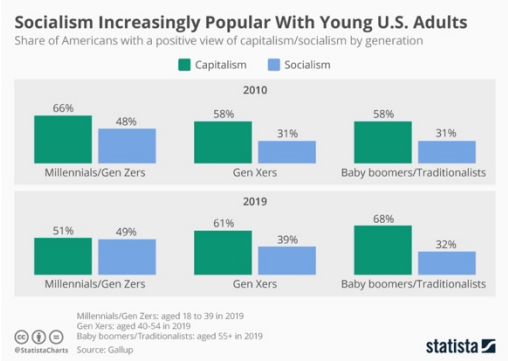
What's Next for the Democratic Party?

Sydney Schair

Anyone with knowledge of American politics knows that the term "socialism" and the name "Bernie Sanders" are inextricably intertwined. Through his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, Sanders elevated socialism to be worthy of national attention for the first time since the Cold War, and favorable discussions over this economic system (or, realistically, form of government) have been on the rise. According to a 2019 Gallup poll, only 2% of millennials and Gen Zers favor capitalism over socialism compared to 18% in 2010.



The Democratic Party has shifted more to the left recently, especially in the latter half of the 21st century. Compared to the party's ideology during the 2008 presidential election, when President Barack Obama was awarded the title, today's moderates, and even President Joe Biden, the 'moderate' candidate in the 2020 presidential election, are significantly more progressive. Vox Media supposes that this transition can be partially attributed to "Obama's accomplishments" while the remainder "reflects the influence Sanders and a resurgent left have had on the entire Democratic Party." Socialism is a movement that the Democratic Party is rapidly adopting, and the party's awareness, or lack of awareness, of this evolution has had a negligible impact on its advancement.

Despite the outcries that the mention of socialism instigates from moderate and conservative Americans, and even some progressives, Sanders' democratic socialism reflects the ideals of FDR (who did happen to win four presidential elections). Award-winning historian Doulas Brinkley told GBH News in an interview that with "FDR there's a little of that narcissistic kind of personality of grandiosity, wherever those words meet, that you see a little bit in Trump but that's about it. I mean FDR was about the people. He was a democratic socialist. His philosophy was closer to Bernie Sanders than, than even you know Hillary Clinton or and certainly of compared to Donald Trump." Whether they like it or not, many Americans are drawn to socialism when the term itself is excluded.

However, as Sanders has recently reached eighty-one years of age, and has confessed that it is "very, very unlikely" he will run in 2024. Americans, especially young adults, are beginning to wonder if socialism has a place in the country's future, and if so, who the socialist torch will be passed on to. With good reason, many have turned their attention towards Democratic Rep. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, affectionately deemed AOC by her supporters.

AOC, who has represented New York's 14th congressional district since 2019, has proclaimed herself to be a democratic socialist, volunteering for Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign and endorsing him in 2020. In an interview with Business Insider, AOC argues that "when millennials

talk about concepts like democratic socialism, we're not talking about these kinds of 'Red Scare' boogeyman. We're talking about countries and systems that already exist that have already been proven to be successful in the modern world." She has no problem calling out politicians with flawed views of socialism, as demonstrated by her retort to Republican Senator Marco Rubio.

Even supporters of Sanders can agree that his relationship with the African American demographic was less intimate than necessary to win the 2016 or 2020 presidential elections, but this is not the case for AOC. According to Vox Media, she has habitually advocated "for anti-racism, reparations, and police reform on her social media platforms and on the Hill, she has drawn comparisons to activists like Martin Luther King Jr. and politicians like Shirley Chisholm." AOC considers the progressive movement, which aligns with her views, to be a battle for "guaranteed health care, higher education, living wages, and labor rights" alongside an initiative "striving to recognize and repair the wounds of racial injustice, colonization, misogyny, and homophobia." Where Sanders failed, AOC is projected to succeed.

However, AOC has inspired hatred from the right to an extreme that Sanders has not. A super PAC by the name of "No Faces GOP" released a political ad attacking AOC during her 2019 congressional campaign in which an image of her face is set on fire and she is blamed for the "horror or socialism." Members of the Republican Party have even threatened AOC, as Republican Rep. Paul Gosar tweeted an anime cartoon in which he murders her with a sword, his actions portrayed as being heroic (despite the video resulting in him being the first legislator censured in 11 years and the 24th in U.S. history). But does she care? Not in the slightest. AOC has an individualized response for all of her haters, and some of them, such as her response to Ben Shapiro's invitation to speak on his show, are downright sassy.

And if AOC is too controversial, guess what? Her "squad" will be ready to step in. Democratic Representatives Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib won seats in the House alongside AOC in 2018, and the four of them are described as "progressive stars by NBC News. Recently, these women have been joined by Democratic Sen. Ed Markey and Democratic Representatives Marie Newman, Dan Lipinski, Jamaal Bowman, Mondaire Jones, Ritchie Torres, and Cori Bush.

Another intriguing socialist figure is Kshama Sawant, the longest-serving member of Seattle's city council and a speaker at many of Sanders' rallies. It is thanks to her that the national movement to raise the minimum wage to $15-an-hour; Sawant succeeded in attaining this goal within Seattle in 2017, and now, even Sanders and Biden support her initiative. In an interview with the Financial Times, she discusses how in her mission to raise taxes for big businesses, particularly Amazon, Sawant yearns to publicly debate Jeff Bezos, the monopoly's CEO (and the second wealthiest individual in the world).

AOC's dedication to the future of democratic socialism, and America, though, is what enchants her supporters. Her platform focuses primarily on Medicare for All, housing as a human

right, the Green New Deal, supporting K-12 public schools and tuition-free public universities, prison reform, police brutality, abolishing ICE, and aiding Puerto Rico. When fully considered, the majority of her stances are far from radical. Even Republicans advocate for prison reform; just ask CNN host Van Jones about the First Step Act. AOC implores Americans to recognize the ways in which socialism already manifests itself within this nation, denying the belief that capitalism is a staple of the world in an interview with PBS.

Although Sanders is Jewish, he's still old, white, and a man, traits that raise suspicion for many progressive voters. On the other hand, AOC is young, Hispanic, and a woman, representing the possibility of accurate representation for various marginalized communities. She has a fiery, untouchable persona that rivals her mentor's, and her reputation continues to expand; she currently has 12.6 million Twitter followers, the most out of any member of Congress, including Sanders, who has 12.3 million followers. While a victory for AOC in the 2024 presidential election is somewhat unlikely, as she continues to develop her brand, could AOC's career lead her to become both the first socialist and female president of America? It's more than possible.