Democratic socialism or social democracy?

The 2020 election cycle is just getting started, and one of the biggest issues in American politics is socialism. We shouldn’t be surprised. Our last recession was a throwback to the 1930s, and socialism is an ideological vestige of the same era.

A few Democratic politicians, such as presidential candidate Bernie Sanders and new member of Congress Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, characterize themselves as “democratic socialists.” Conservative media are only too happy to apply that label, believing it will repel voters. They underscore their point every chance they get by tying socialism to the nearly failed state of Venezuela.

Conservatives may be wrong about voters’ attitudes toward socialism. Much of what the self-proclaimed democratic socialists advocate is popular. Single-payer health insurance polls well, as does free college and a higher minimum wage. Sure, the devil’s in the details. For example, single-payer’s popularity drops when survey respondents are told they’d have to give up their private insurance.

What our “democratic socialists” aren’t calling for that. What they want, in effect, is for the U.S. to more closely emulate the Scandinavian countries. Government there is indeed more involved in the economy than in the U.S. Taxes are high and the government isn’t shy about imposing regulations, though it also provides extensive benefits and services. But most economic activity is conducted and controlled by private companies.

All industrialized countries have certain sectors that are socialized. In the U.K., the government owns the hospitals and employs the physicians. In the U.S., the government owns the roads. But when only a few sectors are government-owned, it’s hard to call the entire economy socialist.

What our “democratic socialists” are really advocating is European-style regulated capitalism. They’re talking about Sweden and Finland, not Cuba and Venezuela.

Interestingly, many conservative pundits agree. You see, living standards are higher in Scandinavia, with longer vacations, better health, more happiness and longer life expectancies. Productivity per worker is lower there, but productivity per hour worked is higher. It’s no wonder that conservative commentators want to claim the Scandinavian countries as capitalist economies. But they’re high-tax, high-regulation capitalist economies.

Which brings me back to nomenclature. Several definitions of democratic socialism are floating around social media, and they say in essence that democratic socialism isn’t socialism. But simply putting “democratic” in front of a word doesn’t transform it into something else. Democratic principles are principles. Democratic processes are processes. Ergo, democratic socialism is socialism.

That’s why I think progressive Democrats should say they advocate “social democracy.” The term introduces no inconsistency or confusion. It’s easy to say, and it’s accurate. For generations, many of the left-of-center European parties that built the system progressives so admire have called themselves Social Democrats.

Ocasio-Cortez should cast herself as a champion of social democracy, not democratic socialism. However, while I’m right on the political science, I could be wrong on the political strategy. A recent Gallup poll shows the American public has its own idea of what “socialism” means. In 1949, a third of respondents said it implied government ownership and control of production. But in 2018 the most frequent answer was that socialism implies “equal standing for everybody: equal in rights, equal in distribution.” And who could oppose that?

Andrew Brod is a senior research fellow in UNCG’s Center for Business and Economic Research.

However, these so-called democratic socialists aren’t actually advocating socialism. Socialism refers to an economy in which the government owns and controls the factors of production. The control may be enforced by a ruling elite, as in the former Soviet Union and modern Venezuela. Or it can be established by free and fair elections, in which case it truly is democratic socialism.

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