideas have always seemed like fish out of water, never capturing the popular imagination. A partial explanation is our country's long Cold War struggle with the communist Soviet Union. This military, economic, and above all ideological struggle went far in discrediting socialist theory.

Yet socialism's failure to sink roots in America is also a tribute to the overwhelming dominance of classical liberalism. Belief in individual responsibility, belief in economic success for those who work hard, and a distrust of big government have severely handicapped socialism's ideological challenge. Americans are more likely to admire businesspersons and entrepreneurs than vilify them. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the almost cult-like celebrity of a Warren Buffet or Donald Trump in any other country but the United States. Americans are more concerned about acquiring private property than making sure it is equally distributed.

Socialism's fortunes have recently waned outside the United States as well. Experiments with state ownership of the economy, such as those in France, India, and Sweden failed to sustain attractive growth rates after the 1970s and left countries less competitive in a globalized market. Socialist parties have toned down both their ideological rhetoric and policies in response to an evolving world economy. The continued appeal of socialist values in other countries, however, still explains wide differences between politics in America and the rest of the world because it has dramatically reset the baselines of political debate. The political values of a conservative in Britain or France are much more likely to appear liberal in the United States.

Political Ideology

Political ideology is a set of values and beliefs held by groups regarding the purpose and scope of government. Core political ideologies like conservatism, liberalism, and socialism, shape an

individual's stance on the government's role in economic and social issues. Additionally, political ideologies act as a "social cement"; binding individuals together with similar beliefs and values on government's role in society.

Since the early days of our nation, the American political system has been shaped by the prevailing political ideology of a particular time period. When economic, social, or political upheavals occurred, new strains of political ideologies emerged to address the upheaval. As America became increasingly more capitalistic and modernized, shifts occurred in the core political ideologies. For example, classical liberalism split into two ideological strains, modern liberalism and modern conservatism.

This activity tests your knowledge of different political ideologies.

Interactive Activity: Political Ideology

Highlights different political ideologies. Defines political ideologies: The set of values and beliefs held by individuals and groups regarding the purpose and scope of government Explains that libertarians are opposed to government intervention in economic and social matters; classical liberalism and modern liberalism support separation of church and state; classical conservatism supports political dynasties like the Bushes as well as maintaining the status quo; socialism and modern liberalism support equality of results and equality of opportunity; and classical liberalism and modern liberalism are likely to support same-sex marriage.

Additional Resources

Websites

[Karl Marx](http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/bios/Marx.html)

<http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/bios/Marx.html>

The Library of Economics and Liberty offers a brief biography of Karl Marx and a summary of his views on government and economics.

[Manifest of the Communist Party](#)

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>

The 1884 book by Karl Marx is available online.

[The Labour Party UK](#)

<http://www.labour.org.uk/home>

The official website for this socialist-inspired political party in the United Kingdom offers the latest Party news, current and archived videos, and information about the Party's policies.

[Socialist Party USA](#)

<http://socialistparty-usa.net/>

The Party's official website provides a statement of principles, a list of candidates for federal and state office, and a downloadable version of their magazine, *The Socialist*.