**Headline:** Socialism Has a PR Problem—One That Can Be Solved

**Teaser:** Even as openly socialist candidates are winning political power, the right is working hard to equate socialist governance with repressive regimes.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

New York’s second-largest city, Buffalo, has essentially elected a socialist mayor. [India Walton](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/23/nyregion/india-walton-buffalo-mayor-socialist.html), who calls herself [“very proud” to be a democratic socialist](https://www.wivb.com/news/local-news/buffalo/buffalo-mayor-elect-india-walton-is-proud-a-democratic-socialist-aoc-socialism-rich-dsa/), swept past incumbent mayor Byron Brown in Buffalo’s Democratic mayoral primary race on June 22. Walton’s victory is reminiscent of recent shocking election upsets where self-proclaimed socialists, particularly in the state of New York, like [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/26/nyregion/joseph-crowley-ocasio-cortez-democratic-primary.html) and [Jamaal Bowman](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/17/jamaal-bowman-wins-new-york-congressional-seat-progressives), have beaten establishment favorites. Because Buffalo residents have reliably chosen Democratic mayors for decades, Republicans [didn’t even bother putting up a candidate](https://buffalonews.com/news/local/government-and-politics/gop-candidate-for-buffalo-mayor-declines-nomination-challenges-filed-to-other-petitions/article_ec7cc04c-90b6-11eb-98b4-3fe100cf1f12.html), and Walton is expected to prevail against any write-in opponents in November’s general election.

Walton’s achievement is hugely significant and is yet another indication of the traction that socialist ideas have today in an increasingly unequal capitalist economy. With the backing of increasingly powerful left groups like the [Democratic Socialists of America](https://www.dsausa.org/) and the [Working Families Party](https://workingfamilies.org/), Walton will become the first socialist to hold mayoral office in a big city since [Frank Zeidler](https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS346) was elected in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1948 and served until 1960. After him, the highest-profile socialist to have been elected mayor was [Bernie Sanders](https://jacobinmag.com/2021/03/bernie-sanders-burlington-vermont-mayoral-election-open-socialist) in Burlington, Vermont, in the 1980s. Moreover, the combination of Walton’s ideology, race, gender, and youth (the 39-year-old [would be](https://inthesetimes.com/article/india-walton-mayor-buffalo-democratic-socialist-new-york) Buffalo’s first woman mayor and second Black mayor) makes her mayoral win even more significant than that of her socialist predecessors.

On the same day as Walton won in Buffalo, [New York City residents voted](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/06/23/early-nyc-mayoral-election-results-eric-adams-leads/5315099001/) on a large slate of candidates for mayor using ranked-choice voting for the first time. In a city that is considered a bastion of progressive politics, [not a single strong candidate](https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/04/nyc-mayor-2021-democratic-primaries-race-left-dsa-wfp) stood out as a progressive leader, let alone a socialist. [Eric Adams](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/new-york-mayor-election/2021/06/23/50de2de0-d43d-11eb-9f29-e9e6c9e843c6_story.html), a pro-police Democrat, emerged with a significant vote lead as the vote-counting process began. Just because socialists did not make enough headway in the nation’s largest and arguably most liberal city does not mean, as Washington Post columnist [Max Boot](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/21/new-yorks-mayoral-race-shows-progressives-are-out-touch-with-ordinary-democrats/) bloviated, that, “progressives are out of touch with ordinary Democrats.” It may just be a matter of time—and marketing.

Socialism has a PR problem. Social psychologist Romin Tafarodi in a deft exploration of the stigma attached to socialism [wrote in Psychology Today](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/knowing-ourselves/202106/why-socialism-is-stigmatized-in-america) that there is a deep skepticism of the ideology because, “Americans closely identify it with the failures of authoritarian socialist republics, past and present.” And, he explained, “Most Americans don’t like what (they think) it represents.”

Republicans have exploited this misunderstanding quite effectively, appealing to constituents of immigrant backgrounds, particularly from Latin America. The state of Florida is ground zero for such tactics, and Governor Ron DeSantis just [signed a bill into law](https://news.yahoo.com/ron-desantis-signs-civic-literacy-121900838.html) that would require his state’s education department to create a new civics curriculum that includes indoctrination against socialism. DeSantis said:

“We have a number of people in Florida, particularly southern Florida, who’ve escaped totalitarian regimes, who’ve escaped communist dictatorships to be able to come to America. We want all students to understand the difference: Why would somebody flee across shark-infested waters, say, leaving from Cuba to come to southern Florida? Why would somebody leave a place like Vietnam? Why would people leave these countries and risk their life to be able to come here? It’s important students understand that.”

[Senator Marco Rubio](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/05/28/rubio_scott_see_hispanics_as_key_to_gops_resurgence_145845.html) (R-FL), a Cuban American, has launched a similar line of attack, saying Latinos are key to the GOP’s political power and will respond to the party’s anti-socialism message because they, “know what life is like in another country.” Numerous [analysts](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/news-columns-blogs/fabiola-santiago/article246926947.html) claim that Joe Biden lost Florida in the 2020 presidential race because Donald Trump and other Republicans linked him to socialism, effectively invoking a new form of McCarthyism.

Since Republicans repeatedly invoke Latin America to demonize socialism, a fact-based international context is a useful counterpoint to right-wing propaganda. While conservatives may cite Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua as examples of authoritarian socialism, there are many more examples, historically and currently, of right-wing repressive regimes and military dictatorships serving neoliberal capitalism rather than socialism. And such regimes—[Chile](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/world/americas/chile-coup-cia-museum.html), [El Salvador](https://theintercept.com/empire-politician/biden-el-salvador-reagan-military-junta/), [Brazil](https://nacla.org/news/2014/4/1/remembering-brazils-military-coup-50-years-later), [Colombia](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/world/americas/colombia-cocaine-human-rights.html), [Venezuela](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/21/usa.venezuela), [Guatemala](https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/21/world/americas/an-apology-for-a-guatemalan-coup-57-years-later.html), [Honduras](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/07/crisis-of-honduras-democracy-has-roots-in-us-tacit-support-for-2009-coup), and [Argentina](https://psmag.com/social-justice/the-history-of-american-intervention-in-argentina)—have usually come to power with the help of the United States.

The trouble is that most Democratic Party politicians and liberal corporate media outlets feed into right-wing propaganda by refusing to acknowledge U.S.-backed right-wing repression in Latin America—perhaps because it undermines the myth of American commitment to democracy and human rights. After his recent meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, President Biden asked a [laughable rhetorical question](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/06/16/biden-putin-live-updates/?fbclid=IwAR3Lh4KoAHt5dKKWhuWW5RRw7OuiOdGp4k65SRi05igZwX4CIp_o7RQDinI): “How would it be if the United States were viewed by the rest of the world as interfering with the elections directly of other countries and everybody knew it?” The Washington Post and other major media outlets covering his remarks did not bother to illustrate the myriad ways in which the U.S. has indeed interfered in elections, most notably in Latin America, and usually done so to combat socialist efforts to nationalize industries.

Given the increasing Trumpian reliance on racism and white supremacy to expand its power, the Republican Party sees socialist leaders of color to be particularly tempting targets. Rep. Bowman, also unafraid of being openly socialist, [eloquently explained](https://twitter.com/JamaalBowmanNY/status/1328379665023692800?s=20), “We can’t talk about the attacks against ‘Socialism’ without talking about white backlash to demands for investment in communities of color.” GOP leaders have repeatedly targeted and attacked young socialists elected to office like Ocasio-Cortez, Bowman, [Rashida Tlaib](https://inthesetimes.com/article/rashida-tlaib-democratic-socialism-palestine-israel-michigan), [Cori Bush,](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/cori-bush-responds-to-the-mccloskeys-who-called-her-a-marxist-liberal-activist-at-the/article_3c0b8aa1-8077-5101-b9c1-c7807ded74ea.html) and other members of the so-called [Squad](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/aoc-squad-are-getting-some-company-here-s-who-joining-n1250958). The Republican answer to this high-profile group of socialists of color is “[Freedom Force](https://www.deseret.com/indepth/2020/12/29/22203109/republican-freedom-force-immigrants-socialism-democrats-squad-aoc)”—yes, really. While members of the Freedom Force don’t seem to have the charisma of the Squad, they are comprised—surprise, surprise—of young Republicans of Latin American descent claiming to fight against socialism.

The same day that Walton declared victory, [saying](https://news.yahoo.com/what-is-rightfully-ours-socialist-candidate-india-walton-upsets-incumbent-democratic-mayor-of-buffalo-174301969.html), “today is only the beginning,” a disturbing exposé in [the Intercept](https://theintercept.com/2021/06/22/socialists-counterterrorism-political-terrorists-navy-antifa/) revealed a Navy counterterrorism manual that equated socialism with Nazi ideology. Reporter Ken Klippenstein explained that, “a section of the training document subtitled ‘Study Questions’ includes the following: ‘Anarchists, socialists and neo-nazis represent which terrorist ideological category?’” The correct answer to that question is apparently “political terrorists.” In other words, Navy-trained counterterrorism experts are being told to consider democratically elected socialist lawmakers, city council members and mayors as “political terrorists.”

If Republicans are equating socialism with authoritarian repression, and centrist Democrats are refusing to challenge those claims, then socialists like Walton may face an uphill battle in convincing most Americans of the benefits of socialism. A day after her victory in Buffalo, conservatives predictably began demonizing Walton, with Fox News pronouncing her a “[defund-police supporter](https://www.foxnews.com/politics/socialist-defund-police-supporter-victory-buffalo)”—likely the first salvo of a larger barrage. But Walton, seemingly savvy to such attacks like many others of her generation, had precisely the right retort, [saying](https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/india-walton-socialist-mayor-buffalo-1185869/), “we’re perfectly fine with socialism for the rich… [but] when it comes to providing the resources that working families need to thrive, socialism becomes scary.”