

## In Their Own Words: Behind Americans' Views of 'Socialism' and 'Capitalism'

*Socialism's critics say it weakens work ethic; those with positive views say it fosters equality*  
By Pew Research Center

For many Americans, “socialism” is a word that evokes a weakened work ethic, stifled innovation and excessive reliance on the government. For others, it represents a fairer, more generous society.

Critics of socialism point to Venezuela as an example of a country where it has failed. People with positive views of socialism cite different countries, such as Finland and Denmark, as places where it has succeeded.

Earlier this year, Pew Research Center found that 55% of Americans had a negative impression of “socialism,” while 42% expressed a positive view. About two-thirds (65%) said they had a positive view of “capitalism,” and a third viewed it negatively.

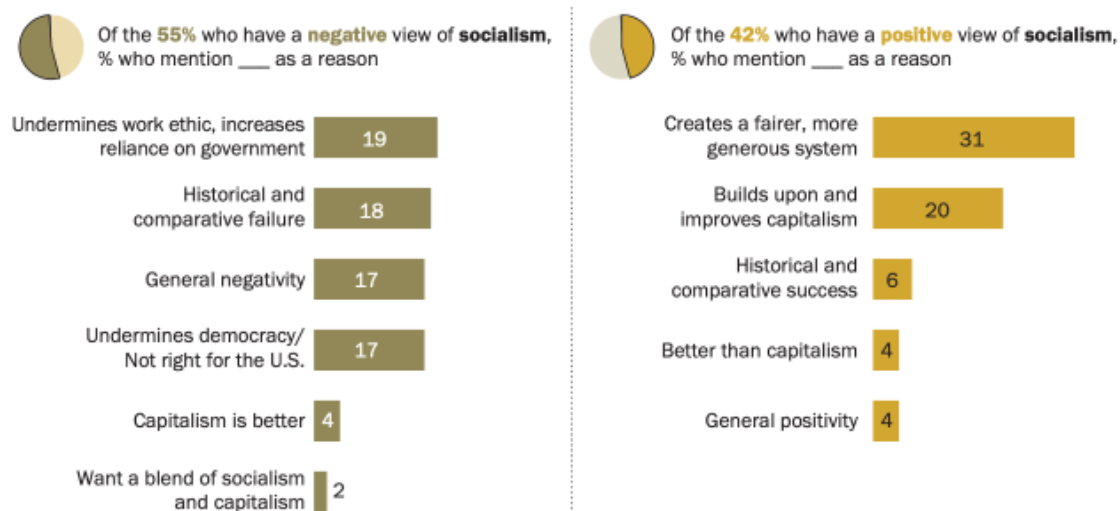
But what’s behind these opinions? To find out, we asked people to describe – in their own words – why they had positive or negative impressions of socialism and capitalism.

Some who view socialism negatively portray it as a serious threat to capitalism in the U.S., while others who view it positively say the opposite – that it builds upon and improves capitalism. And some who have a positive view of socialism express an explicit preference for a system that blends socialism and capitalism.

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### Some with negative views of ‘socialism’ say it undermines work ethic and has failed elsewhere; many with positive views say it will make society more equitable

Why do you have a positive/negative view of socialism? (%) [OPEN-END]



Notes: Based on those with a positive or negative view of socialism. Responses offered by at least 2% shown here. “Other” responses and no answer responses not shown. See topline for full set of responses. Total exceeds 100% because of multiple responses.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 29-May 13, 2019.

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The survey found that Republicans, in particular, viewed socialism and capitalism in zero-sum terms. A large majority of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (68%) had both a positive impression of capitalism and a negative view of socialism. However, Democrats and Democratic leaners were more likely to view both terms positively; a plurality (38%) had a positive impression of both socialism and capitalism.

While many of the open-ended impressions are revealing, a sizable share of people either did not share their views or articulated their reasons in simple terms, stating that socialism or capitalism is “good” or “bad,” or that one is better than the other. A quarter of those with a negative opinion of socialism – and 31% with a positive view – declined to offer a reason for their opinion.

But others mentioned history, the experiences of other nations, personal experiences or their own understandings of the terms in explaining the reasons behind their opinions of socialism and capitalism.

### **Socialism’s critics say it weakens work ethic; some point to Venezuela**

Among the majority of Americans who have a negative impression of socialism, no single reason stands out. About one-in-five (19%) say that socialism undercuts people’s initiative and work ethic, making people too reliant on the government for support. As a 53-year-old man put it: “I believe in individual freedoms and choice. Socialism kills incentives for people to innovate and climb the ladder of success.”

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#### **Why do you have a *negative* view of socialism?**

*“I believe in individual freedoms and choice. Socialism kills incentives for people to innovate and climb the ladder to success.” –Man, 53*

*“Socialism has been tried for centuries in various countries and it has never elevated the population. The latest example is Venezuela... The only economic system that offers the most opportunity for the most citizens is capitalism in a free society like the United States.” –Man, 79*

*“People need to learn to take care of themselves. The government has never been able to handle money and waste, so why give them more to waste.” –Woman, 54*

*“I am skeptical of its long-term sustainability with regard to budget considerations. I think private ownership of capital gives more flexibility than social ownership and is more clearly defined.” –Man, 23*

*“I don’t want to see the American dream die; I think everyone should aspire to become the best they can be and go as far as they can in life, and not just work to feed their neighbor. I do agree we need to do something to help keep our middle class from disappearing, but I’m just not sold on socialism.” –Woman, 73*

Notes: Examples of open-ended responses of those who say they have a negative view of socialism. Verbatim responses, edited only for spelling and grammar.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 29-May 13, 2019.

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About as many critics of socialism (18%) refer to how socialism has failed historically or in other countries, such as Venezuela or Russia. A comparable share of those with negative impressions of socialism (17%) say it is not consistent with democracy in the United States or is simply not right for the U.S.

### **Many with positive views of socialism say it fosters equality**

About four-in-ten Americans (42%) have positive views of socialism. Among this group, the most frequently cited reason is that it will result in fairer, more generous society (31% say this). This includes 10% who specifically express a belief that it is important for the government to take care of its citizens or for fellow citizens to care for each other.

A smaller share of Americans who have a positive view of socialism say it would build upon and improve capitalism (20%). Some in this group say the U.S. already has socialism, in the form of government programs. Others specifically say they prefer a blend of socialism and capitalism. “A blend can ensure a thriving productive society for all,” said a 42-year-old woman.

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#### **Why do you have a *positive view* of socialism?**

*“Socialism is all about giving the worker a voice and that is where I think America has been lacking. Income inequality is rising and boosting the middle class is the best way to reverse that.” –Man, 22*

*“I believe a healthy society has a good blend of capitalism and socialism. We have socialized education and libraries.... A blend can ensure a thriving productive society for all.” –Woman, 42*

*“Capitalism tends to lead to the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. This is ultimately self-destructive and unsustainable. Socialism is not without its flaws, but at least its stated goal is to provide for everyone who contributes.” –Man, 35*

*“I believe our society is better off in the long run if we use our resources to strengthen our social networks. If people are secure when it comes to income, housing, health care, employment, food, transportation and education they will be less stressed and can then contribute in a much more positive manner towards the greater society.” –Woman, 63*

*“I grew up in a democratic socialist country and saw how quality of life is enhanced through government providing essential services like stipends for children, free secondary and college education, universal health care and retirement pensions.” –Man, 47*

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Just 2% of those who have a positive view of socialism explicitly mention the phrase “democratic socialism” as the reason.

While some who express a negative view of socialism link it with countries like Venezuela, some of those with a positive view point to different countries – such as Denmark or Finland – as models. Among those with a positive impression, 6% say it has been a historical or comparative success, with most of these people citing how it has worked in European countries.

### ‘Capitalism’ viewed positively by about two-thirds of Americans

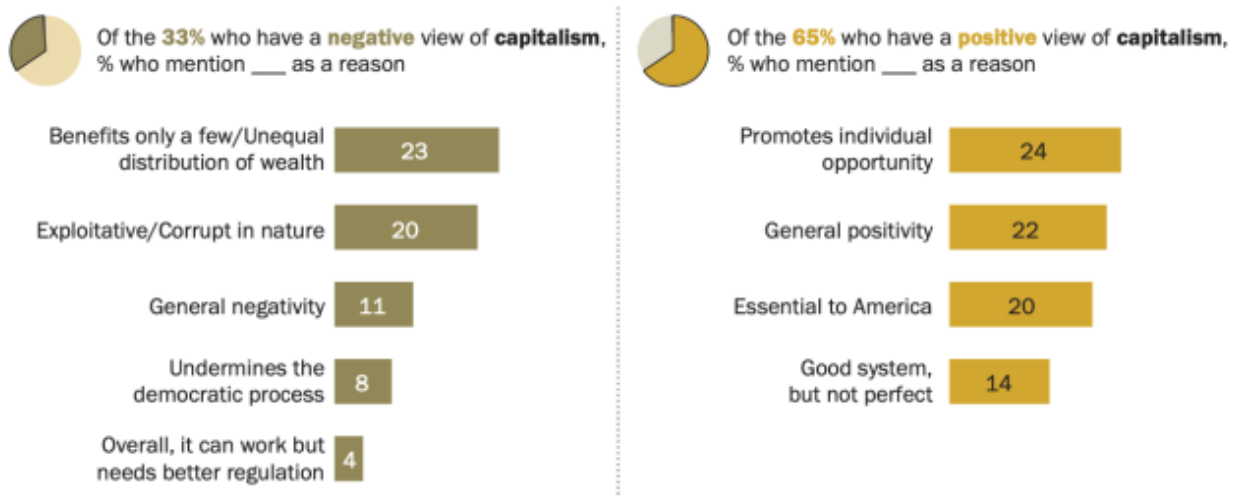
Among the 65% with a positive view of capitalism, many give reasons that contrast with criticisms of socialism. For example, while many who hold a negative view of socialism say it undermines initiative and makes people too dependent on government, nearly a quarter of those with a positive view of capitalism say it promotes individual opportunity (24% say this).

And while those with a positive view of socialism say it could bring increased equality, a common theme among critics of capitalism is that it has led to unequal distribution of wealth in this country.

Nearly a quarter of Americans who have a positive view of capitalism (24%) say they hold their views because the system provides opportunity for individual financial growth. A similar share (22%) expresses general positivity towards capitalism, saying that the system works.

### Those who are positive about ‘capitalism’ say it fuels prosperity and is linked to the nation’s success; many with negative opinions link it with inequality and corruption

Why do you have a positive/negative view of capitalism? (%) [OPEN-END]



Notes: Based on those with a positive or negative view of capitalism. Responses offered by at least 2% shown here. “Other” responses and no answer responses not shown. See topline for full set of responses. Total exceeds 100% because of multiple responses.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 29-May-13, 2019.

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One-in-five adults with positive views of capitalism associate the system with the foundation of America: They mention that capitalism has advanced America's economic strength, that America was established under the idea of capitalism, or that capitalism is essential to maintaining freedom in the country.

Another 14% say that although they view capitalism positively overall, the system is not perfect. This includes 5% who say capitalism has caused economic inequality and corruption and 4% who express a desire to see more regulation or a mixed system with socialism.

"Capitalism is the worst way to set up a society, except for all the other ways," said a 44-year-old man. "Free markets allow for more innovative solutions and for more people to succeed."

When those who hold negative views of capitalism are asked why they hold this view, about a quarter (23%) say that capitalism creates an unfair economic structure, mentioning that the system only benefits a small number of people or that wealth in this country is distributed poorly.

A similar share (20%) says that capitalism has an exploitative and corrupt nature, often hurting either people or the environment.

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### **Why do you have a *positive view* of capitalism?**

*"It gives people freedom to profit from their own labor.... It has risen more people out of poverty and gives people the opportunity to change their social standing with hard work and ingenuity." –Woman, 38*

*"Capitalism, as a way of ordering economic activity, has improved the lives of more people in human history than any other." –Man, 35*

*"It is what this country was founded on, and I don't think we need to completely move away from it in every aspect of the economy." –Woman, 31*

*"Capitalism is the worst way to set up a society, except for all of the other ways. Free markets allow for more innovative solutions and for more people to succeed." –Man, 44*

*"Capitalism in America has done more to raise people out of poverty than any other economic system. Capitalism encourages innovation, invention, and growth." –Man, 66*

*"I think it can give people a chance to move up in society by [giving them] opportunity to good education and earn a decent salary. Unfortunately not all people can benefit fully in the so call[ed] American dream." –Woman, 82*

Notes: Examples of open-ended responses of those who say they have a positive view of capitalism. Verbatim responses, edited only for spelling and grammar.

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A smaller share of Americans who have negative views of capitalism (8%) mention that corporations and wealthy people undermine the democratic process by having too much power in political matters. And 4% of those with a negative view say that capitalism can work, but to do so it needs better oversight and regulation.

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### **Why do you have a *negative view* of capitalism?**

*“Capitalism tends to favor the few at the expense of many and leads to the viewpoint that poor people are lazy. Not everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” –Woman, 45*

*“Capitalism is a source of evil in the world, which has led to the destruction of the environment and exploitation on a global scale.” –Woman, 23*

*“Wealthy people spend their money influencing politicians, tilting the scales of capitalism in their favor. Wealth distribution has become way out of whack. Unchecked capitalism has created a wealth aristocracy.” –Man, 64*

*“Money seems so important to some people that they have forgotten their manners and how to follow the rule of law.” –Woman, 52*

*“Capitalism is a sound and beneficial system. Now it does not have the limits needed to avoid its inevitable negative side, such as income and wealth inequality, too many benefits for the rich and a lack of an adequate safety net.” –Man, 69*

Notes: Examples of open-ended responses of those who say they have a negative view of capitalism. Verbatim responses, edited only for spelling and grammar.  
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 29-May 13, 2019.

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## **Methodology**

### **The American Trends Panel survey methodology**

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Ipsos.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted April 29-May 13, 2019. A total of 10,170 panelists responded out of 13,476 who were sampled, for a response rate of 75%. This does not include eight panelists who were removed from the data due to extremely high rates of refusal or straightlining. The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 3.4%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged onto the survey and completed at least one item is 1%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 10,170 respondents is plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of which 9,942 agreed to participate.

In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample (ABS) of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. For a random half-sample of invitations, households without internet access were instructed to return a postcard. These households were contacted by telephone and sent a tablet if they agreed to participate. A total of 9,396 were invited to join the panel, and 8,778 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. Of the 18,720 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 13,493 remained active panelists and continued to receive survey invitations at the time this survey was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover somewhere between the low 90% to 98% of the population.

## **Weighting**

The ATP data were weighted in a multistep process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 and 2017 some respondents were subsampled for invitation to the panel. The next step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on the dimensions listed in the accompanying table.

Sampling errors and statistical-significance tests take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the American Trends Panel's Hispanic sample is predominantly U.S. born and English speaking.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

The unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.