

A rebranding of 'freedom'?

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According to recent Gallup polls, socialism is now more popular than capitalism among Democrats and young people, and support for "some form of socialism" among all Americans is at 43% (compared to 25% in 1942). Policies that went unmentioned or were declared out-of-bounds in elections four years ago—a federal jobs guarantee, single-payer health care, free college, massive tax hikes on the rich, and the Green New Deal—are commonplace in Democrats' 2020 campaigns.

However, in "Freedom Now," a new paper published by Alex Gourevitch and Corey Robin in *Polity's* May Symposium on the Challenges Facing Democrats, there is still no clear, unifying idea behind this political shift. "One has not heard anything on the order of Franklin Roosevelt's Commonwealth Club speech or Reagan's story of the free market," the authors write. If these policies are to have a chance of breaking through, they will need a grounding principle, or ideology name the enemy, organize the policies, orient the actions, state the destination, and provide the fuel for the movement.

Gourevitch and Robin propose that that idea is [freedom](#). "While the left once understood freedom as emancipation from the economy, the right spent the twentieth century neutralizing and appropriating the idea of freedom by reinventing the economy as the true site of freedom."

To reclaim freedom as a value of the left, the authors believe the first place to start is the unfreedom of the workplace. "In nearly every capitalist country, one of the leading elements of the legal definition of employment is subordination to the will of a superior." That can mean

that employees must urinate—or are forbidden to urinate. It can mean that they should be sexually appealing—or must not be sexually appealing. They may be told how to speak, what to say, whom to say it to, where to be, where to go, how to dress, when to eat, and what to read—all in the name of the job. "But isn't the worker free to leave a bad boss? Formally speaking, yes," the authors write. "But even if they are free to exit this workplace, they are not free to exit the workplace."

Reclaiming "freedom" names the problem that an increasing number of people face today: systemic unfreedom in the neoliberal economy. By confronting that unfreedom, the left can do more than identify, in a coherent and cohesive way, the myriad problems that individuals are currently facing. The authors find the seeds of that idea in Bernie Sanders's rhetoric about being "organizer in chief," and in proposals from the Warren and Sanders camps that would strengthen workers' right to strike and organize.

However, they note, "A real politics of freedom posits a belief in the capacity of people to revise the terms of their existence and a commitment to the institutions that make these collective revisions possible." In other words, freedom is best realized not through tending our own gardens but through disciplined commitment and collective struggle, in activities like mass strikes and party politics. "These democratic struggles are not simply expressions and experiences of freedom, though they are that. They are also the means to the freedoms people deserve."

More information: Alex Gourevitch et al, *Freedom Now*, *Polity* (2020). [DOI: 10.1086/708919](https://doi.org/10.1086/708919)

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