

# Socialism and American public opinion

David Walsh  
17 April 2009

A national telephone survey conducted in early April by Rasmussen Reports, the US polling company, discovered that only 53 percent of Americans believe capitalism to be superior to socialism. Twenty percent favor socialism and 27 percent are undecided.

Adults under 30, according to Rasmussen, were “essentially evenly divided: 37 percent prefer capitalism, 33 percent socialism, and 30 percent are undecided.”

These results lift the veil on a reality the US establishment feverishly seeks to conceal: the existence of a deeply-felt popular opposition to the existing economic system and social conditions.

The Rasmussen findings, under the ideological conditions that prevail in America, are a stunning refutation of the official manufactured public opinion. To the extent that socialism is understood as the opposite of capitalism, it is viewed favorably by substantial sections of the population.

There is widespread popular outrage at the bankers, the corporate CEOs and the rest of the financial aristocracy who have plundered the country for decades and now accept trillions of dollars in handouts. This is viewed as deeply unjust by millions of people whose jobs, pensions and health care benefits are under sustained attack, who have seen the value of their homes drop dramatically and who generally view the future with increasing pessimism and even alarm.

The mass anger toward Wall Street and the generalized disaffection with the existing system generates the strong desire for an alternative to the present intolerable conditions. That alternative, evidently, is identified in general terms with “socialism.”

Socialism is associated positively in many minds in America with a more humane, democratic and egalitarian policy, with a society in which social needs, and not the profit interests of the rich, are addressed.

The high level of popular support for such ideas, especially among the young, is particularly striking when one considers that for the past 60 years or so socialism has been relentlessly denounced in the US, or banned from public discourse altogether. Within the political establishment, including its liberal wing, to label someone a “socialist” has been the equivalent of formally cursing, shunning or excommunicating an individual.

In recent decades ruling circles were unanimous: the capitalist free market solved all problems and “un-American” socialism was a dead issue. Apparently not.

A vast chasm separates Establishment opinion and consensus from the thoughts and feelings of the working population. The average American sees and experiences nothing in the mainstream political arena or the daily media that would offer a favorable picture of socialism. And yet, according to the poll, 47 percent of the population, according to this survey, either favor or haven’t made up their minds about socialism.

In March Barack Obama told a group of top corporate directors, “I’ve always been a strong believer in the power of the free market. It has been and will remain the very engine of America’s progress—the source of a prosperity that has gone unmatched in human history.” When the economy “gets out of balance,” Obama argued, government has to intervene, “but the goals should always be to right the ship and let private enterprise do its magic.”

Millions of Americans think otherwise, but their views find no expression in the existing set-up. Every significant American politician, as well as many insignificant ones, is a bought and paid for stooge of powerful corporations and financial interests. We have, in effect, the Senator from Oil and Gas, the Governor from Finance, the Representative from Health Care or Defense. Social inequality has reached levels disastrous for the functioning of any society; the obscene

flaunting of wealth by the super-rich does not go unnoticed.

The powers that be imagine they have gotten away with their looting of society, colonial wars and other crimes because the rottenness of the trade unions, the so-called civil rights organizations and liberalism has meant no one speaks up for the needs and interests of the population. But the more the social contradictions are ignored or papered over, the more explosive they become.

This situation, in which popular sentiment and the entire political system are so obviously out of joint, is volatile and untenable. The US has been staggered in the past seven months by the economic breakdown. Objective developments, despite all the efforts of the establishment, are bringing about a violent adjustment in the relationship between social consciousness and social reality: socialism will emerge as a major presence in American political life. The poll reflects a process already under way.

After decades of a reactionary bombardment, most Americans are no doubt confused about socialism. If Rasmussen or any other firm, however, asked people whether they preferred a society in which all policy was geared to the enrichment of the wealthiest one percent (or one-tenth of one percent) of the population, or a society based on social equality ... what would such a poll show?

In a crisis, inevitably, basic social interests and sentiments find expression. The present breakdown of the capitalist order is objectively sorting the population out along class lines.

Despite all the efforts to brutalize American society and render the population callous and indifferent to the suffering and plight of others, the recent poll reveals that the broad masses of the people have an elemental socialistic orientation. They oppose injustice, they support social equality and democracy, their sympathies lie with the downtrodden.

The capitalist media believes in its own reality and its infinite ability to manipulate and shape public opinion. In fact, other processes are taking place, with ultimately revolutionary implications. Leon Trotsky offered a far more profound view of the changes in consciousness that occur in a time of crisis: "Scientific socialism is the conscious expression of the unconscious historical process; namely, the instinctive and elemental drive of

the proletariat to reconstruct society on communist beginnings. These organic tendencies in the psychology of workers spring to life with utmost rapidity today in the epoch of crises and wars."

Social development has an inexorable logic. At the very moment when popular sentiment is shifting to the left, against capitalism, the remnants of the liberal-left around the *Nation* magazine proclaim the virtual impossibility of "reimagining socialism," much less realizing it. These social elements, deeply conservative in their outlook and wedded to the economic status quo, will fiercely oppose the growth of a mass socialist movement in the US. That is the elemental instinct of *their* class, the privileged petty bourgeois.

The poll conducted by Rasmussen is cause for genuine optimism. For the same reason, while the poll's uncovering of socialist sympathies in the population has created a stir in ultra-right circles, it has gone largely unreported in the major media. If Rasmussen, run by a right-wing evangelical Christian, meant the poll as a wake-up call, the phone was promptly hung up.

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