

Socialism for the Tea Parties

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Posted: March 30, 2010 12:58 PM

A recent [Bloomberg National Poll](#) confirmed what was already apparent, that the Tea Party movement has an intense hatred for anything they, or their leaders, deem to be socialist while both appreciating and wanting more government support for programs they like and, of course, not really understanding what the term socialist means. The Tea Party movement has a long, if perhaps not so distinguished pedigree, as fear of socialism has been a tool by powerful economic forces in the US for more than a century used to oppose any policies which might help poor and working people.

For over a hundred years the US has been characterized by a consensus dread of socialism while continuing to enact enormously popular policies that are essentially social democratic in nature. Health care reform is only the most recent example of this type of legislation which also includes Social Security, veterans benefits, Medicare, head start, [food stamps which have become particularly popular in this economic downturn](#), and various other programs, subsidies and tax incentives.

In recent decades socialism, even among many of its advocates, has evolved into social democracy which seeks to take the edges off of the injuries of capitalism without substantially changing the system itself. Most of the industrialized world, including the US, learned in the first half of the last century that the only way to sustain capitalism was to rein it in somehow through providing support and protection for citizens. The social programs that were enacted in the US during the 1930s, as well as those in subsequent decades have always been quite popular. Americans, like Europeans and others, appreciate government safety nets, public projects and other benefits. The primary difference is that in the US, we have become very comfortable with elements of social democracy, although we still have far fewer of these than most wealthy industrialized countries, while we remain virulently opposed to the word "socialism" or even the phrase "social democracy."

Of course, using government resources to levy taxes and provide services including defense, infrastructure, education, economic incentives and programs is not socialism. It is governance. In America socialism is the bogeyman that is wheeled out from time to time to oppose programs that are viewed as too big or too costly, but even that is not entirely accurate. Defense buildups throughout the last decades have infused enormous amounts of money, through lucrative and often wasteful government contracts, into the economy, transferring hard earned tax dollars into profits and jobs, but nobody really calls that socialism

In the US the term socialism is only used to describe some programs. Programs that seek to help big businesses through tax incentives, even waiving taxes entirely, particularly by state and local governments, are referred to as being pro-growth. Programs that help mostly middle class Americans such as veteran's benefits, social security and Medicare are viewed as government service delivery. However, programs that seek to help the poor, such as the health care bill, are

referred to as socialist. Thus socialism for the middle class is not questioned; and socialism for the wealthy is often viewed as a necessary economic strategy, while programs to help the poor are presented as dangerously subversive. There is, of course, a high degree of hypocrisy in this view, but it reflects how the right wing has largely succeeded in framing this.

Accordingly, it is much easier to mobilize Americans against the idea of socialism, rather than the policies themselves. It is almost certain that most of the Tea Party demonstrators who are so against health care reform because they view it is socialism would be demonstrating even more passionately and actively if they were told that the government was going to do away with Social Security or Medicare because of a need to balance the budget.

The specific irony about the movement against the health care reform bill is that the passion and red-baiting was directed against a bill that was not only the kind of legislation that should have been popular among moderate, pro-market Republicans, [but that similar legislation was supported by pro-market Republicans](#). It is one thing to call President Obama and the Democratic Party socialists because, you know, they like helping poor people and community organizing. Making these [attacks against the likes of Mitt Romney or George H.W. Bush](#), would be unequivocally nutty, but both of these Republicans supported very similar legislation in the past.

The anger and passion expressed in the Tea Party movement is obviously unfocused and plagued by logical inconsistencies, but it is also genuine and strongly felt. The ease with which this anger was transformed into anti-socialist hatred aimed at a bill that, while certainly objectionable to partisans of the left and the right, has few components that can be described as socialist, reveals both the depth of this anger and the power the word socialist still has to instill fear in many Americans. The passage of the bill, and the likelihood of there being little political fallout for its passage indicates that for many Americans the need for better policy and more government assistance still trumps fear mongering and name calling.