

Socialism and the Young

Students discuss why DSA candidates perform well in their age cohort.

[Wall Street Journal](#), July 21, 2026



The Symbol of Socialism

Socialism isn't on the rise among young Americans; a feeling is, and socialism is the nearest available mold it fills. The Marxist commentator Thomas Sankara, who died in 1987, became a trend on TikTok with clips edited with trending songs, GIFs of his face in comment sections. Zohran Mamdani's "turn the volume up" attack on President

Trump in November 2025 gained millions of likes. It was cool, and it matched a feeling that young people grip onto more and more: socialism as a symbol.

Almost no one my age has studied Marx beyond a digestible short-form scroll. Generation Z is filled with people who feel wronged, and those who feel wronged gravitate toward the loudest thing opposed to whatever they sense wronged them. Mr. Trump is the wound; socialism is the loud opposition. Grievances about rent, healthcare and wages are real, yet the increasing socialist sentiment in young people stems from a largely aesthetic basis and attraction to abstract ideologies of socialism—a picturesque utopianism.

In a society that's defined by endless consumption of content, it is easy to absorb philosophies on a surface level, giving Gen Z performative labels to slap on. Young people can be socialists, and some truly are. But a symbol you can wear and can't define, can't argue with, can't see the flaws in is an aesthetic, not politics.

—Leo Herbold, *University of Connecticut, political science*

Real Progress Takes Time

Bandages can't fix broken bones, but for a generation raised on quick fixes, it shouldn't come as a surprise that socialism was promoted as a crutch for young Democratic voters

during the recent primary elections. Gen Z is the first generation to grow up in a digitized world in which instant gratification is the norm, so, naturally, why wouldn't young voters expect the same from modern political candidates?

Democratic socialism offers the instant gratification that Gen Z seeks, supplanting the opportunity to achieve upward mobility through hard work with the alternative of simply having a capitalist system to blame for any societal economic woes. On top of that, Gen Z reports loneliness at levels that surpass previous generations, which is exacerbated by an increasing reliance on social media to form connections. To combat this isolation epidemic, the Democratic Socialists of America positions the American meritocratic system as the antithesis of equality, effectively rallying young voters against a common enemy: those who have successfully climbed the ladder of socioeconomic mobility.

But democratic socialism neglects that true progress takes time. In light of the growing discontent that many young voters have expressed toward rampant political division, the DSA fails to recognize that its own polarized messaging will likely disenchant moderate voters come November. Though democratic socialist candidates gained traction in primaries this cycle, in the long run they will further fracture the Democratic Party.

—Kathleen Keeseey, *University of Colorado Boulder, finance*

We Were Taught This Way

There's a rise in young Americans embracing the democratic socialist agenda in recent years. While many point to the affordability crisis, widening wealth gap or other major financial downturns to explain this trend, the influence of higher education can't be overlooked. College has become increasingly liberal, and as such, those views have become more prevalent on campus, with protests by students expressing their dissatisfaction with America's current political and economic systems.

When universities emphasize our country's shortcomings, students focus on these problems and attribute them to the failures of capitalism. When this academic environment is combined with the real financial pressures that young Americans face, such as rising housing costs and student debt, students turn to the socialist agenda for a promising future. When they are faced with a choice between candidates endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America and those who aren't, it is reasonable to conclude that these experiences may influence which name they put a check next to.

—Talan Maury, *Georgetown University, government*

What Does 'Socialism' Mean?

Surveys from several sources, from the Cato Institute to Gallup, confirm that young Americans have become more comfortable with socialism. Notably, these polls didn't rigorously define what constitutes socialism—a parallel to Rand Paul's remark that many self-declared socialists can't agree on what the term means. Part of socialism's popularity with young Americans comes exactly from the vagueness of its definition.

Still, many young people sense that “socialism” acts as a label for enhanced social safety nets, nationalized healthcare and subsidized education. A steady decline in the wage-share of income, spurred on by the digital revolution, has made it more difficult for younger workers to compete. The last three years of rapid AI development threaten to accelerate this slide even further. Millions of young Americans face a credible risk of losing their jobs and livelihoods to AI in the near future. What else are we to do besides demand more robust social safety nets?

—Liam Scully, Wesleyan University, economics and mathematics

The Establishment Failure

Socialism is popular among young voters, but it's a symptom, not a cause. We've grown up through the 2008 financial crisis, stagnant wages, soaring student debt and housing costs that have outpaced income growth by decades. When the existing system fails to deliver, people look for alternatives. The Democratic Socialists of America are winning because they address material concerns that establishment Democrats have largely ignored.

Young voters aren't necessarily embracing socialist theory. Rather, many of us are supporting candidates who acknowledge that rent consumes 40% of income, that medical debt is the leading cause of bankruptcy, and that the minimum wage hasn't kept pace with inflation since 2009. What's being mistaken for a “rise in socialism” is actually the DSA's superior ground game. Their endorsed candidates win because they run lean, organized campaigns that talk directly to voters about concrete problems.

Meanwhile, establishment Democrats spend millions on digital ads that don't move anyone. The difference in electoral performance reflects campaign strategy, not ideology. But here's what should worry establishment politicians. Young people wouldn't be receptive to this messaging if the current system were working for us. We're not ideologically committed to socialism. We're desperate for someone, anyone, to take our economic anxiety seriously. If Democrats had done that, the DSA wouldn't have this opening.

—*Evan Fernando, Hamilton College, government and economics*