

# Social Democracy Is 100% American

For some time we have feared that Republican politicians were losing their minds. Now it seems we must worry, as well, that Democratic politicians are losing their memories.

Appearing late last week on [MSNBC's Morning Joe](#), Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri insisted that Democratic presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont “is too liberal to gather enough votes in this country to become president.” Indeed, responding to the fact that candidate Sanders is not only drawing big, enthusiastic crowds to campaign events in Iowa and New Hampshire, but also pulling within 10 points of frontrunner and party favorite Hillary Clinton in certain state polls, McCaskill said: “It’s not unusual for someone who has an extreme message to have a following.”

*Extreme?* McCaskill’s remarks indicate that we may be in more trouble than we thought. For some time we have feared that Republican politicians were losing their minds. Now it seems we must worry, as well, that Democratic politicians are losing their memories.

Clearly, McCaskill’s attack — which, to me, smacked of red baiting — was intended as a dismissal of Bernie Sanders’s candidacy based on the fact that Sanders, who has repeatedly won elections in Vermont as an independent and then caucused with the Senate Democrats, is a self-described “democratic socialist” or “social democrat.” And of course, we all know that social democracy is not just unpopular in the United States, it is *un-American*.

*Well, think again.* Social democracy is 100 percent American. We may be latecomers to recognizing a universal right to health care (indeed, we are not quite there yet). But we were first in creating a universal right to public education, in endowing ourselves with ownership of national parks, and, for that matter, in conferring voting rights on males without property and abolishing religious tests for holding national office.



Thomas Paine by Laurent Dabos, National Portrait Gallery (Wikicommons)

But there’s even more to the story. It was the American Revolution’s patriot and pamphleteer, [Thomas Paine](#) — a hero today to folks left and right, including tea partiers — who launched the social-democratic tradition in the 1790s. In his pamphlets, [Rights of Man](#) and [Agrarian Justice](#), Paine outlined plans for combating poverty that would become what we today call [Social Security](#).

As Paine put it in the latter work, since God has provided the earth and the land upon it as a collective endowment for humanity, those who have come to possess the land as private property owe the *dispossessed* an annual rent for it. Specifically, Paine delineated a limited redistribution of income by way of a tax on landed wealth and property. The funds collected were to provide both grants for young people to get started in life and pensions for the elderly.



### Ladies Tailors Strike

*Think again.* The social-democratic tradition was nurtured by Americans both immigrant and native-born – by the so-called “[sewer socialist](#)” [German Americans](#) who helped to build the Midwest and, inspired by the likes of Eugene Debs and Victor Berger, radically improved urban life by winning battles for municipal ownership of public utilities. By the Jewish and Italian workers who toiled and suffered in the sweatshops of New York and Chicago but then, led by David Dubinsky and Sidney Hillman, created great labor unions such as the [International Ladies Garment Workers Union](#) and the [Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America](#). By the farmers and laborers who rallied to the grand encampments on the prairies organized by populists and socialists across the southwest to hear how, working together in alliances, they could break the grip of Wall Street and create a Cooperative Commonwealth. By African-Americans who came north in the Great Migration to build new lives for themselves and, led by figures such as the socialist, labor leader and civil rights activist [A. Philip Randolph](#), energized the civil rights movement in the 1930s.

*And think again.* Think about the greatest president of the 20th century, Franklin Roosevelt, whose grand, social-democratic New Deal initiatives – from the CCC, WPA and Rural Electrification Administration, to Social Security and the National Labor Relations Act — not only rescued the nation from the Great Depression, but also reduced inequality and poverty and helped ready the United States to win the second World War and become the strongest and most prosperous nation on earth.

### Fighting for the Four Freedoms

Moreover, those we celebrate as the Greatest Generation, the men and women who confronted the Great Depression and went on to defeat fascism, fought for the decidedly social-democratic [Four Freedoms – freedom of speech and religion, freedom from want and fear](#) – and the chance of realizing them at war’s end.

Polls conducted in 1943 showed that 94 percent of Americans endorsed old-age pensions; 84 percent, job insurance; 83 percent, universal national health insurance; and 79 percent, aid for students — leading FDR in his 1944 State of the Union message to propose a [Second Bill of Rights](#) that would guarantee those very things to all Americans. All of which would be blocked by a conservative coalition of pro-corporate Republicans and white supremacist southern Democrats. And yet, with the aid of the otherwise conservative American Legion, FDR did secure one of the greatest social-democratic programs in American history: the G.I. Bill that enabled 12,000,000 returning veterans to progressively transform themselves and the nation for the better.

Nor did that generation of veterans give up their social-democratic aspirations. On reaching middle age in the 1960s, they enacted civil rights, voting rights, Medicare and Medicaid; established protections for the environment, workers and consumers; *and* dramatically expanded educational opportunities, especially in public higher education.

We ourselves honor America's social-democratic history with two great monuments on the National Mall – not just the FDR Memorial, but also the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial. Yes, [King was a democratic socialist](#). Drawing on the New Deal experience, embracing the American tradition of Christian socialism and peaceful activism, and believing, like so many of his generation, that Americans could harness the powers of democratic government to enhance freedom and equality, he campaigned for both racial justice and the rights of working people and the poor.

Senator McCaskill's attack on Senator Sanders appears to have been launched on behalf of the Clinton campaign. Its rationale rests on the belief that, in the light of the past 40 years of conservative ascendancy and liberal retreat, her words were simple common sense: *Aren't we, as the talking heads tell us, a [center-right nation](#)?*

Well, no, we are emphatically not. And it is regrettable that by swallowing this myth, the present leadership of the Democratic Party, embodied in the Democratic National Committee has, in election after election, shrunk from some of the party's best traditions in order to keep up in the race for campaign cash, even to the extent of marginalizing and openly scorning what is described as its "left wing."

Indeed, when America's purpose and promise have been in jeopardy we acted radically, progressively, and, yes, as social democrats. Hillary Clinton herself seemed to recognize the power of that history and its legacy by [launching her new presidential campaign](#) at New York City's [Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island](#). Though she never did actually pronounce the words of FDR's Four Freedoms, her speech revealed some awareness of a reviving — dare we say it? — social-democratic spirit? Whether simply tactical or genuine on her part is an important question that remains to be answered.

Bernie Sanders may never appear at Four Freedoms Park. But he sounds like FDR, not simply because you can practically hear him saying of the one percent what FDR did — "I welcome their hatred" — but all the more because of what he wants to do: tax the rich, create a single-payer national health care system, make public higher education free to all qualified students,

create jobs by refurbishing the nation's public infrastructure, and address the environment and climate change.

But even more critically, like FDR he doesn't say he wants to fight for us. He seeks to encourage the fight in us: "It is up to us to launch the most heroic of all struggles: a political revolution." If that is "extreme," then Democrats like McCaskill are not just forgetting their history, but trying to suppress it.

That Sanders, given his background, is garnering huge crowds who shout his name with an enthusiasm reminiscent of the heyday of the People's Party in the 1890s, radiates a special glow. Americans may once again be remembering who they are and what they need to do to recapture a government now in thrall to the Money Power. And that ain't extreme. It's fundamentally American.



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