

# Democratic socialism, explained by a democratic socialist

It's not just New Deal liberalism.

By [Meagan Day](#) Aug 1, 2018, 12:50pm EDT



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a democratic socialist who won a New York primary race, with New York gubernatorial candidate Cynthia Nixon. Nixon has embraced the political label too. *Scott Heins/Getty Images*



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“They are not traditional socialists. There is no call for communal ownership of production,” [said](#) an MSNBC anchor while attempting to define “democratic socialism,” a term that has burst onto the political scene since the unexpected win of democratic socialist [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) in a New York primary for a House of Representatives seat.

“I am open to persuasion on this, but my instinct is that if what you mean by ‘democratic socialism’ is ‘stuff FDR proposed’ you might be better off using a more all-American reference point like the New Deal or FDR,” Vox senior correspondent Matt Yglesias [said](#).

“Democratic Socialists will not be covered [by the media] as the radicals that they are,” Glenn Beck [said](#) on his show. “They’ll be covered as ‘innovative, millennial-friendly upstarts with fresh ideas’ when they’re really diet-Communism.”

“It’s petrifying to me that this is being normalized,” [said](#) Meghan McCain on *The View*.

The phrase is indeed everywhere. In addition to Ocasio-Cortez, Sen. Bernie Sanders and now New York gubernatorial candidate Cynthia Nixon have claimed the label. Meanwhile, the Democratic Socialists of America ([DSA](#)), the country’s largest socialist group, is seeing its membership explode from 6,000 in summer 2016 to more than 45,000 today. And the media doesn’t quite know what to make of it all.

I’m a staff writer at the socialist magazine Jacobin and a member of DSA, and here’s the truth: In the long run, democratic socialists want to end capitalism. And we want to do that by pursuing a reform agenda today in an effort to revive a politics focused on class hierarchy and inequality in the United States. The eventual goal is to transform the world to promote everyone’s needs rather than to produce massive profits for a small handful of citizens.

### **Democratic socialists share goals with New Deal liberals. But they want to go further.**

Pooling society’s resources to meet people’s basic needs is a tenet of social democracy, one that’s been advocated domestically by much of the labor movement and many of its political supporters among New Deal and post-New Deal liberals. This is a vision we share. But we also want more than FDR did. A robust welfare state in an economy that’s still organized around capitalists’ profits can mitigate the worst inequalities for a while, but it’s at best a temporary truce between bosses and workers — and one that the former will look to scrap as soon as they can.

The mid-20th century in the United States featured many elements of social democracy, at least for the majority of white workers: Public education became readily available, housing was heavily subsidized, and ordinary workers took

home a greater share of income than ever before. But the rich moved quickly to throw all that out the window as soon as they could get away with it — starting in the **1970s**, when stagflation and the oil crisis presented pretexts for pro-capitalist policy that set the stage for a weakened welfare state under President Ronald Reagan.

Bosses and the politicians supporting them (from both major parties) attacked collective bargaining, tried to privatize anything that wasn't nailed to the floor (for instance by passing laws that began the process of privatizing public housing in the '70s), and steadily eroded the social safety net. As a result, a handful of bosses became wealthier and more powerful while wages stagnated and quality of life eroded for everyone else.

As long as a handful of elite capitalists get to call the shots in the economy and society, the playing field will be tilted in their favor. They'll always be the ones who come out on top.

Many observers see groups like DSA pushing for policies like Medicare-for-all and decide that we must actually be something like New Deal liberals who are simply confused about the meaning of socialism. That's not true. Our goal is not to rein in the excesses of capitalism for a few decades at a time — we want to end our society's subservience to the market.

Medicare-for-all is an instructive example. Winning single-payer health care in the US would be an enormous relief to the millions of Americans who, even with insurance, find themselves stymied by claims denials and crushed by medical debt. Many progressives and an increasing number of centrist liberals — hell, even a few **Trump voters** — want the private insurance industry to be replaced by a single comprehensive public insurance program, one we all pay into with our taxes to relieve everyone of financial stress in times of illness. We want that too.

But we also know that Medicare-for-all is not socialism. It would only nationalize insurance, not the whole health care system. Doctors would remain private employees, for example, though under some plans they would be required to restructure their businesses into nonprofit entities. Democratic socialists ultimately want something more like the British National Health Service (NHS), in which everyone pays taxes to fund not just insurance but doctors and hospitals and medicine as well. This would give us the opportunity to design a system that benefits every one of us, not a few pharmaceutical and hospital network executives.

## Medicare-for-all cannot be won with just a policy argument

So why are democratic socialists not demanding an NHS right now? Because we currently don't have the support to push for and win such an ambitious program. Social democratic reforms like Medicare-for-all are, in the eyes of DSA, part of the long, uneven process of building that support, and eventually overthrowing capitalism.

Of course, even socializing a whole industry like medicine wouldn't automatically lead to the socializing of others. But through the process of the campaign, democratic socialists want to build into the popular consciousness an awareness that the market is not capable of meeting society's needs. This sets us up for other fights, whether something defensive such as stopping school privatization or something proactive such as nationalizing energy companies.

To win something as massive as an American NHS or even Medicare-for-all, it isn't enough to just win a policy argument. Democratic socialists believe we need to build a mass movement that can pry health insurance provision out of the hands of health insurance companies and put it into the hands of the public. To marshal the kinds of forces that can achieve such policy victories, we need to get working Americans comfortable thinking about class in a broader sense.

Many proponents of Medicare-for-all aren't driven by any kind of ideology — they're simply sick of high deductibles and constant claims denial and ballooning medical debt, which is one of the [top causes of personal bankruptcy](#) in the US. But in fighting for Medicare-for-all, people will inevitably start asking basic questions like why corporations are allowed to get rich off of something that should be a basic human right. Medicare-for-all might not *be* socialism, but at its core, it's a demand to take something out of the market.

Democratic socialists also believe there are some reforms that empower and embolden the working class to fight battles in other arenas. For example, right now unions spend a huge chunk of their time negotiating benefits for their members. *Fighting* for Medicare-for-all can teach Americans the value of uniting over the working-class majority's interests. *Winning* Medicare-for-all would free up the labor movement to make more demands on employers, like [greater democratic control on the job](#).

And if health insurance were not yoked to employment, just imagine how much freer workers would be to demand safer working conditions and better pay.

Workers who are experiencing harassment or endangerment could press their bosses for concessions without fearing that losing their job automatically means becoming unable to afford life-sustaining prescription drugs, for example. This is why some democratic socialists refer to Medicare-for-all as a “strike fund”: It’s a huge transfer of money and power from the capitalist class to the working class, and will expand the opportunities for the latter to put up fights against corporate power down the line.

## **Big reforms can dramatically change the political conversation**

Today’s democratic socialists don’t see positive policy reforms as something we’ll stack up until one day, voilà!, we have socialism. As DSA member and New York state Senate candidate Julia Salazar told me in a recent [interview](#) for Jacobin, “There’s no question that we have to expand and comprehensively fund the social safety net, but if we do that without altering the more basic structures that disempower people and keep them in wage slavery, we’re never going to see long-term social change.”

That’s why when democratic socialists choose reforms to rally behind, we favor battles with the potential to transform ordinary people’s lives for the better *and* teach millions of people the value of uniting to fight the capitalist Goliaths currently in charge of our society.

Right now, we think demands for big reforms can dramatically change the political conversation, which means that socialist and robust progressive agendas — including those of the most progressive Democrats (though this topic is up for [debate among democratic socialists](#)) — will likely overlap for a while. Maybe they’ll diverge once some of these reforms are won and the political terrain starts to shift.

But until then, we’ll be in the trenches fighting for what Ocasio-Cortez called the “minimum elements necessary to lead a dignified American life” — and along the way, we’ll also be articulating a vision for society beyond capitalism, where each person’s life is truly theirs to live, not to spend toiling for a dime while the boss takes a dollar.

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