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Rush Builds A Revolution

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By Harold Meyerson
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According to a [Rasmussen poll](#) released last week, 37 percent of Americans under age 30 prefer capitalism, 33 percent prefer socialism and 30 percent are undecided. Among all Americans, 53 percent prefer capitalism, 20 percent prefer socialism and 27 percent are undecided.

How's that again?

If you comb the annals of Americans' ideological preferences, you won't find figures like these. At socialism's apogee, presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs got 6 percent of the vote in the 1912 election. After that, it was pretty much all downhill -- until last week, anyway.

Or consider this: In the first two decades of the 20th century, and again in the 1930s, there were substantial American socialist organizations that argued the case against capitalism. I recently came across some issues of a magazine that the League for Industrial Democracy, a group affiliated with the Socialist Party, published during the early '30s on the crises of capitalism and unemployment. Among its regular contributors were John Dewey and Reinhold Niebuhr. Today, America is home to no substantial socialist organizations, and virtually no public figures champion socialism's cause.

So where do these numbers come from? Rasmussen didn't provide any data that clarify causality, but I think it's safe to infer that the havoc that Wall Street has wreaked upon the world over the past year and its reliance on American taxpayers to bail it out haven't exactly helped capitalism's cause.

But there's more to these numbers. For one thing, they signal that the link between socialism and anti-Americanism has been weakened and, among the young, all but destroyed. The end of Soviet communism has meant that the United States no longer has a major adversary that professes to be socialist. The one remaining powerful Communist Party, China's, has opted for a capitalist economy. The violent threats to America today come from a branch of Islamic fundamentalists who wage war on all forms of modernity, socialism among them. And the actual existing socialists today are the social democrats who govern or are the chief opposition parties in Western Europe -- home to the nations with which we are most closely allied.

The Soviet Union's collapse is surely responsible for some of the variations by age group that turn up in Rasmussen's polling: Thirty-somethings, while not quite so socialistic as 20-somethings, remain decidedly cooler on capitalism than their elders. The Left Bank of the Seine doesn't quite convey the terror that Stalin's gulag once inspired.

Moreover, those Americans opting for socialism are doing so when socialists themselves aren't calling for, and don't believe in, the kind of revolutionary transformations -- the abolition of wage labor, say -- for which their forebears routinely campaigned in the days of Debs and the Depression. Today, the

world's socialist and social democratic parties basically champion a more social form of capitalism, with tighter regulations on capital, more power for labor and an expanded public sector to do what the private sector cannot (such as providing universal access to health care).

Which means there are real areas of overlap between European social democracy and American liberalism: The former has defined its Eden down to a form of social capitalism, while the latter, prompted by Wall Street's implosion, has upgraded its project to the creation of, well, a form of social capitalism. Doctrinal differences persist, but these overlaps certainly underpin Rasmussen's polling: While Republicans preferred capitalism to socialism 11 to 1, Democrats favored it by 39 percent to 30 percent.

The data on the young are particularly telling. Twenty-somethings are more open to socialism -- or social capitalism -- than 30-somethings not only because they never lived through the Soviet threat but because the economy, during the years in which deregulatory policy and Wall Street financialization were at their height, hasn't worked very well for them. Americans under 29 scored well to the left of the general public in [a recent survey](#) by the Center for American Progress, and voters under 30 backed Barack Obama by a 34-point margin in November, 66 percent to 32 percent.

The young may now disdain Wall Street -- but what do they know of socialism, past and present? Who even speaks of socialism in America today? The answer, of course, is the demagogic right. According to Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck and their ilk, Obama is taking America down the Socialist Road. As Benjamin Sarlin has noted on the Web site the [Daily Beast](#), the talkmeisters of the right have linked a doctrine that never commanded much support in America to a president whose approval rating hovers around 60 percent and much higher than that among the young.

Rush and his boys are doing what Gene Debs and his comrades never really could. In tandem with Wall Street, they are building socialism in America.

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