ABSTRACT  This paper examines the relationship between race, socialism, and democracy in America. It is organized into five sections and a conclusion. The first section explores how socialism has been viewed by many black leaders and intellectuals as necessary, imperative perhaps, in the black struggle for material equality, and further investigates the relationship of this black perspective on socialism to white opposition. The second section uses the most recent historical work to identify the factors that have stalled the development of socialism in America. I also assess how these factors have changed or not in terms of making the socialist project more likely. In the third section, I analyze available poll data on American opinion about socialism from the 1930s to the present. While the data show unambiguously increased support for socialism since the 1930s, socialism does not today command the support of a majority of the American people. In the fourth section I examine the paradigmatic Franklin Roosevelt presidency on how liberal Democratic presidents have avoided the socialist label while embracing socialist programs. The fifth section is a brief examination of what socialism—really existing socialism—means in the early twenty-first century, and the idea of “socialist smuggling” as manifested in the presidencies of FDR and Lyndon Johnson. The speculative conclusion asks what are the prospects for the socialist project, and whether the white liberal cosmopolitan bourgeoisie rather than the white working class might become a mass base for the socialist project.  

KEYWORDS race, racism, democracy, socialism, working class, public opinion, liberalism, socialist smuggler

In 2016 Senator Bernie Sanders, a declared democratic socialist, ran a competitive race for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. As a result of the campaign, Senator Sanders has become an influential voice in the Democratic Party. In 2018 Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, running as a democratic socialist, defeated an entrenched Democratic incumbent congressman in New York City by a margin of 15 percent. Polls indicate that more young people (18–34) and Democrats have a favorable opinion of socialism than capitalism. A majority of African Americans—a core Democratic constituency group—have a favorable opinion of socialism. Reportedly since the Sanders campaign there has been a sizeable increase in the membership of the Democratic Socialists of America. Among Democratic congressional leaders and prospective 2020 presidential candidates there is increasing support for socialist programs such as universal health insurance or “Medicare for all,” free college tuition, and full employment.
What do these developments portend? Could socialism become an important factor in one of the two major parties for the first time in the history of the American democracy? Also, what are the implications of these developments for the half-century-stalled African American quest for full material equality? These are the questions explored in this historical and speculative essay. Broadly speaking, this is an essay on the relationships between race, socialism, and democracy in America.

The paper is organized into five sections and a conclusion. The first section explores how socialism has been viewed by many black leaders and intellectuals as necessary, imperative perhaps, in the black struggle for material equality, and further investigates the relationship of this black perspective on socialism to white opposition. The second section uses the most recent historical work to identify the factors that have the stalled the development of socialism in America. I also assess how these factors have changed or not in terms of making the socialist project more likely. In the third section, I analyze available poll data on American opinion about socialism from the 1930s to the present. While the data show unambiguously increased support for socialism since the 1930s, socialism does not today command the support of a majority of the American people. In the fourth section I examine the paradigmatic Franklin Roosevelt presidency on how liberal Democratic presidents have avoided the socialist label while embracing socialist programs. The fifth section is a brief examination of what socialism—really existing socialism—means in the early twenty-first century, and the idea of “socialist smuggling” as manifested in the presidencies of FDR and Lyndon Johnson. The speculative conclusion asks what are the prospects for the socialist project, and whether the white liberal cosmopolitan bourgeois is rather than the white working class might become a mass base for the socialist project.

**RACE AND THE SOCIALIST PROJECT IN AMERICA**

Socialism or socialist-type redistributive programs such as universal health insurance, full employment, and free college tuition would improve disproportionately the material conditions of blacks in the United States. In effect, the adoption of socialist programs would be a kind of implicit reparations, transferring resources from disproportionately wealthy whites to disproportionately poor blacks. Blacks in general have likely always understood this. To paraphrase Lipset and Marks, referencing Jews, because of racism and a large impoverished population blacks are “ready-made socialists.”2

At their first opportunity to govern during the Reconstruction era, state and local governments with blacks in coalitions with Northern white migrants inaugurated what Douglas Egerton calls “America’s most progressive era.”3 These governments were the first in the United States to enact policies with a socialist tinge, including free public schools, asylums, property rights for married women, reductions in the number of crimes, and regulations of private markets and insurance companies. At the local level, streets were paved and boards of health and sanitation were established. These programs were financed by increased taxation, especially on wealthy planters.4
These progressive policies were one of the reasons Northern white capitalists joined with Southern racists to overthrow the Reconstruction governments. Certainly many of these Northern whites were racists and white supremacists, but as Heather Cox observes, many turned against Reconstruction because they increasingly perceived the mass of African Americans as adherents of a theory of political economy in which labor and capital were at odds and in which a growing government would be used to advance labor at the expense of capitalists. For these northerners, the majority of ex-slaves became the face of “communism” or “socialism” as opponents dubbed their views. . . . Northerners turned against freed people after the civil war because African Americans came to represent a concept of society and government that would destroy the “free labor world,” that is, a view that labor and capital had mutually compatible interests.5

Black leaders and voters were also overwhelmingly supportive of the progressive policies of the New Deal and Great Society, in the case of the New Deal even when the policies were structured and implemented on a racist basis. For blacks a racist Social Security or unemployment compensation system was better than no Social Security or unemployment system at all.

Black civic and political leaders from the beginning of the twentieth century embraced socialist programs, if not the label. W.E.B. DuBois and many of the NAACP’s early white founders were socialist. The organization itself never embraced socialism but this was in part due to prudence (the fear of being labeled “red”; as one NAACP official quipped, “It’s bad enough being black, why add red”) and a fear of political repression.

Many black leaders, however, were not so prudent, if prudence it was, and were willing to embrace socialism. The most influential black leader of all time—Martin Luther King, Jr.—in his last years embraced democratic socialism. A partial list of black leaders, historically and contemporary, who have embraced socialism includes Henry Highland Garnett, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, Ralph Bunche, Bayard Rustin, Ronald Dellums, A. Phillip Randolph, Angela Davis, and Amiri Baraka. In 1932 the black historian St. Clair Drake recalled, “I didn’t know any black social scientists who privately or publicly didn’t claim to be some kind of Marxist.”6

Among contemporary black elected officials, however, few have embraced socialism. The only black members of Congress to declare themselves socialist were Ronald Dellums, elected from the majority white radical left Berkeley-Oakland district and Cynthia McKinney of Atlanta. None of the large number of black mayors elected since the 1960s have been willing to openly embrace socialism.

Even Jesse Jackson distanced himself from the socialist label. Nevertheless his 1984 presidential campaign was sufficiently socialist that he earned the endorsements of Michael Harrington, then the nation’s best-known democratic socialist, and the Democratic Socialists of America. There was some reluctance by the Democratic Socialists to endorse Jackson, initially because of worries and concerns about his alleged anti-Semitism but also because he consistently resisted the advice of a number of persons...
who wished him to speak openly in democratic socialist language. Jackson’s failure to
abandon the rhetoric of free enterprise and openly embrace democratic socialist prin-
ciples and rhetoric was a political calculus, believing, perhaps correctly, that he would
lose more elite and mass support by doing so than he would gain, and would be further
isolated and marginalized by the party establishment and the media. Thus, he coyly
feigned ignorance on the subject. When asked by Playboy, “Do you identify with the
European social democratic tradition?” he replied, “I don’t know enough about it to say I identify with it.”

This reluctance of established black leaders to embrace socialism while proposing
socialist policies is mainly a function of their being part of the establishment—the
Democratic Party establishment—which since FDR has preferred to conceal its social
democratic tendencies by co-opting the label liberal and now progressive. I discuss this
legacy of FDR below.

Among the black public there is overwhelming support, compared to the white public,
for socialist ideas, policies, and programs. In Table 1 data from the 1996 General Social
Survey comparing black and white opinion on a variety of socialist ideas showed that
blacks were much more supportive of a government guarantee of jobs, health care,
financial aid for college, and decent housing, and that the government should reduce
income inequality between rich and poor. And as the table shows, blacks were also more
likely to favor government ownership of electric utilities, hospitals, and banks. Klugel and
Smith, after close study of American opinion on inequality, wrote: “Judged by the black-
white gap in beliefs that potentially challenge the dominant ideology, blacks are the group
that come closest to being class conscious in the Marxian definition.”

| TABLE 1. Racial Differences in Attitudes toward Government Spending on Selected Programs (percent in favor) |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Blacks | Whites |
| Health | 87 | 64 |
| Schools | 54 | 25 |
| Retirement | 79 | 46 |
| Unemployment | 69 | 21 |
| Culture/Arts | 68 | 31 |

| Racial Differences in Attitudes toward Government Ownership of Selected Enterprises (percent in favor) |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Blacks | Whites |
| Electric Utilities | 39 | 17 |
| Hospitals | 59 | 20 |
| Banks | 47 | 18 |

Whites probably inchoately understand the relationship between socialism and the advancement of blacks, and because of their racist ideas become “ready-made anti-socialists.” That is, it is probable, perhaps even likely, that many whites who might be inclined to support socialist ideas like universal health care because it is in their material interests nevertheless refuse to do so because they know it will also help blacks. This racist myopia, what Richard Hofstadter called the “Negro bogey,” has infected the socialist project in America, from the populists of the 1890s to the effort to enact the Affordable Care Act in the early twenty-first century.¹⁰

In any event, we know that while blacks have in general been favorably disposed toward socialism, the American democracy generally has not. To the contrary, it has been hostile and often repressive. I turn to the sources of this hostility in the next section.

WHY SOCIALISM DID NOT HAPPEN IN AMERICA

There are several books that seek to answer the question “why no socialism in America,” including Warner Sombart’s classic *Why There Is No Socialism in the United States*, Daniel Bell’s *Marxism and Socialism in the United States*, and Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America*. There are also useful insights in the writings of Tocqueville and Max Weber. In this paper I rely often on *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in America* by Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marx.

Any analysis of the question, however, should begin at the beginning with Frederick Engels’s analysis of what has been called the great contradiction of the Marxist theory of socialist revolution. Marx and Engels confidently predicted that socialism would first happen in the most advanced industrial societies, namely the United States and Britain. Instead, the US is and was at the time of Marx and Engels’s deaths (1883 and 1895 respectively) the least socialist state. After their deaths the socialist revolution (or at least revolutions in the name of socialism) happened first in a place where Marxist theory claimed it could not happen—in Russia, a poor, backward, agrarian society. All subsequent socialist revolutions—China, Vietnam, Cuba—have happened in similar places. Engels of course could not account for what happened in Russia or subsequently in China, Vietnam, and Cuba because he was long dead. In his correspondence, however, he sketched out what happened in America and why. His brief analysis has been a starting point for all subsequent studies of the problem.

According to Engels, central to America’s bourgeois, conservative character and its resistance to socialism is the absence of a feudal, monarchical, aristocratic ruling class. In a 1890 letter he wrote, “Americans are born conservative just because America is so entirely without a feudal past and therefore proud of its purely bourgeois origins.”¹¹ Second, Engels saw the ethnic diversity of the American working class as inhibiting class consciousness and solidarity. Finally, he saw the economic opportunities available to American workers and their relative equality as sources of their political backwardness. Although capitalism in the United States was certainly the source of an entrenched wealthy and exploitative ruling class, “The native American working man’s standard of
living is considerably higher than even that of the British, and that alone suffices to place him in the rear for still some time to come.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to these factors, Lipset and Marx identify many others who inhibited the socialist project in America. In terms of the ethnic diversity of the working class, they further point out that socialism was initially brought to America by immigrants—Jews, Germans, Finns—which allowed it to be portrayed as “foreign” and “un-American.” Structural features of the US political system—separation of powers, staggered elections for the presidency and Congress, the two-party system and federalism—diffused power in a way that made it difficult for an electorally viable socialist party to develop. Individualism and the anti-statist elements of the political culture; the influence of religion (especially the opposition of the Catholic Church); the weakness of unions and their trade union mentality; the doctrinaire, sectarian nature of US socialist parties; white working-class racism and the repression of socialist ideas, organizations, and leaders—all can also be identified as reasons for the failure of socialism in America.

While these are the principal reasons socialism did not happen here, the question is whether these reasons have changed over the years so as to make the socialist project more feasible in the twenty-first century. Engels’s first factor has changed. The de-industrialization of the economy in the midst of globalization, and the resulting disappearance of well-paid manufacturing employment, has caused anxiety among the working class about the idea of America as the land of economic opportunity and prosperity. Indeed, many Americans are apprehensive that the so-called American dream is just that—a dream—with their children likely to fall behind them in economic status. The stagnation in wages and growing economic inequality add to the anxiety. These developments theoretically constitute fertile grounds for the future of the socialist project. However, hardly anything else does.

The ethnic diversity and divisions of the European immigrant groups have in the twenty-first century largely withered away, as those groups all have “become white” and identify mainly as white rather than German, Irish, Italian, or Polish. Further, in recent decades a white consciousness, identity, and nationalism has emerged among a significant segment of the white group.\textsuperscript{13}

Yet ethnic diversity and divisions continue to characterize the working class in the United States. Rather than ethnic diversity and divisions among Europeans, today it is caused mainly by mass immigration from Latin America and Asia. Racism, xenophobia, and ethnic chauvinism divide the working class in America today as much as they did when Engels wrote in the 1890s. Indeed, political scientists and commentators routinely put the white working class in a separate analytic category from nonwhite workers.

Racism is an abiding feature of American society and politics. Virtually all of the studies of the 2016 presidential election, for example, indicate white racism, euphemistically referred to as white racial resentment or white identity, rather than class or economic anxieties, as the major basis of white support for Donald Trump’s election to the presidency.\textsuperscript{14}

Unions are as weak and lacking in class consciousness as they have ever been. Union membership is at an all-time low (roughly 9 percent of workers compared to 35 percent at
its postwar peak), and these shrinking unions are divided along industrial, craft, and public versus private employment lines. With little class consciousness or solidarity, at least since the Reagan administration unions have become a near irrelevant force in American politics.15

Sectarianism and ideological rigidity still mark the organized socialist parties, as in the doctrinal disputes between the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party, USA, and the quasi-party formation, the Democratic Socialists of America. Finally, the structural features of the system—separation of powers, the two-party system, federalism—are unchanged and constitute one of the most conservative political arrangements in the world.

All and all, looking at the factors that historically have inhibited the socialist project in America, there is little reason for optimism. Except for a growing sense of anxiety about economic opportunity and the perception and reality of economic inequality, there is little that has changed in the factors that have historically inhibited socialism from happening here. In the next section I examine changes in public opinion on socialism that are causes for at least some optimism about the socialist project.

PUBLIC OPINION

Modern scientific surveys and polls began in the 1930s during the Depression and FDR’s long presidency.16 One would think that, in the midst of capitalism’s near-collapse and with mass unemployment and other economic dislocations, hostility toward capitalism and sympathy for socialism would be rather high. As the data in Table 2 show, this was not the case. From 1937 to 1948 Gallup asked respondents whether they considered themselves Republican, Democrat, or socialist. During this time span never more than 2 percent identified as socialist, with an average of 1 percent for the period (Gallup also asked during this period how respondents voted for president, with less than 1 percent indicating socialist). During this period there was also considerable support for repression of the socialist party, with an average of 34 percent between 1943 and 1957 agreeing that the socialist party should not be allowed to publish a newspaper in peacetime.

Occasionally Gallup asked respondents how they defined socialism. In 1939, 34 percent said, “government ownership of business, everything controlled”; 12 percent, “equality, all equal in rights, distribution”; 6 percent, “modified communism,” and 36 percent, “don’t know.” In 1949 Gallup defined socialism for respondents: “Under socialism, the government owns and runs many industries and businesses like steel, coal, railroads and banks and offers services like medical and dental care, with the people still having the right to elect their government officials. Would you like to see the United States go more in the direction of socialism or less?” Two thirds of respondents said less, 15 percent more. However, perhaps due to FDR’s New Deal, which was constantly labeled socialism by its conservative critics, in 1949 51 percent of respondents agreed, “We have socialism in the US today,” while 43 percent disagreed. While it is not clear from this response alone, it is likely that the majority were not in favor of this new direction of the country.
Gallup essentially stopped asking questions about socialism after the early 1950s, perhaps because it was such an inconsequential factor in US politics.

A 1982 poll by the Continental Group found that 20 percent of respondents agreed that the United States “would be better off if it moved toward socialism.” While 20 percent is a relatively small number, compared to the dismal numbers of the 1930s, it suggests rather remarkable growth in favorable sentiments. In a 2009 Fox News poll 23 percent of respondents said it would be a good thing if the country moved toward socialism. In 2010, 51 percent of respondents said they were “worried the country was
moving toward socialism,” 43 percent were not. Also, in 2010 when respondents were asked whether they had a positive or negative image of socialism, 36 percent answered positive, 58 percent negative.

Overall, then, the available poll data indicate that socialism as a label hardly enjoys majority support. But compared to the Depression years and immediate postwar period, there has been considerable growth in positive attitudes toward socialism. We will return to the poll data later in the context of the Sanders campaign.

**FDR’S LEGACY AND THE SOCIALIST PROJECT**

Most historians agree with Hofstadter’s contention about the two things that distinguish the New Deal from previous reform presidencies. First, the systemic crisis generated by the Depression: “The New Deal episode marks the first time in history of reform movements when a leader of the reform party took the reigns of government confronted with a sick economy. . . Jefferson in 1801, Jackson in 1829 and after them TR and Wilson, all took over at a moment when the economy was in good shape.”17 Second, “The demands of a large and powerful labor movement, coupled with the interests of the unemployed, gave the later New Deal a social democratic tinge that had never before been seen in American reform movements.”18

Roosevelt’s reforms were condemned as socialist, communist, and fascist. Former president Hoover called the New Deal “communistic,” formed out of the “witch’s cauldron which boiled in Russia.” The Republican National Committee in 1936 issued a statement describing Roosevelt’s policy as “socialistic,” the leader of the House Republicans said Roosevelt’s goal was the imposition of a “Russianized form of government,” and at the 1936 Republican Convention Hoover said the New Deal was the “first phase of American fascism.” And conservative senator Carter Glass of Virginia described the New Deal as “an utterly dangerous effort of the federal government to transplant Hitlerism to every corner of the nation.”20

The New Deal was neither fascist nor communist, but its social democratic tinge with its regulation of business and banking, its wealth tax, and the creation of a rudimentary welfare state was a clear break from the individualistic, anti-statist tradition of the Democratic Party and the nation. Thus, Roosevelt knew the New Deal was vulnerable to attack as socialism and un-Americanism. Aware of the state of public opinion about socialism, and that the attack on it might easily find traction, Roosevelt systematically co-opted liberalism (heretofore associated with conservatives) as the ideological label for the New Deal.21 Prior to this time reformers or challengers to the established order used progressive. Roosevelt rejected this label because in the past it had been identified with Republicans (Theodore Roosevelt, Robert La Follette, even Herbert Hoover), and because he wanted to avoid the socialist label. That is, he was breaking with tradition but he did not wish the break to be seen as socialism. Thus, starting with his acceptance speech at the 1932 Democratic Convention he referred to the Democrats as “the bearers of liberalism and progress,” and subsequently he would describe the Democrats as the “party of militant liberalism.”
Conservatives vigorously objected to FDR’s co-optation of the label liberalism, claiming they were the true liberals. However, by the 1940s most conservative Republicans had resigned themselves to Roosevelt’s capture of the label, and began to refer to themselves as conservatives, asserting that it was ideologically superior to liberalism because it reflected traditional American values of liberty, individualism, and limited government.

While this may have been good politics for Roosevelt at the time, it damaged the socialist project. Given his personal popularity and the approval of his New Deal, FDR might have responded by defending socialism on its merits and as consistent with democratic values. By becoming a liberal socialist smuggler rather than a defender of democratic socialism, FDR capitulated to reactionary forces. This set the pattern for all future Democratic presidents from Truman to Obama. When their policies (mainly national health insurance) were attacked as socialist they responded by denying and disparaging the word, treating it as a pariah, as un-American. This strategy of Roosevelt and his successors not only limited the socialist project but gave aid to McCarthyism and its repression of socialist ideas and individuals, forcing progressive organizations such as the NAACP and the Americans for Democratic Action to purge their ranks of communists and socialists.

Again, Roosevelt might have been politically prudent in his avoidance of socialism and co-optation of liberalism, but its damage to the socialist project should not be ignored. Nevertheless, in his final State of the Union address in 1944 he proposed what he called a “Second Bill of Rights,” which programmatically was a social democratic agenda. First, he told the nation that true freedom included more than the rights listed in the Bill of Rights. Rather, “true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. ‘Necessitous men are not free.’” Describing this as “self-evident,” he listed some of the rights under which a new basis of security would be established for all, “regardless of station or creed.” Among the rights Roosevelt listed were the right to a “useful and remunerative job,” adequate food, clothing, and recreation, a “decent home,” and the “right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health.”

**REALLY EXISTING SOCIALISM**

In the last half century, the meaning of socialism in the Western world and elsewhere has changed. It no longer requires government ownership of the principal means of production, state economic planning, or efforts to achieve equal distribution of wealth. Most socialists today envision a continuing role for the market in the allocation of production and the distribution of income. Even nominally communist China has introduced “market socialism” in its purported commitment to the building of an equititarian society.

What really existing democratic socialism means today might be called the Danish model. (During the 2016 primary contest with Sanders, Clinton dismissed Danish socialism as perhaps good for Danes but not for Americans.) Danish socialism includes a relatively high rate of taxes on the middle class, not just the wealthy, but also steeply progressive taxes on the wealthy. It also requires regulations of the market in terms of...
occupational, health, safety, the environment, and ethnic and gender equality. It also requires an extensive welfare state which at a minimum includes employment security, universal health insurance, free schooling from elementary to graduate education, child care, vacations, and paid family leave. Citizens are willing to pay relatively high taxes if in exchange they receive these kinds of benefits because they know they will lead not just to the pursuit of happiness but happiness itself. (The Danish people are routinely ranked the happiest in the world.)

Looked at the Danish way, it is clear Sanders in 2016 ran on the most minimal of a social democratic agenda. The 1972 George McGovern platform was far more socialist than Sanders’s platform. McGovern’s “liberal” redistributive economic agenda included a guaranteed job, a minimum income, and a highly progressive income and estate tax with the rate reaching as much as 100 percent on the wealthiest Americans. In addition to these broad reforms McGovern’s platform had specific components targeted toward racial egalitarianism, including busing for purposes of school desegregation, affirmative action, and “full enforcement of all equal employment laws, including federal contract compliance and federally regulated industries and giving the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission adequate staff and resources and power to issue cease and desist orders promptly. The platform vastly increased efforts to assist minorities and women and other under-represented groups.”

McGovern, an old-fashioned anti-imperialist, also called for an end to the Vietnam war, the avoidance of such conflicts in the future, and major cuts in defense spending.

CONCLUSION: IS IT HAPPENING HERE?

The most significant event in the recent talk of a revival of socialism in America is undoubtedly the surprisingly competitive campaign of Senator Sanders for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination. Early polling on the prospects of a socialist candidate were mixed but on the whole not encouraging. A 2015 Gallup Poll found that more than 90 percent would vote for a woman, Catholic, African American, Latino, a Jew; 81 percent for a Muslim; 74 percent for a homosexual; 58 percent for an atheist; but only 47 percent for a socialist. Forty-nine percent of young people were positive toward or about socialism compared to 13 percent of those 65 and older, and 59 percent of liberal Democrats compared to 6 percent of conservative Republican. Thus, the socialist Sanders had potential base constituencies among blacks, Latinos, young people, and liberal Democrats. We have limited data on the voting behavior of Latinos and liberal Democrats during the Democratic primaries, but we know that young people did constitute a base of Sanders’s support while African Americans were the core Clinton constituency.

In Table 3 additional data on opinions about socialism in the context of the Sanders’s campaign are displayed. A 2015 Quinnipiac poll asked respondents would they feel comfortable or uncomfortable with a socialist president; 39 percent said comfortable, 57 percent uncomfortable. A 2016 Selzer & Company poll found that while 24 percent said they were bothered that Sanders called himself a democratic socialist, 75 percent were not. A Wall Street Journal / NBC News poll in 2016 found that 29 percent would be enthusiastic
about or comfortable with Sanders as the first democratic socialist president, 51 percent would be uncomfortable at the prospect, and to 19 percent it would make no difference.

The opinion data on the Sanders campaign overall are ambivalent and ambiguous, but clearly the majority opinion was not favorable, and most political scientists dismissed as forlorn the Sanders quest for the nomination. Nevertheless, he ran a competitive campaign in terms of fundraising and caucus and primary victories. According to the exit polls Sanders won 49 percent of the white vote compared to Clinton’s 47 percent, while Clinton won the vote of women, 60 to 38 percent. Sanders’s core vote or base constituency was young people (18–29), which he won 68 to 21, while Clinton by an equally decisive margin of 64 to 30 percent won the elderly vote. The limited data available suggests that Clinton won the Latino vote 56 to 43 percent. No exit poll data are available on the Jewish vote, not even from New York and Florida where it is sizeable. (This is inexplicable given the historic relationship of the Jewish people and socialism, and Sanders was the first competitive Jewish candidate for a major party nomination.)

Clinton won 80 percent of the black vote, which provided the competitive edge in states won, primary votes, and pledged delegates. To put it another way, if Clinton’s margin among blacks had been similar to her margin among whites or even Latinos, she could have won the nomination only with the super delegates, many of whom in that case might have decided to split their votes.

Virtually all black political leaders endorsed Clinton, but suppose Jesse Jackson, who Sanders endorsed in his 1988 presidential campaign, had reciprocated and campaigned with him. This might have made a difference and altered the course of the socialist project in America. As it was, Sanders was endorsed by a handful of black celebrities such as Spike Lee, Harry Belafonte, and Danny Glover.

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TABLE 3. Opinion on Sanders in the Context of the 2016 Campaign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you honestly assessed yourself, thinking in general terms, would you be comfortable or uncomfortable with a democratic socialist president?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable – 39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable – 57%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a negative or positive attitude toward socialism?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive – 32%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative – 57%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some concerns expressed about Bernie Sanders are that he describes himself as a democratic socialist. Does this bother you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bothers – 24%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not Bother – 75%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you enthusiastic or uncomfortable that Bernie Sanders will be the first democratic socialist president?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic/comfortable – 29%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncomfortable – 51%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Difference – 19%</td>
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</table>
Among Democrats Sanders’s campaign renewed interest in the socialist project. Since 2010 Gallup has asked respondents whether they have a more favorable opinion of socialism or capitalism. In 2016 58 percent of Democrats had a more favorable opinion of socialism than capitalism. More young people (18–29) are also more favorable toward socialism (51%) than capitalism (45%).

For the first time since ideological self-identification has been consistently measured (the 1970s), liberals constitute a majority of Democrats. When Obama took office 37 percent of Democrats identified as liberal; today the figure is 50 percent.27 Well-educated whites, especially women, are pushing the Democrats to the left, especially on the social issues of gender, race, and sexuality. Given the heterogenous nature of the American working class, its divisions along racial and immigrant lines and a tendency of many to embrace racist sentiments, there is little likelihood it will fulfill its historic role as the bearer of socialism. But in another contradiction to Marxist theory, perhaps the white cosmopolitan bourgeoisie might take its place. That is, it is possible well-educated whites might join with blacks and the well-educated young and become the base for the twenty-first-century socialist project.28

Meanwhile, prospects for the socialist project certainly have increased since the 1930s and perhaps to an extent since the Sanders campaign, but such a project has a long way to go to become a major factor in the Democratic Party. Of the 540 members of Congress, only two are declared socialists. Except for Sanders, none of the prospective 2020 presidential candidates are declared socialists, although many espouse socialist policies. The legacy of FDR’s socialist smuggling controls the left of the Democratic Party.

In 2015 a Harvard student asked the left-liberal progressive speaker of the House (since the 1980s liberals have preferred the label progressive, reflecting a rejection of this part of FDR’s legacy) whether in her second term as speaker she would disenthrall herself from capitalism, and pay attention to the party’s base on socialism and capitalism. In a televised town hall in New York the student cited a poll that 51 percent of Americans 18–20 no longer support capitalism and asked her whether Democrats could embrace this and offer a clear challenge to conservatives. A visibly shaken Pelosi responded, “I thank you for the question, but I am sorry we are capitalists and that is the way it is.”29

President Trump will likely attempt to use socialism as a bogey man in the 2020 election. In fact, the portraying of socialism as a failure—citing Cuba, Soviet Russia, Venezuela—was developed in the October 2018 report, The Opportunity Costs of Socialism, prepared by the president’s Council of Economic Advisors.30 In his 2019 State of the Union address the president directly attacked the socialist project, declaring, “Here in the United States, we are alarmed by new calls to adopt socialism in our country. Tonight, we must resolve that America will never be a socialist country.” The president and his advisors of course ignore the really existing social democratic states in Western Europe with canards about Cuba, Soviet Russia, and Venezuela.31 Whether this kind of propaganda will be effective in blunting the socialist project in the United States in the early twenty-first century is unclear, but for the future it is a question that calls for close observation and analysis.
NOTES
4. Ibid.
8. The 1996 General Social Survey is the only survey that directly probes black opinion on these kinds of socialist indicators.
11. Engels, “Selected Correspondence,” as quoted in Lipset and Marks, It Didn’t Happen Here, 25.
12. Ibid.
15. Socialist governments were elected in several cities—Milwaukee, Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Oklahoma City—in the early twentieth century, but Bruce Stave concludes: “Often coming to power as a consequence of voter reaction to corruption within major party administrations, fearing programs that would raise taxes and alienate business and the public, limited by city charters, and at loggerheads with hostile state legislatures, believing that a socialist municipality in a capitalist nation had little chance of success, the city socialists determined to be both ‘in the world and of it.’ They sought to win elections, stay in power, and work for reform within the existing framework of government and economy.” Socialism in the Cities (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975), 5.
16. I should like to thank my Howard colleague and longtime friend Richard Seltzer for providing me near comprehensive survey data on opinion on socialism in America from the 1930s to 2016.
17. Hofstadter, Age of Reform, 161.
18. Ibid.


25. The few polls conducted indicated Jews supported Clinton by a 2–1 margin, with most of Sanders’s support among Jews coming from younger voters. See Alex Kampas, “Bernie Is Surging. But Do Jews Feel the Bern?” *Jewish Daily Forward*, January 14, 2016.


28. It should be clear, however, that this increasing liberalism among well-educated whites in general, and on social issues, does not at this time necessarily translate into majority support for socialism or socialist programs such as full employment.

