

Roth: Solar and its erosion of socialism

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Solar and its erosion of socialism

Since long before the Affordable Care Act, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and Social Security, Americans have relied upon socialism to safeguard their lives, provide vital services like water, electricity and infrastructure and to connect one another in a seemingly unbreakable co-dependence. The term and concept of socialism can be a politically charged (often negative) term in today's culture, but the reality is it's been the American way of life, in many ways, for many years.

But the greatest threat, or opportunity depending on your point of view, to disrupt some aspects of socialized American life is not whether Speaker Paul Ryan's past efforts to privatize portions of Social Security have a new life or whether the incoming president will repeal "Obamacare," it's whether fast-paced solar energy technologies may give Americans the chance to "live free" so-to-speak, or at least more free in the energy future.

About five years ago, to a national energy audience, I once heard the late Aubrey McClendon state "we have more energy hitting the surface of the Earth every day from the sun than this planet may ever need, we simply don't know yet how to harness and use it."

He of course was right and the last five years have seen incredible growth in human ability to harness and use solar energy. And it's about to disrupt some socialized ways of life, for the better.

Imagine if you will, you drive to and from work in your solar-powered car, park in your home's garage with solar-technology shingles repowering it and your home, with the help of battery technology that has captured the sun for 24/7 benefit and value to your family. And what are the effects to our socialized systems? Well, the jury is still out on this question but it's fair to believe that change is coming and that's a good thing. Yet some of the change won't be easy as it will involve recalculating and perhaps redesigning cost structures for things like the socialized electric grid and America's road systems.

Imagine two case studies:

- More Americans can rely upon a solar-powered home and live free of the local utility. If that trend moves quicker than utilities can divest from older, expensive debt like coal plants and built-out transmission and

distribution grids, will the non-solar customers need to pay more for their older forms of socialized electricity? And if that's the case, then the cost-competitiveness of stand-alone solar energy, compared to escalating utility costs, creates price signals that will motivate even more customers to switch to their own solar systems and hasten the cost increase in the incumbent utility rates.

- As more Americans drive electric-powered cars right past gas stations without the need to fuel up, what happens to the funding of local roads and bridges that rely upon gas and diesel fuel tax collections to pay, in part, for the roadway system?

More cars may be relying upon their own energy generation, while roads receive less funding as less gasoline and diesel is consumed. And although Americans also pay for roads through public bonds, property taxes and general revenue, some may worry about the reduction of gas taxes into that funding pie.

Early "societal cost analyses" actually suggest that electric-powered cars are cheaper to society, on an all-in basis, because of reduced costs to health and environment compared to combustion engines. But the trend will undoubtedly impact socialized road funding as we know it today and will be something future public policy will need to adjust toward.

It's rich irony to realize that the sun, something all humans on Earth have access to in common, may be the new way that we all live more separate and independent lives from each other.

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