

Birth of a Movement Party: An Interpretive Sociology of U.S. Democratic Socialism,

2015-2025

by

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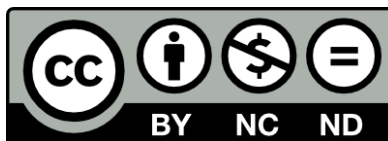
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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

Title: Birth of a Movement Party: An Interpretive Sociology of U.S. Democratic Socialism, 2015-2025

This dissertation tries to give a sociological answer to an urgent political question: How can democratic decline be reversed? It does so by means of a comparative and historical analysis of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a left-wing political organization in the United States that has grown rapidly since 2015. I argue that DSA is exceptional both politically and organizationally, when compared to its left-populist peers and recent U.S. social movements. I interpret DSA as a case of a *movement party*: a partisan organization that actively seeks to build contentious, extra-institutional movements while also contesting for power in conventional political institutions. In the first and second chapters, I discuss my case, method, and relevant literature. In the third chapter, I review the general sociological literature on socialism since 2012. I find that this work has generally neglected socialism as a contemporary political movement around the world and in the United States. In the fourth chapter, I shift attention back to DSA. I present a narrative interpreting the organization's evolution since 2015, balancing both political and organizational issues. Throughout, I compare DSA's development to that of other left parties internationally and historically, including those situated in the communist and social-democratic traditions.

This dissertation includes previously-published material.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Roxanne and Steve, who have always been there for me; to
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION: STUDENTS, WORKERS, VOTERS, SOCIALISTS	13
A.	DSA as movement party: Two cases	18
a.	Democratic socialists and the undergraduate student worker movement, 2020-2025	18
b.	Democratic socialists and the New York City electoral project, 2017-2025	31
II.	CLASS, PARTY, DEMOCRACY: A REVIEW AND ARGUMENT	65
A.	For a materialist political sociology	66
B.	Democratic decline and working-class politics	79
C.	Parties and partisans	99
D.	Party formation in the twentieth century: A sketch	115
E.	Notes on data, methods, and standpoint	127
F.	Looking ahead	131
III.	SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIALISM, PAST AND PRESENT	133
A.	Introduction	134
a.	A note on terms	136
B.	Why engage socialism today?	140
a.	Sociology and socialism in historical perspective	141
b.	The contemporary relevance of socialism	146
C.	The sociology of socialism since Wright	151
a.	Data and methods	153
b.	Books and articles	156
c.	Textbooks	166
d.	ASA addresses	168

e. Discussion	169
D. Explaining sociological disinterest	175
E. For a political sociology of socialism	182
F. Conclusion	188
G. Coda: For a class-struggle sociology	189
IV. U.S. DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM FROM SANDERS TO MAMDANI	196
A. Prologue: Meeting a red-diaper baby	197
B. Introduction	199
C. From Sanders to Mamdani: An interpretive narrative	212
a. Legacies and circumstances: Before Bernie	212
b. The Sanders campaign	221
c. Stirrings in DSA	233
d. Rivals	251
e. November and after	260
f. Into the new decade	269
APPENDIX A: REVIVING THE MASS ORGANIZATION	
FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS? (M.A. THESIS)	273
A. Introduction	274
B. The decline of mass-member organizations in civic and political life	277
a. From membership to management: The thinning of mass civic organizations	279
b. Weapons of the working class: The mass party	283
C. Data and methods	288
a. Case selection	291
D. Empirical findings and discussion: The meaning	

of membership in a DSA chapter	294
i. The participation fork: Paper and activist-cadre	295
ii. “What are we not providing?": Explaining the participation fork	298
iii. Effective but non-intensive membership	307
E. Conclusion: From management to membership?	311
APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL FOR CHAPTER III	313
REFERENCES AND INTERVIEWS CITED	323

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1: Distribution of abstract and jacket copy keywords across mainstream journal articles and books, 2013-2025. (p. 157).

Fig. 2: Distribution of books and mainstream journal articles by U.S. or non-U.S. content focus, 2013-2025. (p. 158)

Fig. 3: Distribution of books and mainstream journal articles by time period focus, 2013-2025. (p. 159)

Fig. 4: Publication rates of articles on socialism by journal, 2013-2025 (as a percentage of all articles published). (p. 165)

Fig. 5: Portland DSA membership trends, 2017-2020. (p. 297)

Fig. 6: Portland DSA membership growth rates by month, 2017-2020. (p. 301)

“A good enough answer to an important question... is of more value than a definite answer to a trivial question.” — Theda Skocpol¹

¹ Annual Reviews, 2019, “A Conversation with Theda Skocpol,” 58:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUZrOV85gk0>.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: STUDENTS, WORKERS, VOTERS, SOCIALISTS

“...modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.” — E.E. Schattschneider²

“We must conclude that the socialist movement is not bound to bourgeois democracy but that, on the contrary, the fate of democracy is bound up with the socialist movement.” — Rosa Luxemburg³

Looking back on the year 2025, future historians of the American left may note two events and study the connection between them. The first was a mostly local story, though it took place at an important state institution, and word of it spread quickly through a close-knit network of activists around the country. The second was widely noticed, becoming an event of national and even international significance. In April, some 3,000 undergraduate student workers at the University of Oregon carried out a contentious 10-day strike to win a union contract, the first for undergraduate workers at a large public university anywhere in the U.S. (Berka 2025). Two months later, on the other side of the country, 33-year old New York state assemblyman Zohran Mamdani won a shocking upset victory in the contest for the Democratic Party nomination for the New York City mayoralty. Mamdani triumphed over a powerful establishment candidate, Andrew Cuomo, by promising working-class voters a city they could actually afford to live in. The victory was widely seen as a political earthquake with implications

² Schattschneider (1942:1).

³ Luxemburg (2008:88).

far beyond New York City. An article in *New York Magazine* after election day declared that “Zohran Mamdani just remade American politics” (Barkan 2025b).

Both events, the strike of student workers and the victory of Mamdani, were the fruit of years of effort. Mamdani began his first campaign for state assembly in 2019, and the campaign to organize student workers began in 2021. Each involved long processes of organization-building and trial and error. Both the strike and Mamdani’s campaign took place in a repressive political environment dominated by billionaires and bosses. The student workers faced down riot police called onto campus to break up a sit-in, while Mamdani’s opponents burned tens of millions to blanket the airwaves with negative advertisements in the final stretch of the race. Each campaign defied the authoritarian turn of national politics under the second Trump administration, which has sought to crush and intimidate student protestors, public sector workers, and left-wing candidates like Mamdani. They occurred in an international context where liberal democratic politics is in decline, while authoritarian populism is ascendant (Hall 1985; González 2024).

But the Mamdani campaign and the student worker strike had more in common than this. Their leaders were motivated by the same set of political commitments and the same long-term goal: to truly democratize American institutions, from the state to the economy. Both sets of leaders had deep experience in the contentious politics of social movements, including not only the labor movement but also, from fall 2023, the movement in solidarity with Palestine. And both Mamdani and his comrades, and the

young leaders of the student workers' union, called themselves the same thing: democratic socialists. Indeed, both campaigns were initiated and led by members of the same organization: the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).⁴ DSA is today the largest socialist organization in the United States, with 100,000 members, over 200 elected officials, and a political program aimed at winning “a true democracy where working people have control over their own lives, their government, and the economy” (DSA 2024).⁵ DSA officially describes itself as a “political and activist organization, not a party,” but—as I will argue—there are good reasons to analyze it in terms of *partisan*, not merely organizational, theory.⁶

Understanding this tangle of connections—of shared ideological conviction; political commitment sustained over years; a vision of politics that combines institutional and contentious struggle; an orientation to articulating politics as a conflict of classes; and common membership in a nationwide political organization—is, I believe, key to answering some crucial questions about the future of democracy. What kind of political project is capable of defending democracy against the rise of authoritarian populism? How can democratic politics be rooted firmly in the working

⁴ A note on terminology. Members of the Democratic Socialists of America almost always refer to the organization as simply “DSA,” without the definite article “the,” though they do typically retain the article when referring to the full, un-abbreviated name of the organization. This usage long predates the organization’s 2015-2016 revival. Curiously, however, when the organization is discussed by non-DSA members or in the mainstream press, it is usually referred to as “the DSA.” This seems to be house style for the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *CNN*. See, e.g., Mays, Rubinstein, and Shapiro (2025) in the *Times*—though a November *Times* piece on NYC-DSA appears to have abandoned the definite article (Oreskes 2025). I follow socialist practice and omit the article. I also follow DSA usage by writing the acronym without punctuation.

⁵ For DSA’s 100,000-member milestone, see DSA NPC (2026).

⁶ This statement appears on the front page of DSA’s website, at <https://www.dsausa.org/>.

class? Is the political party as a form of organization in terminal decline, or can it be reinvented for the twenty-first century? This dissertation engages these questions through the lens of DSA.

My central argument is that the crisis of contemporary democracy cannot be resolved except through the combination of two elements: *a participatory and democratic political organization*, and *class-rooted politics*. DSA, by combining a working-class program with a democratic, membership-based form of organization, overcomes some major weaknesses of the American left and makes possible—though by no means inevitable—a progressive re-foundation of democratic politics in the United States. I treat DSA as a case of a *movement party* (Della Porta et al. 2017): that is, a partisan organization that actively seeks to build contentious, extra-institutional movements at the same time as it contests for power in conventional political institutions. Since 2016, DSA has succeeded in building an organization which intervenes regularly and successfully in both contentious social movements and elections. But it has been strikingly neglected by all sides of the debate on democracy.⁷

My research builds upon several traditions of scholarship, including political sociology, social movement theory, political science, and Marxist theory. From Marxism, I take the insights that the working class is the necessary core of movements for defending and deepening democracy (Therborn 2020); that democracy in politics is

⁷ For example, in a recent symposium on Lee Drutman's case for multipartyism, DSA is mentioned just once, while the Working Families Party (WFP) receives extensive treatment (Drutman 2024).

fundamentally constrained and threatened as long as democracy in the economy remains unrealized (Miliband and Liebman 1985); and that the ultimate aim of democratic politics must therefore be a form of democratic socialism (Poulantzas 1978; Adler 2019). From political science and political sociology, I take the insights that political parties are the key organizational form by which democracy has been achieved and pro-democratic constituencies mobilized (Schattschneider 1942; De Leon et al. 2015); that party organizations, social movement organizations, and civil society more broadly have become “hollowed” and incapable of effectively defending or deepening democracy (Mair 2013; Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024); and that the key to renewing both the party-form and civil society lies in the organization of participatory mass parties (Kuo 2025). My work also builds on a small sociological literature focused on DSA and the socialist movement (Lowery 2020; Robinson 2022), as well as a large historical literature focused on left-wing political parties of the past and present, both in the U.S. and abroad (e.g. Isserman 2024; Dorrien 2021; Eley 2002; Sassoon 2014).

To these literatures I hope to contribute three things. First, an argument for the continuing relevance of socialist politics as both object and normative framework for sociology. Second, a broad descriptive account and interpretation of DSA’s political and organizational development since 2016. And third, a comparative analysis that situates U.S. democratic socialism in relation to some other important movement-party projects, both in the United States and around the world. Before turning to my literature review and outlining the method and structure of the dissertation, however, I return to the two

movements discussed above. First, I consider the part played by DSA's youth wing in the movement to organize undergraduate student workers at colleges and universities. Second, I examine the crucial role of DSA in the Mamdani campaign. Together these vignettes highlight an important social-political mechanism that I see as central to DSA's distinctiveness in the landscape of American politics today: namely, its capacity for bridging the fields of social movements and electoral politics by means of a membership-based party organization. It is, to use a provisional shorthand, a *movement party*.⁸

DSA as movement party: Two cases

Democratic socialists and the undergraduate student worker movement, 2020-2025

The strike of student workers at the University of Oregon (UO) introduced above was not an isolated event. It was, rather, one major episode in a broader social movement to organize undergraduate student workers at college and university campuses in the U.S. (Blinder 2023).⁹ Undergraduate workers labor in dorms, dining halls, libraries, and research labs on many campuses, often alongside non-student blue-collar staff or

⁸ An excellent recent book on DSA, published after this dissertation was drafted, similarly analyzes the organization as a case of a movement party (Holt 2025). The author concentrates on the participation of the New York City DSA chapter with the climate movement. By contrast with Holt, my usage stresses more the *class* aspect of movement-party dynamics, and the relation of this concept to the classical Marxist notion of party-class "merger" (Lih 2008). On Holt, see my forthcoming review in *Mobilization*, as well as Duhalde (2026). For a discussion of the movement party and merger literatures, see chapter 2 below.

⁹ While figures are now available for the number of undergraduate student workers organized in unions (National Center 2024), I am not aware of any data on the total number of undergraduate student workers employed at U.S. universities. I am currently developing a research project to estimate the size of this population, as part of a larger project focused on the undergraduate student worker movement.

graduate student workers. Their employment in some important operational and academic roles—as resident assistants in dorms, for example, or as tutors for student athletes—gives student workers a degree of leverage over university administrators greater than that available to ordinary student activists.

Until the 2020s, student workers faced legal and political barriers to organization. In the private sector, the 2016 *Columbia University* decision by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) opened the door to private-sector unionization for graduate workers and—for the first time—undergraduate workers. The election of Donald Trump that same year discouraged student workers from filing election petitions for fear that the *Columbia* ruling could be overturned. However, in 2020, the economy-wide shutdowns generated by the Covid-19 pandemic pushed workers everywhere to engage in collective action to defend themselves. At Kenyon College in rural Ohio, student workers were suddenly informed that they would be furloughed without pay after the school switched to online-only classes. In response, a group of student workers circulated a digital petition demanding that the college compensate them for the layoffs. The success of this petition inspired the workers to go further by organizing a labor union (Schweitzer 2021). The Kenyon effort was covered by the democratic socialist magazine *Jacobin* and its example would inspire campaigns at other campuses. Not long after, the arrival of the Biden administration and a union-friendly NLRB re-opened the doors to unionization for student workers in the

private sector, while the onset of inflation and a tight-labor market gave workers everywhere more incentive and leverage to organize.

Prior to October 2021, when student resident assistants at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York won their union election, only three majority-undergraduate student worker unions existed in the U.S. (at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Grinnell College, Iowa, and the University of Chicago). But from October 2021 to the second inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2025, 29 majority-undergraduate student worker campaigns won union recognition, and at least 15 other campaigns were launched. By the time of Trump’s second inauguration, the number of undergraduate student workers organized in labor unions (including those in majority-graduate worker unions) had increased from around 2,000 workers to over 34,000. Many campaigns were initiated by student workers themselves, and only later reached out to established unions for support, a pattern seen in many of the “worker-to-worker” organizing drives of recent years (Blanc 2025a). By the end of the period, major unions like SEIU, UAW, and the Teamsters all had a foothold in the student worker sector. The re-election of Trump ended the wave of student worker organizing in the private sector, leading many campaigns to withdraw petitions for elections (Arrojas 2025).

By 2025, the movement had spread to 57 different campuses (around 3% of all higher education institutions) in 20 states.¹⁰ It has been less geographically widespread

¹⁰ Undergraduate student workers in the 23-campus California State University system are organized into a single union, the SEIU-affiliated California State University Employees Union (CSUEU).

than the other major student movement of recent years, the Palestine solidarity movement. The April-June 2024 wave of Palestine solidarity encampments spread to at least 138 different schools across at least 30 states (Chenoweth et al. 2024:5). This likely reflects the greater obstacles to success involved in organizing workers compared to other forms of activism, and the longer time-horizons involved. But the trade-offs in terms of lasting organization are not insubstantial. 21 of 34 student worker unions have successfully negotiated collective bargaining agreements, with meaningful gains in compensation and protections against workplace harassment and discrimination. Undergraduate worker unions that affiliate and negotiate contracts offer a degree of organizational longevity rare for student politics in the U.S.¹¹ Student worker unions could have significant downstream effects by channeling young people into the labor movement after graduation (Purucker and Monroe 2024).

Members of DSA's youth wing, the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA), have been heavily involved in the movement. Kenyon College YDSA members launched the student worker petition in spring 2020 and helped lead the subsequent union drive that fall (Winkler 2020). A year later, at the University of Oregon, members of the campus chapter of YDSA started their own campaign to organize student workers.¹² YDSA chapters were involved in some of the early union victories in 2022, at Wesleyan College and Dartmouth College (Chong, Bagenstos, and Clarke 2022), while a

¹¹ The oldest majority-undergraduate student worker union, at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, was founded in 2002 and is still active today.

¹² I was a founding member of this campaign.

YDSA chapter formed at Hamilton College following their union election in fall 2021.¹³

During the 2021-2022 academic year, YDSA's national Youth Labor Committee (YLC)—a team of member volunteers appointed by YDSA's elected national leadership—delivered presentations on labor organizing over Zoom to more than 50 campus chapters around the country, and launched a Zoom-facilitated “cohort” of chapters engaged in labor solidarity activities—supporting existing unions— as well as those chapters exploring the exciting new tactic of on-campus student worker organizing (YDSA 2022).

That summer, the YLC organized a series of national “Red Hot Summer” Zoom calls to teach student workers the basics of labor organizing. These were led by YDSA members who were themselves workers and active leaders in campus union campaigns. At the annual YDSA convention a few months later, held in-person at the University of Minnesota, elected delegates deliberated upon and approved a proposal to expand the organization's efforts to channel students into labor organizing. Notably, almost all of this organization-building was undertaken by unpaid member-volunteers, not paid staff. In the following two years, the student worker movement took off with a series of victories, mainly at small private colleges in the Northeast, while organizing drives went public at some larger universities (Blinder 2023). In the absence of a coordinated nationwide effort by labor unions to support undergraduate worker organizing, the YDSA YLC took on primary responsibility to mentor new union campaigns, even those

¹³ Personal communication with a Hamilton College union leader, June 2025.

occurring without the presence of an organized YDSA chapter. Through in-person gatherings, online forums, and the organization's official blog, YDSA members engaged in spirited debate over the relationship between YDSA chapters and student worker unions which might include many non-socialists.¹⁴

The role played by YDSA varied by campaign. In some places, YDSA chapters formed during the process of organizing a union campaign, or after the initial election victory. Elsewhere, chapters “liquidated”—the term is of Old Left vintage—into the labor union, ceasing to meet as separate organizations. At the University of Oregon, YDSA members were careful to maintain a clear division of labor and membership between the union organizing committee and the chapter. UOYDSA members met regularly even during the most intensive phases of the union campaign. On top of schoolwork and a busy schedule of union meetings, chapter members reserved time for political education on finer points of socialist history and theory. They also played an active role in other political struggles on campus. Like other YDSA and DSA members around the country, UOYDSAers threw themselves into the Palestine solidarity movement from fall 2023 onwards, and debated how to build bridges between Palestine activism and bread-and-butter union organizing. During the strike of spring 2025, the chapter's dozens of members were engaged constantly, leading pickets, organizing logistics, and debating tactics and strategy. By the end of the 2024-2025 academic year at UO,

¹⁴ These debates came to a head in summer 2023. For review of the different positions, see Purucker (2023).

following the strike, seven of nine members of UOYDSA's elected Steering Committee were also members of the union, while over half of the union's elected leadership body were YDSA members.

What overall role did socialists play in the 2020-2025 phase of the movement? The answer seems mixed. A member of the YDSA YLC estimated that, of 48 known majority-undergraduate student worker union efforts in the years from 2020 to March 2025, including ongoing drives and drives that collapsed before achieving recognition, perhaps half involved YDSA members in some way.¹⁵ Out of 44 completed or ongoing campaigns to organize majority-undergraduate student worker unions since 2020, 22 currently have a YDSA chapter at their campus—more than any other single organization. To date, there has been no labor union or political organization besides YDSA that has even attempted to provide a semblance of national coordination and leadership for the movement, despite YDSA's very limited resources and reliance on volunteer labor.

That said, it is certainly possible to imagine student workers getting organized without the coordinated support and leadership of YDSA. A handful of independent undergraduate worker campaigns predated the pandemic-era upsurge—at Grinnell College, the University of California-Berkeley, George Washington University, Reed College, and the University of Chicago—and none of these had significant involvement from YDSA (Brophy 2017; Fitzpatrick 2021). Some undergraduate workers in research

¹⁵ Personal communication with Carolyn Roderique, 6 July 2025.

and teaching assistant roles have long been organized as part of unions composed mainly of graduate student employees, including in the University of California system, California State University system, Columbia University, and several others, all affiliated with the United Auto Workers (UAW). It is easy to imagine UAW or another union expanding to organize more undergraduates without the initiative of YDSA. Indeed, by far the largest victory for the movement—the organization of 20,000 non-academic undergraduate student workers in the 23-campus California State University system—was the fruit of a campaign led by a well-established labor union, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), with only minor involvement by YDSA. The resources of large unions seem particularly indispensable in winning contracts at scale—the strike at UO depended heavily on the generous support of UAW’s strike fund, which paid workers \$500 per week for picketing duties.

Studies of the labor movement emphasize the crucial role of a “militant minority” of workers who are willing to shoulder the burdens and risks of organizing against the boss (Uetricht and Eidlin 2019). Militant workers might not express themselves in political terms, but they do often possess a radical worldview. YDSA did not by itself inject this spirit of radicalism and social justice into student workplaces. The movement built on a wider current of youth radicalization that gained steam in the late 2010s. This meant that even where organized YDSA chapters were not leading union campaigns, young radicals were usually present. At Smith College in Massachusetts—where no

YDSA chapter was active—student dining workers issued a press release that captured the mood among the militant layer of student workers in these years:

“The union win at Smith highlights a broader trend among our generation and resistance to capitalist, white supremacist oppression,” Castronovo said in the union release. “We are ready to revolutionize our own communities and workforces in solidarity with each other. It’s the only way forward.” (Pentland 2024)

Similarly, a group of dining workers at the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC)—also without a YDSA chapter—released a list of revolutionary “long-term demands” that included “workplace democracy and the abolition of bosses” and “direct control over all profits generated through our labor.” The demands concluded with a quote from Che Guevara: “Be realistic, demand the impossible.”¹⁶ While consciously revolutionary beliefs among student workers may not be especially common, support for labor unions is. A 2024 Gallup poll found that 77% of young people aged 18-34 approved of labor unions (Glass 2024).

Student workers also benefited from technological changes that facilitated rapid organization, even without (or prior to) the involvement of an established union. In a recent study of “worker-to-worker” union drives in the U.S., sociologist Eric Blanc (2025a) argues that new technologies like Zoom, Google Docs, and WhatsApp have transformed the economics of labor organizing by allowing workers to rapidly communicate and train each other in organizing skills, all without the assistance of paid

¹⁶ “Our Demands; First Draft.” UCSC SDWU, June 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C7sr3zatZOn/?img_index=1. In addition to demanding the overthrow of the capitalist system, the workers also expressed their wish for “30 minute to 1 hour breaks.”

union organizers. These new technologies interacted with factors like youth radicalization and a pro-labor NLRB to aid successful union campaigns at Starbucks, Amazon, and elsewhere. Blanc's study shows that rank-and-file radicals, including socialists, are indispensable in winning tough fights against the boss. Blanc found that a remarkably high percentage, almost 50%, of the young workers in retail, logistics, and education who have led new organizing drives identify as "radicals" (2024:242). Many of these workers were motivated to start organizing by their participation in social and electoral movements, like Black Lives Matter and the Bernie Sanders campaigns.

These campaigns have certainly included many DSA members, and have been supported by DSA chapters and DSA-sponsored projects like the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC), which connects workers to experienced volunteer organizers online (Blanc 2024b). But importantly, none of the cases discussed by Blanc appear to have depended on the presence of a *separate* political organization of radicals (or socialists) for their success, even where this may have been present. The same is true of most student worker campaigns, which have made use of digital organizing tools, a "worker-to-worker" ethos, and youth radicalism, but have not generally required that radicalism to be separately organized in the form of a YDSA chapter.

Taking these factors into account, YDSA's contribution to the undergraduate student worker movement seems important but not determinative. YDSA chapters played a key role in some campaigns, like those at Kenyon College, Dartmouth College, and the University of Oregon. YDSA's initiative in the Kenyon campaign was in fact the

spark that lit the movement. YDSA's national committees have accumulated more experience in the tactics and strategy of organizing undergraduate workers, from a more diverse range of campaigns, than any other national organization. And yet, undergraduate workers have demonstrated a capacity for successful organization without YDSA leadership or support. Once student workers have initiated campaigns, labor unions like UAW, SEIU, and OPEIU have been receptive to taking them on and helping workers win first contracts. In all likelihood the student worker movement has been more important for YDSA than the reverse. Participation in the movement has increased the quantity and quality of YDSA's membership by bringing talented student worker organizers into the ranks of the socialist movement, where they may stay for years after graduation.

Why does this matter? The key point to understand is that DSA/YDSA is not an organization dedicated to advancing a single campaign or social movement. The organization is, rather, best understood as a kind of *party*, albeit an unusual one that spans the fields of social movements and institutional politics, and which persists over time as an organization and set of partisan practices. This feature of DSA can be understood by considering its main competitors in the political field: the Democratic and Republican parties. The two major political parties in the United States do, of course, attempt to organize students and workers and channel them into party structures. Recent scholarship in political sociology emphasizes how political parties continuously work to "articulate" groups in civil society into their coalitions, translating

the objective positions of social groups into subjective political affiliations and identities (De Leon et al. 2015).

The Democratic and Republican parties maintain official student wings, as well as para-party advocacy groups like Turning Point USA. And both parties try to appeal to workers. For Democrats, workers are “articulated” not as members of a class, but as one “special interest” among many in a broad coalition, meaning essentially the small slice of workers organized into formal unions (Eidlin 2016). Republicans too articulate workers as a special interest, but as one coded as stereotypically white, masculine, native, blue-collar, and without a college education, an articulation which excludes the majority of U.S. workers, i.e. those who are non-white, women, immigrant, and/or labor in the service sector. Similarly, each party attempts to articulate students into non-class forms of identity: as College Democrats, Republicans, or MAGA conservatives. Students engaged by these efforts tend to come from middle-class backgrounds, and see them as paths into careers as professional political staffers or politicians. In other words, neither major party is today interested in avowing itself as a *class* party for audiences of students and workers, instead preferring mixed-class forms of partisanship akin to the politics of the first Gilded Age (Karp 2021).

Nor do the mainstream parties generally embrace contentious forms of politics by students or workers. Both Democratic and Republican-affiliated student organizations focus mainly on participation within institutionalized student government structures, which typically engage only tiny minorities of students, or on voter registration during

election season. More radical student activists, for their part, often engage in contentious protests, but they have mostly not framed their demands in class terms, nor have they tried to build up participatory mass organizations of students that will last over time, like student worker unions. For decades, student activists, like left-wing groups away from campus, have generally hewn to a “mobilizing” orientation that substitutes the agency of small groups of radicals for the involvement of masses of ordinary people (McAlevey 2016). The same has generally been true of the labor movement, which has since the 1980s shied away from strikes in favor of less disruptive, and risky, forms of protest and advocacy. Needless to say, Democrats and especially Republicans almost never encourage strike action by workers, let alone try to directly organize it.

By contrast, the story of YDSA’s participation in the student worker movement exemplifies a radically different strategy of political articulation, one based around (a) organizing students into contentious struggle and (b) heightening the salience of class among students. YDSA’s character as an ongoing organization—a kind of sustained collective agency for social transformation—gives it the ability to develop member-activists into what YDSA members themselves call “cadre,” i.e. dedicated partisans for the cause of socialism. These features—independent organization, movement-building, and membership-focused political development—are also crucial parts of the second example introduced at the start of this chapter: the Zohran Mamdani campaign and the movement to elect socialists to office in New York City.

Democratic socialists and the New York City electoral project, 2017-2025

Organized socialists in DSA cannot be said to have been decisive in either the undergraduate student worker movement or the broader labor movement upsurge of the years 2020-2025, though they played important roles in many individual campaigns.¹⁷ The role of DSA is much better-documented in the field of electoral politics over the same period. In this area, DSA's specific contributions do in fact seem decisive. Indeed, the effects of organized socialist involvement in electoral politics have had clear and significant political impacts far beyond the scope of particular campaigns and state offices. Between January 2016 and August 2025, 106 candidates endorsed by the national DSA organization were elected to public office at local, state, or Congressional level. At least one hundred other candidates were elected with the endorsement of a local DSA chapter or as non-chapter-endorsed DSA members.

Of all these campaigns, one stands out. DSA member Zohran Mamdani's June 2025 victory in the Democratic Party primary for the New York City mayoralty is a remarkable achievement.¹⁸ Taking place in the most international of American cities,

¹⁷ Precisely where and how socialists did participate in the upsurge, and to what effects, is a question worthy of research.

¹⁸ This section was written in late summer 2025, before Mamdani's second victory in the November general election. I believe the results of that election confirm the basic argument set out here: that Mamdani ran a transformative campaign on the basis of NYC-DSA's movement-party project developed in the years 2017-2025. I will add one qualification: following the June primary, Mamdani shifted his focus towards consolidating alliances with mainstream Democratic Party figures like Hakeem Jeffries and New York governor Kathy Hochul. As of February 2026, it still seems accurate to describe Mayor Mamdani as a movement-party politician, but the contradictions involved in governing New York City while remaining accountable to movements are becoming more obvious by the day. See, for example, Schweitzer (2026).

Mamdani's victory was noticed even by the global elite at the World Economic Forum, as experienced live by the historian Adam Tooze in Tianjin, China:

In a city like NYC, one should expect the unexpected. Nevertheless, it did come as a surprise, in the middle of the speech to the summer Davos meeting in Tianjin by Chinese Premier Li Qiang, to watch as hundreds of delegates turned to their phones to read the news that Democratic Socialist Zohran Mamdani had won the Democratic primary, making him the presumptive future mayor of New York, the headquarters [of] global capitalism and the capital of the dollar system. (Tooze 2025)

At the time of writing, Mamdani looks poised to win decisively in the November general election against a divided field. In the primary, Mamdani ran on a populist, economics-focused platform calling for a rent freeze, free bus service, and expanded preschool for NYC residents. To the surprise of pundits, this message resonated deeply with a Democratic electorate living in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Over the winter and spring primary campaign, Mamdani rose from being an unknown second-term state legislator with just 1% support to become the leading opponent of Andrew Cuomo, the former governor and political scion who had sewn up many institutional endorsements and big money donors.

Mamdani ran an energetic campaign that mobilized tens of thousands of volunteer canvassers and small-dollar donors. On primary day, he outperformed most polls and won with 56.4 percent of the vote after ranked-choice votes were counted, a 12.8 percentage-point margin over Cuomo (New York Times 2025). The assemblyman won the most votes in a primary in New York City history, in the highest-turnout primary election since 1989 (Coltin and Anuta 2025). This would be an impressive

performance by any insurgent candidate. For a socialist in the heart of global capitalism, it is astonishing. When asked in September about the historical significance of the Mamdani campaign, Maurice Isserman, a scholar of the left, was unequivocal: “If he becomes mayor, it will be the single greatest electoral victory in the history of the American left” (quoted in Barkan 2025c).

Mamdani’s coalition was much broader than that seen in any recent previous victory by a progressive or socialist in the city, and included especially strong margins among South Asians, Muslims, Latinos, renters, union members, and low-propensity and first-time voters. On the back of an affordability-focused message, Mamdani won over voters from many groups that had leaned towards Donald Trump in November. In the wake of the primary, Mamdani has focused on consolidating support from parts of the city and state Democratic establishment, gaining endorsements from influential officeholders and unions that previously backed Cuomo or sat out in the primary. National Democratic leaders have been cooler towards Mamdani, including Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer and House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries, both New Yorkers. But momentum appears to be with the socialist, especially after securing the tacit nod of approval from party kingmaker Barack Obama (Gay 2025). Mamdani is set to become the first socialist to govern a major American city—indeed, *the* major American city—since DSA member and Manhattan Democratic Party chair David

Dinkins's narrow victory for the same office in 1989, in a very different political environment (Barkan 2020b).¹⁹

Mamdani was inspired to become a democratic socialist by Bernie Sanders's 2016 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.²⁰ In some important ways, the course of the mayoral primary vindicates the strategy originally set out by Sanders's 2016 campaign: to win a mandate for progressive policies by expanding the electorate, reaching disaffected working-class voters with a populist program focused on jobs, wages, and healthcare. Though Sanders did succeed in winning the support of young voters and a substantial fraction of the party's progressive wing, he ultimately failed in his quest to expand the primary electorate around his outsider brand of politics. In crucial swing states in 2016 and especially 2020, enough Democratic voters remained loyal to moderate establishment candidates to sink Sanders's chances.

In the years after 2016, democratic socialists inspired by Sanders did score victories in Democratic primaries for local, state, and Congressional offices. But these victories (nearly all for legislative, not executive, offices) looked very different from Sanders's ambitious vision of transforming politics at the head of an army of new,

¹⁹ Democratic socialism meant something very different for Dinkins than it does for Mamdani, however. "The affiliation [with DSA] wasn't the slightest bit influential in Mr. Dinkins's decision-making," notes the *New York Times*. "Few people who worked with Dinkins recall democratic socialism ever coming up. 'I knew Dinkins pretty well; I've known him since I was a baby,' said Keith Wright, a former New York State assemblyman. 'I never knew that he was a member of the D.S.A.'" (Goldberg 2025).

²⁰ Sanders describes himself as both a "progressive" and a "democratic socialist" with more-or-less equal frequency and can rightly be considered a leader of both movements. He is not, however, a member of DSA and has kept a distance between himself and the organization for his entire career. I discuss the relationship between Sanders and DSA at length in chapter four below.

working-class voters. The actual model of left-wing electoral victories in these years was set in 2018 by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who won a dramatic upset against a powerful Democratic machine politician in Queens, Joe Crowley. Ocasio-Cortez won by mobilizing a critical mass of volunteers in a low-turnout election against an unprepared opponent. Ocasio-Cortez aligned herself strongly with Sanders and joined NYC-DSA midway through her campaign. But she performed most strongly among middle-income and college-educated parts of her gentrifying 4th Congressional district, not working-class areas (Jilani and Grim 2018).

The story was similar for other left-progressives and socialists like Jamaal Bowman, Cori Bush, and Ilhan Omar. Socialists could break through in deep-blue urban districts by mobilizing a hard-core of volunteers and persuading enough of the already-activated Democratic primary base to win. But they fared little better than moderate candidates in reaching the growing number of disengaged working-class voters drifting from the party. By 2025, most of the DSA elected officials in New York City were based in middle-income and gentrifying neighborhoods in Brooklyn and western Queens, like Astoria, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Sunset Park—what one NYC analyst calls the “Commie Corridor” (Lange 2025a). Mamdani himself won election to a state assembly district in the Astoria neighborhood of Queens in 2020, in a close and low-turnout primary.

The story was the same during Sanders’s own ill-fated campaign in 2020, when he energized young and college-educated voters but failed to replicate his 2016 success

with rural working-class voters in Iowa, New Hampshire, and other key states. By the early 2020s, many socialists and progressives worried that their theory of a working-class-led “political revolution” was fatally flawed. In 2024, two of the four DSA incumbents in the House of Representatives, Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman, lost primaries against moderate Democrats amid an onslaught of corporate super PAC spending, while Donald Trump won the popular vote on the back of a multiracial working-class coalition (Goldmacher 2025). Though the burden of Democratic failure lay mostly with the Biden-Harris campaign and the party establishment who refused to break with the deeply unpopular administration, the party’s progressive wing bore its share of responsibility. Late-summer endorsements of Biden by Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez and promises of a new wave of pro-worker policies in a second term did little to save Biden or improve Harris’s support among working-class voters in November (Weigel 2025).

American workers appeared to be turning away from the left and joining the coalition of the populist right, just like their peers in countries around the world. Even Democratic strongholds like New York City weren’t immune from the shift. As a *New York Times* analysis reported, “In every neighborhood in New York City, from Red Hook in Brooklyn to Riverdale in the Bronx, Vice President Kamala Harris received markedly fewer votes than Joseph R. Biden, Jr. did in 2020, while in most neighborhoods, Mr. Trump notched modest increases compared with his last run” (Collins et al. 2024). Democratic losses were especially pronounced in working-class parts of Queens,

including heavily Latino neighborhoods like Corona and Asian communities like Flushing.

Just seven months later, however, the political landscape looks very different. In the mayoral primary, Mamdani smashed assumptions about where and how leftist candidates could win. Michael Lange, a political analyst, summed up the campaign's success in expanding the left electoral coalition:

Mr. Mamdani's performance across the city was a profound improvement on that of Bernie Sanders and other progressive and socialist candidates. Mr. Mamdani performed relatively well in several affluent neighborhoods where Mr. Sanders struggled, like Park Slope and Morningside Heights. He won a plurality of the Hispanic vote, in addition to sweeping many Gentrifying Battlegrounds in Central Brooklyn and Upper Manhattan, and only trailed Mr. Cuomo by 9 points in Staten Island, performing best along the racially mixed North Shore and in union-dense, home-owning precincts. Furthermore, Mr. Mamdani made pronounced inroads with Asian voters, particularly in Queens, performing well in immigrant-heavy enclaves that shifted toward Mr. Trump in November. (2025a)

Like Sanders and other progressives, Mamdani won overwhelmingly with young voters and the college-educated. But he expanded this coalition in several key ways, especially by making inroads in lower and middle-income Latino, Muslim, and South Asian communities, as well as among higher-income professionals who had preferred centrist candidates in 2020 and 2016. And despite the efforts by Cuomo and a hostile press to brand Mamdani and other socialists anti-Semitic for their vocal support of Palestinians, a poll conducted in July found Mamdani leading by a margin of 17 points among Jewish voters in the general election (Li Bartov 2025). While the 2025 Democratic party primary and the 2024 presidential electorate consisted of different groups of voters,

Mamdani's strength in many neighborhoods where Trump saw gains—like Ozone Park and Jamaica Hills, Queens—suggests that he may be able to reverse Democratic declines in these areas come November (Lange 2025b). If he does so, it may be an even greater political earthquake than June, one with major implications for the shape of the national anti-Trump coalition in years to come.

How did he do it? Mainstream commentary on the Mamdani campaign has emphasized his personal charisma, his effective use of social media, and his good fortune in facing a scandal-scarred establishment opponent, Andrew Cuomo. Without a doubt, Mamdani is a generationally-talented campaigner and a pioneer of engaging, authentic digital communications. But explanations focused on the candidate himself or the immediate political circumstances of 2025—notably, the deep radicalization of Democratic voters after the party's failure to defeat Donald Trump in November, as well as the escalating rift in the party over the issue of Israel and Palestine—miss the critical role played by organized socialists in the victory. Unlike some other prominent DSA-endorsed candidates who won office in the years after 2016 or Sanders himself (who is not a DSA member), Mamdani is considered a “cadre” member of DSA, that is, a member who actively builds the chapter and views it as their central political home.²¹

²¹ According to an NYC-DSA insider close to the candidate, Mamdani would never have pursued the mayoral campaign had he not first received the endorsement of the chapter (interview with EL, 27 June 2025). Mamdani indicated as much in the pre-endorsement questionnaire he submitted to the chapter. As NYC-DSA electoral strategist Michael Thomas Carter notes, “in this very direct sense our organization is responsible for his mayoral run” (2025).

Following his trajectory through the chapter over these years indicates some of the deeper reasons for his success in 2025.

NYC-DSA is the largest DSA chapter in the country, with 10,500 members spread across the five boroughs (López 2025). The chapter also boasts the most experienced and sophisticated electoral campaigning apparatus of any DSA chapter. From its revival in 2015-2016, NYC-DSA has run 36 electoral and issue-based campaigns around the city, and won 15.²² These include efforts to elect DSA members to the City Council, the state Assembly and Senate in Albany, and to Congress. By summer 2025, the chapter could claim 10 endorsed public officeholders. Like many DSA chapters, NYC-DSA has also run pressure campaigns to support or oppose pieces of legislation, like the 2023 Build Public Renewables Act, a measure to invest in publicly-owned green energy projects. And beyond particular campaigns, the chapter has also actively participated in an ongoing way in social movements like the labor movement, Black Lives Matter, and the Palestine solidarity movement. Like YDSA chapters on their campuses, but at a much larger scale, NYC-DSA functions as a kind of local *movement party* that balances participation in episodic movements with a sustained political organization that can move with the rhythm of electoral politics.

²² As I explain below, though New York City had long been the national home of DSA, the local chapter had become nearly defunct by the mid-2010s. By this point, there were surprisingly few links remaining to DSA's own history in the city. Probably few of the members who joined DSA in these years were even aware that a DSA member, David Dinkins, had once been mayor of New York City (in 1990-1993) or that another DSA member, Ruth Messinger, had been the Democratic nominee in the 1997 mayoral election. David Duhalde recounted how he only discovered Dinkins's past membership in the organization by paging through old copies of the DSA publication *Democratic Left* after becoming a DSA national staffer in the early 2000s (Duhalde 2020).

As with many DSA chapters around the country, NYC-DSA grew rapidly in 2016 and 2017, first during Bernie Sanders’s primary campaign and then after Trump’s shocking victory in November. In the months after Trump’s election, the chapter held energetic branch meetings with hundreds of people determined to fight back against both Trump *and* a Democratic Party establishment that they blamed for his victory. The chapter’s first big protest mobilizations took place in response to Trump’s “Muslim ban” policy in late January 2017. The chapter would continue to play an active, though minor, part in the anti-Trump Resistance movement over the next two years. In spring 2017, the chapter made its first serious electoral efforts in a pair of City Council races in Brooklyn.²³ Each race pitted a DSA-endorsed candidate against a Democratic incumbent, one in a primary and the other (unusually) on the Green Party line in the general election. Mamdani joined the organization around this time, and served as campaign manager for Khader El-Yateem, one of the Brooklyn candidates. The campaigns mobilized large canvassing operations composed of DSA volunteers. Both candidates went down to defeat, but each performed respectably. NYC-DSA’s hypothesis that a socialist message and robust canvassing operation could pick off establishment

²³ The El-Yateem and Brisport campaigns of spring 2017 are usually dated as the starting point of NYC-DSA’s electoral project, both by observers and NYC-DSA cadre themselves (e.g. van Auken 2025). However, one year before, the chapter (at that time much smaller) endorsed and supported a state senate campaign by Debbie Medina, a DSA member in Williamsburg (Markbreiter 2016). Though a chapter leader, Neal Meyer, described the campaign as a “total failure,” Medina drew a respectable 40% in the Democratic primary against an establishment incumbent, Martin Dilan (interview with Neal Meyer, 2023). Dilan was defeated two years later by DSA candidate Julia Salazar.

incumbents was shown to have merit. The El-Yateem campaign had a formative influence on Mamdani, and also marked his first contact with DSA.

The following year, the chapter had its first big breakthroughs. In a stunning primary upset, an unknown candidate, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, defeated a powerful incumbent Democrat, Joe Crowley, in a Congressional race. Ocasio-Cortez had been recruited by Justice Democrats, a small but well-funded operation focused on supporting insurgent progressive campaigns for Congress. NYC-DSA was a junior partner in the campaign to elect Ocasio-Cortez, but it provided much of the canvassing people-power in the last weeks before primary day, and both of the candidate's two full-time staffers were DSA members (Carter 2025; Freedlander 2021). Ocasio-Cortez's victory sent shockwaves through the political world and she would quickly become a political celebrity with a somewhat distant relationship to DSA. By contrast, NYC-DSA's other big campaign of that summer involved one of the first DSA "cadre candidates," Julia Salazar. Salazar, a nonprofit staffer, was a leader of the chapter's Socialist Feminist Working Group and a participant in a reading group sponsored by *Jacobin*, the flagship democratic socialist magazine. Unlike with the Ocasio-Cortez campaign, DSA members "ran the operation up and down," according to two NYC-DSA leaders (Gordillo and Mauser 2025). Salazar succeeded in primarying an incumbent Democratic state senator in north Brooklyn, becoming the chapter's first representative in Albany.

While NYC-DSA members were running successful campaigns for their endorsed candidates Salazar and Ocasio-Cortez, Mamdani was working as a campaign manager

for Ross Barkan, a journalist running in a state senate primary in west Brooklyn. Mamdani ran an energetic field campaign for Barkan, but the campaign struggled to keep up with fundraising and lacked any institutional endorsements. Crucially, Barkan (who is not a DSA member) failed to secure an endorsement from NYC-DSA, who instead concentrated their efforts on the Ocasio-Cortez and especially the Salazar races. On election day in September, Barkan lost to a centrist competitor by 15 points, while Salazar won by 8.5 points. Lange summarizes the lesson that Mamdani took from the experience: “Hard work and field organizing, without a movement campaign, had their limits” (2025c). From this point onwards, Mamdani would work exclusively within the framework of NYC-DSA’s campaigning apparatus.²⁴

In 2019, NYC-DSA and Ocasio-Cortez led a successful grassroots effort to prevent Amazon from opening a new corporate headquarters in Long Island City, Queens, defeating a behemoth corporation backed by the mayor and governor (Featherstone 2019). Later that year, a bill improving protections for tenants, co-sponsored by Salazar, passed into law. A public defender endorsed by DSA, Tiffany Cabán, narrowly lost a race to become the Democratic nominee for Queens District Attorney, in a campaign where Mamdani served as field coordinator. In August, NYC-DSA endorsed an ambitious five-candidate slate for the 2020 Assembly and Senate primaries (including Salazar, running for re-election), and geared up to campaign for Bernie Sanders in the

²⁴ For Barkan’s account of the campaign, see Barkan (2025a).

presidential race.²⁵ Mamdani, then working as a housing counselor, was part of this “For the Many” slate, along with Jabari Brisport (a public school teacher), Phara Souffrant Forrest (a nurse and tenant union organizer), and Marcela Mitaynes (an immigrant tenant organizer). In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and intense nationwide protests against police brutality, DSA’s entire slate won their primaries on a radical platform calling for Medicare for All, a right to housing, a Green New Deal, and criminal justice reform (Himes and Pentz 2020).

A DSA volunteer on Mamdani’s campaign highlighted some of the factors in their victory, including drawing a “clear class line” against the corporate-backed incumbent, emphasizing multiracial class solidarity, and assembling a mutual aid infrastructure to support community members affected by the pandemic. The campaign also developed a “relational organizing” program to help pull volunteers and their social networks into the campaign (Lucas 2020). Once in office, Mamdani continued this organizing-first approach to constituent services by, for example, connecting a community member dealing with a gas shut-off to a tenant union to fight a negligent landlord (Thier 2022). As an assembly member, Mamdani and NYC-DSA played important roles in a number of local movement struggles, each of which pitted the legislator against powerful corporate and Democratic Party interests. These included successful campaigns to prevent the construction of a natural gas plant in Astoria and win debt relief for struggling taxi-cab

²⁵ Mamdani’s first canvasses for his assembly race took place in the crowd at Sanders’s famous October 2019 comeback rally in Queensbridge Park.

drivers. Assemblyman Mamdani was a regular at labor protests, including a 2023 rally for undergraduate resident assistants at Columbia University (Gallo 2023), and early in his mayoral campaign, protests for trans youth facing cuts to gender-affirming healthcare. Mamdani also quickly developed a reputation as the informal leader of NYC-DSA's Socialists in Office (SIO) committee, which brings together elected chapter leaders with endorsed officeholders.

But by far the most important movement, the one that most clearly tested the “inside-outside” commitments of a movement politician, was the Palestine solidarity movement that took off in the wake of the October 7th, 2023 attacks in Israel. Mamdani himself is the son of prominent anti-Zionist scholar Mahmood Mamdani, and founded a Students for Justice in Palestine chapter while in college. Months before the attacks, Mamdani and DSA state senator Jabari Brisport had introduced a bill to ban tax-exempt “charitable” donations from subsidizing Israeli settler violence in the West Bank (Zraick 2024). After October 7th, Mamdani and other DSA legislators would participate in many protests jointly organized by NYC-DSA, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), and other groups calling for an immediate ceasefire. These included a dramatic shutdown of the Grand Central Terminal in late October and a five-day hunger strike outside the White House in November.

During this period, DSA was politically isolated and under intense criticism for its pro-ceasefire stance. A spokesperson for the Biden administration called those demanding a ceasefire “disgraceful” and “repugnant,” while New York Democratic Party

leaders like Hakeem Jeffries and Kathy Hochul castigated NYC-DSA and its elected members (Arria 2023; Beeferman 2023). In response to threats of violence, a planned NYC-DSA convention had to be cancelled. At this moment, the distinction between a cadre DSA politician like Mamdani, and progressive or even socialist leaders not embedded in the organization, became very clear. Several prominent DSA-endorsed officials took the opportunity to break publicly with the organization over its pro-ceasefire stance, including Allegheny County (Pittsburgh) Executive Sara Innamorato and Los Angeles City Council member Nithya Raman (Potter 2023; Ngo and Reisman 2023).

But over the following year and a half, DSA's immediate and unequivocal solidarity with Palestinians and call for a ceasefire turned from a political liability into a major asset, as the Gaza genocide ground on and American public opinion shifted against Israel. By February 2025, attitudes towards Israel among Democrats had been transformed, with 35% of Democrats sympathizing more with Palestinians than Israel (Arria 2025). Mamdani wisely did not center his campaign on the issue—it is not mentioned on his website—but he did not shy away from speaking frankly about the genocide when asked. It now seems clear that the constant attempts by the Cuomo campaign and his allies in the media and corporate PACs to hit Mamdani on the issue backfired. Lange suggests that the Israel-Palestine question became a kind of litmus test for a candidate's willingness to defy an unpopular political establishment, even for voters who might not hold strong opinions about American foreign policy.

The political credibility of the DSA candidate on the crucial issue of Israel-Palestine was an asset in another way: it unlocked a huge reservoir of political energy among young people horrified by the genocide and willing to work hard for a candidate that shared their views (Gowayed 2025). NYC-DSA mobilized an unparalleled field operation of canvassing teams for Mamdani, consisting almost entirely of volunteers. In an interview conducted after election day, the chapter's two elected co-chairs, Gustavo Gordillo and Grace Mauser, discussed the logistics of the campaign (Gordillo and Mauser 2025). The Mamdani campaign built on the model developed by NYC-DSA since 2017, but now implemented at a vastly greater scale. The repeated experience of running campaigns over eight years had turned the chapter into a hub of organizing talent. According to Gordillo and Mauser, the field operation for the campaign was structured in a "hierarchy" that "creates a lot of opportunity for intermediate leadership" to emerge and numerous entry points for volunteers to get involved. Canvassers armed with a phone app listing addresses of the campaign's "universe" of potential voters assemble at a public rally-point like a park. There, they are guided by a "canvass lead" responsible for quickly training the canvassers in the art of knocking doors and talking to voters. These leads are "trusted people who think on their feet" who have themselves participated in a training session put on by the chapter or campaign.

These trainings, in turn, are conducted by "field coordinators," who support the work of the various canvass teams around a given district. Field coordinators

communicate with their canvassing teams with the help of large WhatsApp groupchats, which might include hundreds of different canvassing volunteers in a single neighborhood. Finally, there are a small number of field “directors,” usually staff members employed by the campaign itself (which is incorporated as a separate entity from NYC-DSA). Almost all of these positions are filled by volunteers, and the middle and upper roles of the field operation are mostly cadre DSA members. This “distributed organizing” method, which puts agency in the hands of volunteers to initiate canvasses and other events for the candidate (like fundraisers and social gatherings), has origins in the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign (Grim 2019) and the 2008 Barack Obama campaign (McKenna and Han 2015), and is part of a common tactical repertoire for DSA chapters around the country.

Distributed volunteer agency, anchored by motivated DSA cadre, allowed the campaign to grow at a speed that a more top-down operation couldn’t match. According to Gordillo and Mauser, “it would have been impossible for staff to manage” everything that was going on, with dozens of events for Mamdani taking place over a single weekend in the final weeks before election day. By the end of the primary campaign, Gordillo and Mauser estimated there were dozens of field coordinators and around 430 trained field leads driving forward the campaign, from a starting point of just 30 or 40 in January. Overall, the campaign estimates that it mobilized over 50,000 people during the primary, vastly more than any other candidate, and had 247,000 conversations with

voters—about a quarter of all people who voted on primary day (Sterne 2025).²⁶ Michael Spear, a historian of New York City politics, could not recall any campaign since the 1930s heyday of the American Labor Party and Communist Party that mobilized so many people in the city (Featherstone 2025). The unprecedented ground-game was a key factor in helping Mamdani overcome an equally unprecedented onslaught of corporate money backing Cuomo. Over the primary, Cuomo’s campaign and allies together burned about \$25 million, or \$87 per vote, against Mamdani’s spend of just \$19 per vote (Smith 2025).

NYC-DSA was and is able to mobilize so much volunteer capacity not only because of its unique political profile, but also because it engages in what the political scientist Didi Kuo terms “associational party building” (Kuo 2025). That is, over the years since 2017, NYC-DSA has succeeded in building not only a public brand but also an *organization* that can involve its members and supporters in regular and self-reinforcing patterns of interaction. For example, after a canvass for Mamdani, volunteers might gather together at a bar or restaurant to share stories and bond over the experience. These are excellent opportunities for recruiting new participants up the ladder of activism by becoming a canvass leader themselves. Soon, that new canvass leader might be invited by a canvass coordinator to join them at a DSA meeting or social event, and not long after they might become a DSA member and sign up to take on

²⁶ Unlike conventional campaign field operations, Mamdani’s team made very sparing use of paid canvassers—just “40 to 50 specialized canvassers” employed to reach voters in small language groups, according to Sterne.

responsibility for planning the next meeting or social. The chapter has even hosted speed-dating events for socialists to mingle and meet a partner who shares their values. Both NYC-DSA and the Mamdani campaign have made a point of fusing politics with activities that build a social and cultural infrastructure among both activists and supporters in those activists' networks.

After Mamdani's likely victory in November, it is not hard to imagine the hundreds of Mamdani canvass leaders and DSA members being converted into local intermediaries directly connecting neighborhoods and labor unions with a local political organization—be this DSA or a broader party-like association—and with the Mamdani administration in City Hall. This is a type of linkage that the Democratic Party long ago abandoned but which was once the bread-and-butter of urban political machines around the country. With 10,500 members, DSA includes only about a fifth of the canvassing army that mobilized for Mamdani, meaning that there is an activist base to build on outside of the organization. Of course, there are major questions about the relationship between constructing an associational party project and the existing structure of the Democratic Party, which Mamdani has positioned himself as a new leader within. There are also serious and difficult contradictions between, on the one hand, the electoral need to win votes from middle-income voters and homeowners, and on the other, DSA's working-class focused program. But however this "Mamdani party" is organized, DSA members are likely to be at the center of it.

What about workers? In New York politics, labor unions have long been incorporated firmly within the Democratic Party. Unions have generally been torn between their interests in supporting a reformist politics that can push back on the power of capitalists and the short-term political gains to be had in supporting one faction or another of the Democratic Party. The loyalty of the house of labor to the Democrats has been a source of frustration for NYC-DSA and its candidates, who have generally struggled to secure union endorsements during primaries against centrist incumbents.²⁷ In 2018, many unions broke from the Working Families Party (WFP) over WFP's decision to endorse Cuomo's progressive competitor in the gubernatorial primary, Cynthia Nixon. In the 2021 mayoral primary, unions were divided between progressive, centrist, and conservative Democratic candidates. In 2025, some major unions again opted for a moderate course by endorsing Cuomo in the primary.

This time, however, a crucial segment of the labor movement broke for the socialist candidate, including the UAW, while others stayed neutral in the contest (Blanc 2025b). The early endorsement of the autoworkers was illustrative. In 2018, the UAW had endorsed Cuomo for governor. But seven years later, the venerable union had undergone a substantial opening-up and shift towards progressive politics after the election of a reform leadership in 2023, including new leadership in the union's New

²⁷ Ocasio-Cortez received no union endorsements in her original 2018 campaign, while Tiffany Cabán received just one labor endorsement in her 2019 campaign for Queens district attorney (Wang 2019). Labor's mobilization behind centrist Democratic candidates played a role in NYC-DSA's poor showing in city council elections in 2021, when just two of its six endorsed candidates won their primaries (Barkan 2021).

York region. This combined with growing activism of white-collar UAW workers in legal services, nonprofits, and academia, who have a strong presence in New York City (Feldman 2025). That spring, UAW members wearing “UAW for Zohran” shirts would be a common sight at Mamdani canvasses.

There is substantial cross-membership between these white-collar UAW members and DSA. In fact, UAW has more DSA members than any other union, owing to DSA’s strength among college-educated workers in the “sociocultural professions.”²⁸ Mamdani had a track record of supporting strikes by UAW paralegals and graduate students, and a number of DSA members in the union pushed for a Mamdani endorsement over other candidates. Mamdani was also helped by the support of Claire Valdez, a Queens State Assembly member and one of NYC-DSA’s newest elected officeholders (Lucas and Valdez 2023). Before her election, Valdez was a UAW steward at Columbia University. UAW itself has in recent years moved strongly leftward and has deep ties with social movements in the city, including the Palestine solidarity movement.²⁹

After Mamdani’s victory in June, he quickly gained the endorsements of most of the major labor groups that had backed Cuomo or stayed neutral in the primary, including the powerful unions of teachers, public sector employees, hospitality, and building services workers, plus labor’s peak organization in the city, the Central Labor

²⁸ There is also a large concentration of DSA members in UAW-affiliated higher education locals in California.

²⁹ In March, the president of the Columbia University UAW local, Grant Miner, was expelled in a move widely seen as retaliation for participating in the school’s Palestine solidarity encampment (Miner 2025).

Council. This is a decisive break for labor against the establishment of the Democratic Party, which has still not reconciled itself to supporting Mamdani. Alignment from above is also being driven from below, by groups of rank-and-file workers organized into pro-Mamdani caucuses in their unions. For example, DSA members organizing within AFSCME District 37 (DC 37) were important in pushing leaders of the city workers union to rank Mamdani second in their official endorsements (Lundquist 2025). Mamdani's campaign manager later cited the overwhelmingly positive reception for Mamdani among workers at a February DC 37 mayoral forum as the moment she started to believe her candidate could win (Chang 2025).

The Mamdani campaign occurred alongside reform campaigns within some important unions that later ended up backing him, like the UFT teachers and healthcare workers in SEIU 1199. Around the time of the mayoral primary, the latter union held its own top leadership election, in which a reform candidate ousted an incumbent who had engineered SEIU's endorsement for Cuomo. Once elected, the reformer, Yvonne Armstrong, quickly repositioned the union behind Mamdani. Incumbent leaders of the teachers union, site of a fierce reform battle over the spring and summer, did the same. Meanwhile, traditionally conservative craft union locals like the Carpenters, Electrical Workers (IBEW), and Teamsters continued to back Cuomo, who an IBEW leader described as "the only one true Democrat in the mayoral race" (Gruenberg 2025).

The situation is in flux, but what seems to be happening is a political recomposition of the city's labor movement, with the relative balance of power of

left-wing social movement unions (like the reform-led UAW and its particularly-radical Region 9A) being boosted by leftward movement among liberal but top-down social unions (like AFSCME or UFT), while more conservative business unions suffer from declining mobilization capacity and influence in Democratic politics.³⁰ In this regard the business union leaders find themselves in the same situation as the other decaying gatekeepers of institutional power in the city, like the *New York Times*, the Chamber of Commerce, and the borough Democratic machines, each of which was powerless to halt or even slow down Mamdani's ascent.

With these facts in mind, what overall conclusions can we draw about DSA's role in Mamdani's victory? There are some very important qualifications to the story told above. First, NYC-DSA was far from the sole organization involved in Mamdani's campaign. Unions have already been mentioned. Religious institutions, especially mosques in Muslim South Asian communities, were important early in the campaign. Community groups like Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), a membership-based organization of South Asian New Yorkers, endorsed Mamdani at the same time as NYC-DSA, in October 2024. New York Communities for Change (NYCC), formerly known as ACORN, was another important early backer. Mamdani built on his deep network of connections from his time as an assembly member to mobilize support in

³⁰ On the typology of social movement, social, and business unions, see Dreiling and Robinson (1998). For a similar recent analysis of "class struggle," "labor liberal," and "business" unionisms that has been influential in DSA, see Burns (2022).

areas and communities where DSA lacks reach, and construct a large inter-organizational coalition spanning multiple boroughs.

Second, the economic context of New York City in 2025 needs to be emphasized. The Mamdani campaign centered on making life affordable for ordinary New Yorkers. In the 2020s, pandemic supply shocks and Trump’s tariffs put upward pressure on the cost of living in many parts of the United States, compounding longstanding inflation in the price of health care, education, and rent. In the wake of Mamdani’s primary victory, the pundit class identified his laser-like focus on affordability as a politically-palatable issue that centrist candidates could take up in their own districts.³¹ But as Adam Tooze points out, the cost of living crisis in New York City is simply unlike anywhere else in the country. Of the 10 largest cities in the U.S., New York City was alone in experiencing a significant decline in real median household income between 2019 and 2024, a fall of nearly 5% (Tooze 2025).

Food prices in the city increased more than 25% over the same five-year period (Assuncao 2025). As the *New York Times* reported in November, “Families have to make at least \$100,000 to afford basic necessities.... And families need to be bringing in

³¹ Democratic pundits have been less eager to acknowledge the importance of Mamdani’s pro-Palestinian stance, which marked him as a credible anti-establishment figure and distinguished him sharply even from other progressives in the primary. But even in the area of economics, commentators have often missed how Mamdani’s approach is qualitatively different from standard Democratic messaging. Two of his signature policy proposals—free buses and universal pre-K—go beyond tax credits or increased subsidies to existing programs. Rather, they establish wholly new economic *rights* for all people in the city by taking essential services—transportation and childcare—out of the market. The principles of universality and decommodification mark a core difference between democratic socialist policy design and means-tested policies favored by liberals.

at least \$334,000 to comfortably afford child care for one toddler, according to the city comptroller’s office” (Shapiro 2025, my emphasis). Writes Tooze, “New York is a city in which it is not absurd to say that a large slice of the middle class share everyday interests and experiences with the 56 percent of the population who are either on low-incomes or in poverty” (2025). Such severe and generalized economic strain makes it less surprising that a broad swath of voters would opt for a candidate promising a sharp break from the status quo.

Third, institutions matter. Two facts about the primary system in NYC aided Mamdani’s insurgent campaign. The DSA candidate took advantage of the generous public campaign financing system for citywide races, which multiplies small donations to candidates by eight times. By generating buzz with an early campaign launch and compelling social media, Mamdani quickly led the field in small dollar donations. By spring, he had already received the maximum amount of public financing, allowing him to focus on campaigning and giving him some insulation against Cuomo’s dark money firepower. For a left candidate with no access to corporate and billionaire cash, public financing made a big difference.

But even more important than this was the structure of the election itself. Since 2021, New York City has used a ranked-choice voting (RCV) electoral system for local elections, which allows voters to rank their preferred candidates rather than cast a single vote for their top choice. This has the effect of encouraging a greater diversity of candidates by negating the “spoiler” effect. Voters do not have to worry about splitting

their vote between their preferred candidate and a “lesser-evil” alternative, an outcome normally guaranteed by first-past-the-post elections (which are the norm in the United States). As scholars of electoral systems emphasize, RCV elections encourage candidates to campaign for second- and third-choice votes. This in turn incentivizes candidates who broadly align with each other to campaign more positively and even cross-endorse, encouraging their supporters to rank a competing but broadly aligned candidate second (Drutman 2020).

This exact scenario played out in the mayoral primary. Because most of the candidates were running as progressives or liberals in opposition to the moderate Cuomo, RCV allowed them to run as a de facto anti-Cuomo slate and encourage their supporters to not rank Cuomo. During debates and in TV ads, the leading non-Cuomo candidates mostly refrained from attacking each other and concentrated their fire on the front-runner. Beyond this negative truce, Mamdani and several other candidates cross-endorsed each other late in the primary. Crucially, the third-ranked candidate in polls, city comptroller Brad Lander, cross-endorsed Mamdani in June. Lander’s endorsement and joint media appearances with Mamdani helped neutralize Cuomo’s attacks on Mamdani for his criticism of Israel (Lander is the highest-ranking Jewish politician in the city). In a first-past-the-post election, Mamdani—and NYC-DSA—would undoubtedly have faced a more difficult path to the nomination.³²

³² The outcome of the primary—probably the most high profile ranked-choice election ever conducted in the United States—may challenge the assumptions of political scientists who argue for electoral reform. Drutman (2020), for example, claims that RCV and similar electoral mechanisms will tend to favor more

Fourth, though the campaign's viral social media and podcast appearances were indeed important in generating early attention and building the canvassing operation, it would be an exaggeration to say that this was contributed specifically by NYC-DSA or DSA. Populist candidates not associated with DSA have been able to produce engaging and authentic online content both before and after Mamdani. The mastermind of Mamdani's digital strategy, Morris Katz, did not come to the campaign through DSA, but rather through previous work for a populist but non-socialist Nebraska Senate candidate, Dan Osborn (Freedlander 2025).³³ Fifth, though NYC-DSA was critical in designing and leading the campaign's canvassing operation, even the campaign's army of volunteers could only reach a fraction of the huge city electorate. Mamdani didn't really start to break away from the other non-Cuomo candidates until after he went on the air in April. The campaign made effective use of traditional TV and mail techniques that could have been used by any savvy populist candidate, not just a socialist one.

Finally, though NYC-DSA's contributions mattered greatly in some specific respects, this cannot be said about the national organization of DSA. Notably, Mamdani did not seek or receive a national endorsement from DSA, nor did he campaign on the basis of DSA's national platform or program.³⁴ Without an official endorsement,

moderate candidates against populists of the right and left. In this case, however, Mamdani was widely seen as the furthest left candidate and still won by a commanding margin.

³³ Following the primary, Katz moved on to produce video content for Graham Platner, a non-DSA progressive populist running in the Democratic primary to challenge Susan Collins, the Maine Republican senator.

³⁴ As of September 2025, DSA had both a long "platform" (adopted in 2021) and a shorter "program" (adopted in 2024). In October, the program, titled *Workers Deserve More*, officially replaced the sprawling platform document.

Mamdani did not receive funds or staffing assistance from the national organization. The basic reason for this is political—both NYC-DSA and Mamdani’s own circle clearly believed that associating themselves with the national DSA organization would prove more of a liability than an asset, and that they could succeed without the (limited) support that the national organization could provide.³⁵ From the start of the campaign, Mamdani distanced himself from his own past support for defunding the police, a stance that DSA nationally continues to stridently defend. In late August, Mamdani clarified that his campaign platform was separate from that of the national organization. Specifically, Mamdani rejected a demand made in the 2021 DSA platform calling for the elimination of all misdemeanor crimes and the closure of jails. In response to questions, a campaign spokeswoman stated that “If Zohran has not publicly endorsed or spoken on a position during the campaign, it is not a part of his mayoral platform.” Similarly, Mausser, the NYC-DSA co-chair, stated that “Zohran’s been really clear that his platform and D.S.A.’s platform are distinct” (Mays, Rubinstein, and Shapiro 2025).

With these qualifications, we can specify what NYC-DSA *did* contribute to the historic campaign. During the campaign itself, DSA’s canvassing machinery and rank-and-file labor union activism both made a difference, as we have seen. DSA members are also prominent in Mamdani’s “inner circle” of advisors (Fandos, Fitzsimmons, and Boyce 2025). However, the real importance of the socialist

³⁵ While NYC-DSA’s candidates for state and local office have received national endorsements in the past—including Mamdani in 2020—national support has not generally been important in shaping the outcome of these races.

organization can only be understood in light of the longer history of its electoral project in the city, stretching back to 2017 and the first experimental campaigns in Brooklyn. As discussed above, NYC-DSA was Mamdani's original political home, and without it he would not have become an assemblyman in the first place. But in two other ways, the chapter's eight years of accumulated experience in electoral, labor, and social movement organizing form an essential background to its decision to participate in the 2024-2025 mayoral race. First, the consistent presence of DSA in city politics undoubtedly increased its credibility. There are now actually "DSA voters" in certain districts of the city, according to a DSA member and former Mamdani advisor (interview with EL, 2025). NYC-DSA's own party brand is sufficiently established that early Mamdani canvassers would sometimes encounter voters at the door who had never heard of the candidate but perked up when the DSA endorsement was mentioned.³⁶

Second, this same pattern of sustained commitment has produced a cadre of embedded leaders and organizers very similar to those developed in YDSA-supported undergraduate worker campaigns, though here on a vastly larger scale. Cadre development involves learning concrete skills—running meetings, planning campaigns, developing new leaders—but also adopting substantive political commitments. This

³⁶ NYC-DSA candidates have differed in the degree to which they foreground DSA in their election materials, and the question of how much candidates should publicly identify with the chapter has been a subject of internal debate (Meyer and Pellitteri 2022). No locally-endorsed DSA candidates hide their membership, as (for instance) Communist Party members once did. But it should be noted that candidates are invariably identified by their establishment opponents and corporate media as socialists and DSA members, regardless of their own messaging choices. This arguably has the effect of boosting DSA's own brand among city voters attracted to candidates for their policies and outsider appeal, but who have neutral feelings about the socialist label.

included one particular commitment that would turn out to be very important in the primary. Absent DSA, it is very difficult to imagine a candidate like Mamdani even being taken seriously in the mayoral primary: a credible, professional politician willing to defy the unthinking consensus on Israel, in a city where this issue had long been considered an untouchable third rail. Though Mamdani did *not* campaign on the issue—a point that is important to emphasize—it was nevertheless this position that did the most to distinguish him from his competitors. In a striking departure from DSA’s own history, Mamdani’s anti-Zionism turned out to be inseparable from his democratic socialism.

Finally, the campaign also demonstrates why it is appropriate to describe DSA—at least in the context of New York City—as a movement *party*. I have used this term in the sense of an organization that combines (a) participation in institutional politics via elections and reform efforts with (b) a radical political program and willingness to catalyze contentious politics, especially working-class politics. But even by a more conventional political science definition of parties as “a coalition of people who form a united front to win control of government and implement policy” (Masket and Noel 2021:10), DSA can be accurately judged a party. Though NYC-DSA eschews running on its own ballot line—all of its elected officeholders won in Democratic Party primaries—in every other way it functions as an independent political organization, one which recruits its own candidates and maintains close ties to them after they take office. It is a kind of coalition in which different factions (called “caucuses”) share power within the framework of a democratic membership structure. And it seeks to implement policy

that empowers working people. The crucial difference is that this party organization *also* seeks to catalyze social power outside government, by building movements and popular organizations like labor and tenant unions. Is it singular in this respect? I believe it is. In the United States and in New York City, there are other movement organizations that have cultivated democratic membership structures, other politicians that have tried to pursue a working-class project, and other outsider parties that have tried to break through from the left (and the right). But none has been able to take off the way that DSA has since 2016. One of the aims of this dissertation is to explain why.

I conclude this introduction with two points about the larger implications of the Mamdani campaign. First, Mamdani vindicated a basic point about politics that the establishment wing of the Democratic Party, as well as “populist” writers who argue that Democrats should let polls determine what they believe, seem determined to ignore: the salience of issues in the electorate is not pre-given. Skillful campaigns can raise new issues and lessen the significance of others. At the beginning of the mayoral primary, just after Trump’s victory in November, the consensus narrative among media and political elites was that the country was moving rightwards and that the dominant issues for the electorate were moderate-coded ones like immigration and crime.

Andrew Cuomo worked hard to convince New Yorkers that crime and policing were the key issues facing the city. Polling conducted in February showed that crime and immigration were bigger priorities for New Yorkers than housing, Mamdani’s signature issue, by a 35% to 23% margin (Emerson College 2025a). But by summer, the picture

had changed. Months of disciplined, creative campaigning on the issues of affordability and housing shifted the priorities of New York City voters. Polls in spring indicated that the issue of housing affordability had radically shifted in salience. A May survey showed that housing had now become the top issue for 30% of the electorate, against a combined 25% for crime and immigration (Emerson College 2025b). Observing this phenomenon, political blogger Ettingermentum (Joshua Cohen) would write:

In this, Mamdani has demonstrated where the truly transformative power of a left-wing insurgent campaign lies. It is not in its ability to introduce voters to the very concept of radicalism itself, which they are familiar with and mostly wary of. It is also not in its capacity to challenge centrist narratives on whatever issue might favor them in any given moment. It is its ability to fundamentally change how voters think about what they are voting for: what issues they think are important, what they think they can get out of the electoral politics, and what they imagine politicians can do for them. (Ettingermentum 2025a)

As I discuss in the next chapter, the capacity of political agents to shift the salience of issues is not unlimited. It is constrained by material facts. But within these limits it is real. To paraphrase the great labor historian David Montgomery: what working-class voters want is a function of what they think they can get (Brecher 2024).

Second, the Mamdani campaign also seems to have shifted the national political terrain. In September, a national survey of likely voters commissioned by the DSA Fund³⁷ and *Jacobin* proclaimed that democratic socialism had gone “mainstream” (Jacobin 2025). Self-identified Democrats preferred democratic socialism to capitalism

³⁷ The DSA Fund is a tax-exempt 501c(3) “friends-of” organization that is legally separate from DSA itself, which is organized as a 501c(4) “action” organization, donations to which are not tax-deductible under U.S. nonprofit law. The Fund focuses mainly on political education and grants to support DSA conferences.

by a huge 58-point margin.³⁸ 74% of Democrats viewed democratic socialism favorably, an increase from just 42% in 2016 (Jordan 2016). 42% of all voters reported support for democratic socialism, an increase from the 36-39% range reported in polls from the late 2010s. Populist candidates similar to Mamdani, Ocasio-Cortez, and Sanders were preferred to establishment figures like Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries by a 20-point margin. Importantly, democratic socialists were nine points stronger than establishment politicians among all voters without a college degree. Bhaskar Sunkara of *The Nation* magazine interpreted the survey: “This poll underscores that the term ‘democratic socialism’ now communicates something very practical to American voters: the kind of economic security and fairness once associated with the New Deal tradition.” The survey also showed growing familiarity with the leading organization of democratic socialism: a remarkable 54% of respondents had heard of DSA, while 4 percent knew a DSA member personally or were a member themselves.

Around the time the survey was released, reports emerged of growing frustration among Congressional Democrats at the reticence of party leaders like Schumer and

³⁸ The survey question read as follows: “Democratic socialists believe that the government should take a more active role to improve Americans' lives. They generally support higher taxes on corporations and high income earners, support regulations that protect workers and consumers, and want more public ownership of key industries like housing, healthcare, and utilities. On the other hand, capitalists believe that the private sector is best equipped to make improvements to Americans' lives. They generally support lower taxes, oppose government regulations of businesses, and want the private sector to own key industries like housing, healthcare, and utilities.” This definition is an accurate description of democratic socialist politics as articulated publicly by figures like Mamdani, Sanders, and Ocasio-Cortez, though these leaders are more likely to use terms like the “billionaire class” than the more radical-sounding “capitalists.” Cadre DSA members would also agree with this definition, but would usually qualify it as a directional step towards a more expansive conception of democratic socialism as a system in which the means of production are socially owned and controlled. I return to the distinction between what I call the “directional” and “systemic” aspects of socialism in chapter two below.

Jeffries to back Mamdani, who looks increasingly likely to win the mayoralty in November (Solender 2025). Ten years after Sanders launched his long-shot bid for the Democratic nomination, it seems clear that democratic socialism has established itself as a real factor in the landscape of American politics.

CHAPTER TWO

CLASS, PARTY, DEMOCRACY: A REVIEW AND ARGUMENT

Abstract

In this chapter, I discuss the literature that informs my analysis of democratic socialism and DSA. First, I argue for a materialist political sociology that takes the class structure of capitalism seriously as a determinant for collective action. Second, I review a tradition of comparative-historical sociology that centers the capacities of workers in explaining democratic development and decline. Third, I discuss work by political scientists and political sociologists that highlights the capacities of parties to reshape the landscape of political and social conflict, within limits. Throughout, I mix conceptual exposition with substantive analysis of politics and history, including reflections on the class coalitions of contemporary U.S. politics and the shifting conditions of working-class party formation in the 20th and 21st centuries. I conclude with a brief discussion of my research method and an outline of following chapters.

Introduction

For all their various differences, the two waves of contention described above—the undergraduate student worker movement, and DSA’s electoral project in New York City, culminating in Mamdani’s victory—share one basic thing. In each case, an organization, DSA, has sustained, over a period of years, through ups-and-downs and significant changes in the political environment, a project to link together the political struggle against capitalism and the social struggle to defend the interests of ordinary working people.

This linkage of social and political contention is, I argue, the key issue for advancing democratic politics in the mid-twenty-first century. By many measures, political and social democracy are in decline around the world (Nord et al. 2025). In Donald Trump's United States, both domestic politics and foreign policy have taken a profoundly authoritarian turn, one that is equally hostile to liberals, socialists, LGBTQ people, immigrants, and the labor movement alike, in favor of billionaires, bosses, militarists, and apologists for genocide. In this context, this dissertation tries to offer an answer to a big question: How can democratic decline be reversed—not just through temporary electoral victories, but sustainably, over time?

I have already suggested some of the ways in which this might be possible, through discussions of the undergraduate labor movement and the project to elect socialists in America's largest city. In this literature review chapter, I attempt to set out a more systematic answer, at a fairly high level of abstraction. In doing so I will also introduce some of the main reference points for thinking about my case. First, I discuss some of the fundamental assumptions that guide my analysis. Second, I consider the problem of democracy. Third, I make a specific argument about the nature of parties and partisanship, and contrast this conception to some prevailing themes in political science and sociology.

For a materialist political sociology

My approach to the question of democratic decline and renewal starts from premises that are sociological and materialist. As a rule, political sociologists think about politics in terms of its social aspects: of voters and voting blocs, of interest groups and civil society. Sociologists emphasize the ways in which political institutions and actors are influenced by pre-political, extra-political, or non-political social forces (Clemens 2016). Political scientists, on the other hand, are more inclined to think of political phenomena—the state, the policy process, the party system—in terms of their own endogenous mechanisms. This can produce powerful insights but also a certain narrowness. Political scientists struggle to think about politics as something that takes place outside of conventional institutions like elections, established parties, or states themselves. For political science, the main actors of interest are those already in the political game. Sociology, on the other hand, offers better tools to think about “contentious” politics (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), the kind that takes place outside of, and against, the normal political process. The classic form of such contentious politics is the social movement: broad, sustained challenges by excluded groups fighting for entry into the political game and for the rights and recognition this entails.

But though sociologists have a broader view of politics than political scientists, they arguably share a set of deeper assumptions about the nature of political and social conflict. Vivek Chibber, a sociologist, puts it like this:

The defining characteristic of mainstream sociology, and of the political theory that flows from it, is that there is no fundamental and enduring conflict of interests in society. There are passing conflicts, there are passing coalitions, but there are no deep chasms that endure and which on an ongoing basis pit groups against one another. (Chibber 2016)

This view travels under different names, including pluralism and liberalism, but usually appears as an unstated assumption lurking in the background of a particular analysis. It manifests, for example, in the relative absence of class analysis in social movement theory, despite the field's early roots in political economy (Hetland and Goodwin 2013; McAdam 2022). In another corner of political sociology, scholars in the neo-Gramscian “political articulation” school (de Leon, Desai, and Tugal 2015) argue that sociologists should bring parties back into theories of civil society, as powerful agents for “articulating” patterns of identity in the electorate. But in a perceptive critique, Dylan Riley observes that this work hews dangerously close to a kind of “political determinism” that discounts the objective limits on how parties can articulate political groups into being, limits imposed by the class structure (2015:184).

Finally, a recent synthesis of work on parties and movements in American political development (Tarrow 2021) does much to break down the artificial walls separating the study of institutional and contentious politics. But it largely avoids discussing the impact of transformations in the American political economy on partisan organization and program. Tarrow neglects, for example, the post-1970s dismemberment of the labor movement in explaining the rightward shift of the

Democratic Party. The political sociology literature has made many important contributions to the study of parties, movements, and the connections between them. But the field has arguably forgotten Charles Tilly's foundational statement, in *From Mobilization to Revolution*, that "[o]ver the long run, the reorganization of production creates the chief historical actors, the major constellations of interests, the basic threats to those interests, and principal conditions for transfers of power" (1978:194).

The alternative perspective suggested by Chibber—that there is a “deep chasm” in society which structures patterns of observed social and political conflict—is traditionally described as materialist. Elsewhere, Chibber describes the key elements of materialism as a social and political theory (2024).³⁹ Materialist theory assumes that social agents' motivations and capacities for action are shaped in fundamental ways by their economic positions. All human beings irrespective of culture possess some common basic interests, including access to food, shelter, safety, and time for sleep and leisure. As individuals, actors have many other “higher” interests besides these, such as starting a family or pursuing creative projects. But the basic, or material, interests are unique in that they are a precondition for satisfying any higher interest. This implies that no social actor can sustain any course of action that systematically conflicts with their material interests, on penalty of severe and usually unacceptable physical costs. The fact that agents pursue lines of action that minimally conform to their material

³⁹ For a lucid philosophical exposition of materialism, see Timpanaro (1980). My usage of the term should not be confused with so-called “new materialism”, which imputes agency to physical objects and aspects of non-human nature. For a devastating critique, see Malm (2018).

interests is grounds for describing their action as *rational*, though we do not need to assume that rational action is either maximizing or strictly economic.⁴⁰

What does this have to do with the “chasm?” As it turns out, though the basic material interests are universal properties of human beings, the conditions under which people satisfy these basic interests are *not* universal. They are, rather, determined by an economic system in which the great majority of people, workers, must sell their labor to a small minority that controls economic assets. This small minority, capitalists, find that they must continuously economize on costs to compete effectively with one another. This, in turn, imposes costs on workers, as capitalists work constantly to minimize wages and intensify the labor-process. Workers, in turn, have a universal interest in resisting this pressure, by individual and sometimes collective means. This is a structural situation that Erik Olin Wright calls “antagonistic interdependence” (Wright 2000). It is characteristic of capitalism both at the micro-level (of employers and employees in particular firms) and the macro-level (of political struggle over economic and social policy). This is the “fundamental and enduring” conflict of interest running through society, as Chibber puts it. It is a defining feature of capitalism, and is today a virtually universal fact of human society.

None of these points are commonly disputed by liberal or pluralist theorists of politics. But I believe they are rarely taken as seriously as they ought to be. What do they imply for politics? The materialist view predicts that political life will be structured as

⁴⁰ For a defense of a “satisficing” approach to rationality in social theory, see Collins (1994).

conflicts of material interest, not ideas or identities. In a class-divided society, this means that political struggle will be shaped by the interests and capacities of social classes, as these take shape in parties operating in the democratic game. It does *not* predict, however, that politics will normally be “about” class issues. The fact that capitalists are very few in number means that they can never win an election on the strength of their own votes. Organizing politics openly in terms of class would be, for capitalists, suicidal. Rather, the rich are obliged everywhere to represent politics either in the image of a “universalistic model of society composed of individuals-citizens,” or along some particularistic lines—racial, ethnic, confessional, linguistic—that defuse working-class solidarity (Przeworski and Sprague 1986:10).

Where possible, parties representing the interests of workers will be organized out of the system entirely, and the issues of greatest interest to them—say, Medicare for All, or doing away with the military-industrial complex—pushed off the agenda.⁴¹ In their place will be substituted debates engaging the interests of factions within the capitalist bloc. The specific range of issues tied to workers, those that engage either their immediate or fundamental interests, will never appear unless they are *forced* into the system by the eruption of a new party, faction, or movement. This was, for example, the political pattern of the post-Civil War U.S., and it is true also of our own present-day Gilded Age (Karp 2021).

⁴¹ As E.E. Schattschneider observed, “The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (quoted in Mair 1997:947). Cf. Lukes (2021).

Materialism has never been just an academic idea. It was, in fact, the common denominator of most tendencies of the socialist movement before the 1970s. Socialist and labor parties of all stripes operated within a worldview that took for granted the centrality of the class divide in society, and clearly picked a side in that divide, that of the working class—whether this was defined narrowly as the industrial, manual proletariat or more broadly, as including those employed in the tertiary or service sector. The materialist perspective thus forms part of the historical background of my case. In Chibber’s view, materialist theory “guided the most enduring and most successful social movements the world has ever seen.” For socialists, materialist politics did not involve seeking out any random voter who might agree with the party’s program and values. Instead, the point was to unite and mobilize a large constituency already “organized” objectively by the class structure. Chibber describes what this implied for party strategy:

That constituency, the working class, was not defined by virtue of its attitudes or the values that it held at any particular moment but on an assessment of its objective interests. Political alignments were predicted on the basis of interests, not on attitudes or normative orientations. Indeed, if the attitudes of class members happened to diverge from their interests, it never deterred parties from trying to organize them. The goal was to work with the constituency so that its attitudes could be brought into line with its interests. (2024)

In doing so, socialist party cadres not only addressed themselves to cohesive and pre-existing working-class cultures. More often, in fact, parties were engaged in the active work of raising the salience of class and helping (say) Catholic artisans in Bavaria

(Lidtke 1985), Black sharecroppers in Alabama (Kelley 2024), or multi-ethnic immigrant steelworkers in western Pennsylvania (Rosenberg 2022) to think of themselves as members of a single group—ultimately, a group that extended around the world, across boundaries of nation and culture.

This essential distinction—between objective class position and subjective class identity—is very old. It was drawn by Karl Marx when he wrote in *The Poverty of Philosophy* of the transformation of the proletariat from an unconscious class “in-itself” to a self-conscious class “for-itself” (Tucker 1978:218). It is also present in the *Communist Manifesto*’s declaration that “The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties: *formation of the proletariat into a class*, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat” (ibid.:484, emphasis added). This latter passage is important because of the stress it lays on the contingency and political agency involved in class formation. Encouraged by the remarkable growth of labor movements and socialist parties in Europe from the 1880s onwards, Marxists in the generations after Marx sometimes wrote as if the forward march of labor was a natural or inexorable process. But a materialist perspective does not commit us to believing that working-class organization is in any way inevitable. In fact, the properties of the class structure itself constantly tend to undermine workers’ attempts at organization.⁴²

⁴² This section is strongly influenced by the sociological theory of class structure recently developed by Chibber (2017; 2022) and in a more philosophical manner by Søren Mau (2023). For an earlier statement, see Offe and Wessenthal (1980).

In particular, the near-absolute power of capitalists over workers in the sphere of production is a major obstacle to class organization. Because workers' interests are so tied up with their employment, collective action against employers is highly risky. Non-class forms of organization and collective identity—those formed around kinship, religion, race, language, ethnicity—do not face this same obstacle (one cannot be fired from their church). This means that working people will often find themselves leaning on non-class (in reality, mixed-class) associations that can erect various kinds of social closure over segments of the labor market. The modal form of working-class response to the basic problems of life, then, will be neither resistance nor consent, but *resignation* and resort to non-class forms of association to get ahead or merely to survive.

Though strands of informal class-based solidarity can and do persist everywhere under capitalism, elevating class solidarity to an organizing principle of individual and group identities usually hinges on the conscious interventions of particular special individuals: organizers. Such organizers are distinguished by, first, their greater tolerance for the risks and costs of class-based organizing, and second, their beliefs in the necessity of class-based struggle. Except in the rarest historical moments of social conflict—revolutionary situations—never more than a small fraction of the class consists of such organizers. When and where organizers' beliefs generalize from particular struggles against local elites to include some orientation towards the state—in order, for example, to win some durable legal reform to safeguard workers' rights—we can speak of these class organizers as political actors, their form of activity as partisan in nature,

and their local organization as a kind of party. Since the birth of modern, state-oriented working-class politics in the 1830s, the name assumed everywhere by this politics (and ascribed to it by its adversaries) is socialism (van der Linden 2023).

There is one further implication for working-class politics imposed by the class structure, which concerns the nature of the objectives pursued by workers in the course of economic and political struggle. Erik Olin Wright distinguishes between “immediate” and “fundamental” class interests: “Immediate class interests constitute interests within a given structure of social relations; fundamental interests centre on interests which call into question the structure of social relations itself” (1978:89-90). For workers, immediate interests are defined by market position, whereas fundamental interests concern workers’ interests in abolishing the class structure of capitalism itself. Wright identifies a persistent tendency for workers’ fundamental, long-run interests in a socialist mode of production to be displaced by the pursuit of their immediate, short-run interests for reforms within capitalism. The formation of socialist parties capable of pursuing programmatic political struggle has been a necessary but not sufficient condition for resisting this displacement mechanism. As Wright observes, the entry of socialist parties into parliamentary politics has been accompanied everywhere by a tendency to dilute and remove long-term socialist objectives in favor of reforms to manage capitalism, otherwise known as reformism (234).

This fact has spurred considerable debate on possible counter-mechanisms for resisting this tendency and preserving the integrity of the socialist “final goal.” Perhaps

five can be identified. First, socialists can opt for intransigent fidelity to fundamental interests even at risk of marginalizing themselves from workers' immediate economic struggles. This is the option of sectarianism. In the history of the American socialist movement, sectarianism has a long tradition. Both the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) and the Socialist Party (SPA) were sectarian for long stretches of their history (Isserman 2024; Lipset and Marks 2000). Second, socialists can opt out of the political struggle itself by avoiding participation in state institutions, and even avoiding specifically partisan organization. This is the traditional strategy of anarchists and syndicalists, such as the International Workers of the World (IWW) in the first two decades of the 20th century (Cannon 1955).

Sectarianism and syndicalism have long and almost unremitting histories of failure as political strategies for the working class. But three other possible mechanisms seem more promising. Crucially, each accepts the necessity of partisan participation on the terrain of the state. The first makes a distinction between “reformist” and “non-reformist” (or “structural”) reforms, with the latter understood as “reforms at the level of immediate interests which, even in non-revolutionary situations, tend to reinforce struggles over fundamental interests” (Wright 1978:91). For example, U.S. socialists argue that Bernie Sanders’s Medicare for All reform—a universally-guaranteed right to health care—would have significant downstream effects by boosting workers’ capacities for further collective action (Fong and Offenbacher 2019).

The second concerns the state-civil society relation, by highlighting the role of social movements “outside” the state as a way to counterbalance pressures towards moderation “inside” (Poulantzas 1978). The potential of movement-rooted party politicians to resist cooptation has already been suggested by the example of NYC-DSA’s electoral project, which has generally been a thorn in the side of the establishment Democratic Party. And third, there is the role of inner-party democracy in empowering rank-and-file partisans to prevent the opportunistic drift of party leaders and representatives in office and hold the party on a consistent path of deepening reforms. For example, the stifling of inner-party democracy among European social democratic and communist parties in the 1970s and early 1980s was an important precondition for these parties’ turn towards neoliberalism in the mid-1980s onwards (Ostberg 2024; Myers 2025). The absence of an empowered membership structure in the Democratic Party and in most progressive Democratic presidential campaigns over the same period arguably played a similar role (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024).

Probably some combination of these three mechanisms is necessary. But this takes us beyond the premises of materialism and into more contingent questions of strategy and institution-building. The salient point to make here is simply that socialist organizers-partisans cannot escape the dilemma of immediate and fundamental interests—or reform and revolution, to use the classical terms—because it is posed by the class structure itself.

These are the basic conceptual pieces involved in a materialist political sociology, at least as this concerns the study of socialism: interests, rationality, class structure, organizational logics, and the contradiction between immediate and fundamental interests. Thinking in these terms does not mean “reducing” all politics to class, nor does it mean that every aspect of my case—contemporary democratic socialism in the U.S.—can be explained in terms of political economy. In fact, this framework leaves open a significant margin of *contingency* in politics. Anyone who has ever tried their hand in politics of any kind will understand how socially *under*-determined it is. As sociologists and political scientists rightly emphasize, parties and movements have strategic agency in pursuing opportunities and responding to threats. At the micro-level, the skills, discipline, and *habitus* of organizers can be the difference between success and failure.

Chibber’s own framework—an elaboration of classical Marxist theory—is indeed “structuralist” but only in the sense that it locates and defends a kind of central zone of determination against theorists who would discard the notion of class-based interests *tout court*. Class structure determines the distribution of interests and capacities. Class formation, on the other hand, is the domain of cultural and political work, agency, and strategy to realize interests and exercise capacities. In this connection, the qualities of partisans-organizers become crucial. In the third part of this literature review, I return to this question of socialist partisanship. But first, there is the problem of democracy.

Democratic decline and working-class politics

A central argument of this dissertation is that democratic renewal hinges on reviving working-class politics: forms of struggle for state power anchored by workers' collective agency, especially as this is organized by means of political parties. The argument I set out intervenes in a broader set of debates about strategies for reversing the authoritarian drift of Western and especially American politics.⁴³ Political scientists have developed three strands of thinking about democratic decline in the U.S. First, comparative politics specialists like Stephen Levitsky and Lucan Way (2020; 2025) point to the worldwide spread of “competitive authoritarianism,” in which democratic contestation remains real but increasingly unfair owing to the “weaponization of the state” by governing incumbents. Changes of power remain theoretically possible under competitive authoritarian regimes, but practically impossible. The literature on competitive authoritarianism and other quasi-democratic “hybrid regimes” provides valuable empirical insights into how autocrats from Hungary to Honduras have corrupted democratic institutions in the decades since the crest of the “third wave” of democratization in the 1990s. But it is arguably marred by a focus on the deficient norms of political elites—their tolerance, civility, and adherence to liberal rules of the game—rather than the pressures of material interest which can lead elites to drop the mask of liberalism.⁴⁴

⁴³ Though I cannot review them here, debates on democratic decline and “post-democracy” have also been lively among theoretically-oriented historians. For a brilliant survey, see Tooze (2018b).

⁴⁴ For a critique, see Maisano (2019). The form of autocratization playing out in the Trump 2.0 era is also notably different from the classic competitive-authoritarian sequences in countries like Hungary and

Second, scholars of civil society like Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett (2020) and Lainey Newman and Theda Skocpol (2024) emphasize the decline of rooted civic organizations and, in particular, labor unions. Democratic erosion is downstream from the erosion of civil society and the shift from “membership to management” in civic life (Skocpol 2003). Third, a few scholars have addressed the vexed problem of party-system reform. Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld (2024) and Tabatha Abu El-Haj and Didi Kuo (2022) make the case for rebuilding parties as rooted organizations that are present in ordinary people’s lives year-round, not just during election season. More ambitiously, Lee Drutman (2020) argues for electoral system reform to break the “two-party doom loop” with a proportional representation system.

Sociologists, for their part, have concentrated on the democratic potential of movements and community organizations outside the formal political system. From the perspective of the climate movement, sociologist Dana Fisher (2024) argues for a radical strategy of disruptive protest to compel rapid climate action from unresponsive governments, circumventing the party system. Sociologist and organizer Jane McAlevey

Russia, in that Trump (unlike Orban or Putin during their periods of ascendance) lacks a clear majority of popular support for his program. He is now directly repressing his political enemies and mobilizing the military *before* consolidating political support. This is in some ways a more dangerous and unstable ruling strategy—if indeed Trump can be said to have a coherent “strategy” at all (Radersdorf 2025). Another possible analogy that suggests itself, the two Red Scares of American history (1919-1921 and 1947-1960), differs from the present moment in that these were thoroughly bipartisan projects. Trump and his cronies, by contrast, have declared the Democratic Party itself a “domestic extremist organization”, and have targeted mainstream Democratic figures like New York Attorney General Letitia James. Eric Blanc notes that there are “Lots of downsides to the Left’s strategy of insurgent primaries within the Democratic Party, but 1 major—and overlooked—upside is that it makes authoritarian crackdowns on socialism more of a partisan (Republican) issue, which creates more political space for us to survive & grow” (2025).

(2021) focuses her attention on the power of the labor movement to fight for democracy in the economy, not just the government. And Elizabeth McKenna, Hahrie Han, and Michelle Oyakawa (2021) highlight the power of membership-based community organizing groups to serve as “prisms of the people” in the absence of rooted political parties.

Though informed by these recent currents in political science and sociology, my own perspective is anchored in an alternative tradition of theory which argues for the centrality of working-class politics in the historical emergence of democracy around the world. The key authors in this tradition are Göran Therborn (2020 [1970]), Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens (1992), and more recently Adaner Usmani (2018). These authors broadly emphasize the centrality of class analysis to understanding the trajectory of democracy. This should be immediately qualified in several ways, consistent with our earlier discussion of materialism. First, unlike in economic life, in politics it is notoriously difficult to reliably perceive and act on one’s interests. A farmworker might feel confident that an economy with more and better rural jobs is in her interest. But how is she to choose between a party that promises better jobs through public investment in rural education, and another party that promises the same through tax cuts and restrictions on immigration? Rational action is difficult under conditions of uncertainty. Second, classes are rarely if ever lined up in their entirety behind a particular political party or coalition. Each social class is divided into various segments and groups, each with sectoral interests overlaying their

class interests. And individuals are even more idiosyncratic. One can find aristocratic communists and fascist workers. But this literature predicts that, on the whole, the central tendencies of politics will be determined by the relative interests and capacities of social classes as they contend with one another in the economy, state, and civil society.

Midcentury social scientists emphasized the importance of the middle class or, more diffusely, liberal values of tolerance and moderation, as the key factors in achieving democracy. As Barrington Moore famously put it, “no bourgeois, no democracy” (1966:418). This body of work rightly emphasized the role of landlords as democracy’s chief antagonists. But as Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992) point out, modernization theory erred in assuming that either the broad middle class or capitalists necessarily have a very strong interest in advancing democracy, at least not in the sense of universal suffrage. Curiously, the overestimation of capitalist responsibility for democracy was mirrored by orthodox Marxist-Leninist theory (and communist practice), which generally treated liberal democracy as merely “bourgeois,” a sham with little real meaning for workers.⁴⁵

Against both the academic and Marxist orthodoxy of his time, Therborn argued that democracy was in large part the product of historical workers’ struggles: “The Second International [of workers’ parties, founded 1889] went down in ignominious

⁴⁵ The denigration of liberal democracy and civil liberties as “bourgeois” was, in Chibber’s estimation, a “calamitous mistake” by the communist movement in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917, one that greatly contributed to the weakness of communist politics in the West (2018).

disarray in 1914, but its contribution to the development of bourgeois democracy was certainly not insubstantial. Indeed, democracy may be said to have been its principal historical accomplishment” (2020:98). In this regard, he echoed a great theorist of that International, Rosa Luxemburg, who seventy years before Therborn articulated the deep connection between the socialist and democratic movements, in a passage worth quoting at length:

In view of that fact that bourgeois liberalism has given up the ghost from fear of the growing labor movement and its final aim, we conclude that the socialist labor movement is today the only support for democracy. *We must conclude that the socialist movement is not bound to bourgeois democracy but that, on the contrary, the fate of democracy is bound up with the socialist movement.* Democracy does not acquire greater chances of survival to the extent that the socialist movement renounces the struggle for its emancipation; on the contrary, democracy acquires greater chances of survival as the socialist movement becomes sufficiently strong to struggle against the reactionary consequences of world politics and the bourgeois desertion of democracy. He who would strengthen democracy must also want to strengthen and not weaken the socialist movement. He who renounces the struggle for socialism renounces both the labor movement and democracy. (Luxemburg 2008:88, my emphasis)⁴⁶

Yet as both Luxemburg and Therborn were aware, workers were never able to achieve extensions of the suffrage and parliamentary government on their own. For this they depended on class alliances with farmers and parts of the middle class, alliances which were not always available. In some countries, strong landed elites could exploit bourgeois fears about socialism or coerce dependent peasants to deprive workers’ parties of allies. As the tragic examples of interwar Germany, Austria, and Italy

⁴⁶ This passage appears in Luxemburg’s classic pamphlet *Reform or Revolution*, published in 1898.

demonstrated, the workers' movement was unable to win or defend democracy if it was the only major social force fighting for it.⁴⁷

Workers may have needed allies to win the “battle of democracy,” but they themselves were the social force with the most consistent interest in democracy. Why? Workers' interest in democracy arises from a simple fact about capitalism: it does not require democracy. Since its origins in 17th century England, capitalism has been compatible with a wide array of political systems. In the twentieth century, capitalist regime types have included absolutist monarchies like Saudi Arabia, empires like the British, military-bureaucratic dictatorships like Brazil (1964-1985), fascist states like Nazi Germany, and state-capitalist regimes like China post-1978, as well as liberal and social democracies. The historical experience of the working class has been that democratic rights and institutions—freedom of speech and organization, universal suffrage, legislative sovereignty—are key prerequisites for advancing their material interests and pushing back the market. Before the hardening of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy dismissing “bourgeois” democracy, socialist debates in the era of the Second International took for granted the importance of struggling for political liberties. In his famous “Commentary” on the Erfurt Programme of the German Social Democratic Party, Karl Kautsky wrote:

⁴⁷ Interestingly, this is one area where the American socialist movement was clearly superior to its European counterparts. At its height the Socialist Party of America had deep roots in rural areas among small farmers and agricultural laborers, including in states like Oklahoma and Nebraska. The causes of socialism's failed consolidation in the U.S. are not to be found in the countryside, at least not during the era of the Second International.

On this account, wherever the working-class has endeavored to improve its economic position it has made political demands, especially demands for a free press and the right of assemblage. These privileges are to the proletariat the prerequisites of life; they are the light and air of the labor movement. Whoever attempts to deny them, no matter what his pretensions, is to be reckoned among the worst enemies of the working-class. (Kautsky 1892)

Capitalists have been, on the other hand, ambivalent supporters of democracy, because their material interests in it are mixed. Liberal democracy can keep social conflict within safe bounds in a way that “low-inclusion” political regimes cannot, by providing a kind of safety-valve short of revolution (Blanc 2021). Under certain conditions, capitalists may even possess a collective interest in social democracy, insofar as this helps them resolve collective action problems through rationalized systems of collective bargaining at the industrial level (Wright 2000). But these interests in democracy are balanced against others that push strongly in a different direction—namely, the risk that extensions of democratic freedoms might embolden those without economic assets to organize unions, tax profits, and perhaps even expropriate property to meet social needs (Kalecki 1943). In other words, capitalists may become accustomed to formal, political democracy. But they will fiercely resist attempts to establish deeper forms of substantive democracy.

As an economic system, capitalism is indeed associated with democracy, but this is not because capitalists have ever been strong proponents of it. Rather, capitalism advances democracy because it undermines the power of agrarian landlords and creates a large constituency of people able to fight for a share of political power: workers

(Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992). This argument about democracy was first developed in comparative-historical sociology, but in a large-scale quantitative analysis of almost 200 countries from the 19th century to the present, Usmani (2018) confirms the theory. He finds support for the proposition that the “disruptive capacity” of nonelites—strikes, protests, and more generally “organized withdrawal” from everyday routine—is the key factor determining the success of democratic transitions. Landlord capacity is conversely the key factor explaining the failure of such transitions.

The historical contribution of working-class socialism to achieving (capitalist) democracy is well-established. But is there reason to believe that workers can still defend democracy today, long after it was first achieved in most advanced capitalist countries? The question hinges on whether (a) the working class still retains the combination of *interest* and *capacity* that once gave it such a central role in advancing democracy, and (b) whether there exist possibilities for alliances between workers and other classes to defend democracy. The idea that workers have lost their interest in a more equitable distribution of power in society is, on its face, implausible. It may be argued that the established ways in which democracy has been institutionalized—namely, through representative government—may have become less appealing. International survey evidence suggests that support for representative democracy has indeed been in decline. However, these same surveys also show that support for the idea of democracy itself remains strong, while the ideas of dictatorship or military rule remain deeply unpopular (Wike et al. 2024). But even if subjective

support for *any* conception of democracy was marginal—and thankfully it is not—from a materialist standpoint this would be beside the point. The basic interests of working people today are no different than they were a century ago: to gain autonomy and security in their daily lives, which in turn requires having an equal voice in the political (and perhaps the economic) system.

Workers have not lost their interest in democracy, either in its liberal or social variants. Are there still allies available to them in the struggle to defend and deepen democracy? Here again the answer seems to be yes. The worldwide landscape of class politics has undoubtedly been transformed compared to the 1870-1945 period when the advanced capitalist countries were originally democratized. Crucially, the class of rural landlords presiding over labor-repressive agriculture has vanished almost everywhere, removing the class at the core of traditional authoritarian coalitions. With them have also gone large classes of independent farmers, usually pro-democratic and allies of labor. Speaking generally, from the middle of the twentieth century, the class structure throughout the West shifted to a post-industrial configuration, with a relative decrease in the size of the workforce employed in manufacturing and an increase in the proportion employed in services. In recent decades, revolutions in information and communications technology have disrupted old industries and given new importance to workers employed in the tech sector, while empowering a grotesquely wealthy set of billionaire capitalists like Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg.

Though the traditional basis of authoritarianism was liquidated by urbanization and the mechanization of agriculture, a new authoritarian coalition has emerged around the world, drawing on both older traditions of hard-right movement conservatism and new populist energies ascendant since the 2008 financial crisis. Speaking very broadly, following the world-historic defeat of the labor movement and the socialist left in the 1980s and 1990s, the capitalist class in most countries no longer felt the need for unified business organizations to secure a profitable investment environment. Without organizations able to organize a class-wide rationality for big business, factions of business and even wealthy individual capitalists could strike out on their own politically.

In the United States, this process of elite disorganization played out dramatically within the Republican Party over a period of about 15 years. After the 2008 financial crisis and the defeat of the moderate Republican John McCain by Barack Obama, the Republicans—the traditional party of American business—suffered a dual revolt within their coalition. A hard-right libertarian faction of business grouped around oil billionaires Charles and David Koch rebelled against the neoconservative establishment of the party represented by the Bush family, while a grassroots insurgency—supported by the Koch’s Americans for Prosperity group—took off in the form of the Tea Party. The faction of business aligned with the Koch group was weighted towards domestic manufacturing, agribusiness, and fossil fuel capitalists.

The right-wing rebellion from above and below scored numerous downballot victories against moderate Republicans from 2010 onwards, and was influential in

nominating Mitt Romney and pushing him to the right in the 2012 presidential contest (though Romney was unpopular with the Tea Party base). The vulnerability of Republicans to direct outside spending was compounded by changes in campaign financing regulations and the party's own norms for fundraising going back to the Newt Gingrich era. Like parties elsewhere around the world, the GOP was becoming "hollowed," with control over candidates, money, and messaging slipping out of the hands of traditional party elites (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2024). But the party's disorganization was downstream of breakup and balkanization within the donor class. This was revealed dramatically in 2016, when a rich celebrity outsider, Donald Trump, defeated both the moderate faction (represented by Jeb Bush) *and* the candidates preferred by the maverick Koch wing of donors, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio.

Trump captivated the radicalized Tea Party base with a message that combined strident populist vitriol against liberals and immigrants with savvy attacks on the Republican establishment and promises to preserve Social Security and Medicare. Trump's MAGA base consists of two major groups, one petty-bourgeois, consisting of small capitalists and an exurban "gentry" (Wyman 2021), and the other consisting of retirees and "guard labor" in the working and middle class—the security services, police, supervisors. Trump would not have been able to win in 2016 or 2024 without working-class voters, but his electoral coalition needs to be distinguished carefully from his MAGA base. In the 2016 general election, Trump's populist message cut through

with blue-collar voters in key swing states who were alienated by an unpopular Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton.

The rise of Trump against the wishes of organized capitalist interests, and the strength of his personalist grip over the party, have naturally invited comparisons to fascism and Bonapartism (Riley 2017). What seems to be happening is that Trump's shock-and-awe campaign has rapidly shifted the calculus among capitalists about what is politically possible, at the same time as they have been relatively disempowered within the Republican Party itself. From the point of view of democracy in the U.S. and abroad, the major political question of the 2020s is whether the anti-democratic—or neo-fascist—*political* coalition actually has a firm *social* basis behind it. Though Trump retains an iron grip over his party, it is unclear how long he can retain the confidence of business, especially as he implements an ultra-aggressive tariff policy and destabilizes the Federal Reserve.

Domestic capitalists dependent on immigrant labor or on imports may at some point come into open conflict with the administration. However, capital as a whole has not yet rebelled against Trump's authoritarianism in any meaningful way. In the months following the disputed 2020 presidential election, the CEOs of the Business Roundtable—once considered the most powerful collective voice of big capital—sent loud signals to Republicans that they expected a peaceful transfer of power to the Democrats. But in 2025, the Roundtable has refrained from openly criticizing the administration (Sonnenfeld and Tian 2025). Trump has been remarkably willing to use

his bully pulpit against corporations that dissent from his policies on trade, including giants like Wal-Mart (Romm 2025).

Fear of Trump and the MAGA base is certainly a factor, given Trump's willingness to retaliate using the regulatory machinery of the federal government. More darkly, it is possible that business is concerned about physical threats. This is not implausible in the wake of multiple recent instances of violence against corporate elites in downtown Manhattan, including the assassination of a health insurance CEO and a mass shooting at the headquarters of the Blackstone Group. But for the business elite, fear may be mixed with other feelings. American neo-fascism might be profitable. Capital is waiting and watching to see if Trump can really get away with his project. A kind of managed democracy akin to Putin's Russia, one in which protests are tightly controlled, elections rigged, unions smashed, and the legislature meek, may be acceptable or even preferable to American capitalists, *if* the system can be stabilized and rationalized.

So goes the authoritarian coalition. Who is opposed to it? It should be kept in mind that Trump did not by any means win an overwhelming majority in the 2024 popular vote, and his party failed in several important Senate races. For all the talk of a major right-wing realignment occurring in 2024, Trump's margin of victory looked nothing like past realignment elections, most notably Ronald Reagan's 1980 election. The class coalition opposed to him remains large, though badly disorganized and demoralized.

There are three major class groups with a material interest in opposing Trump's agenda. The first consists of the fraction of business that is internationally-oriented and competitive on world markets, which sells to a domestic market of consumers with liberal tastes, and/or which depends on a highly-educated, urban, and liberal professional workforce (including skilled immigrant workers). These are capitalists in finance, entertainment, defense, biotechnology, and other knowledge-economy industries; domestic manufacturing firms in high-tech supply chains and renewable energy; and service-sector giants like Starbucks. In 2024, however, some of the biggest tech capitalists shifted towards Trump's coalition, alienated by Democratic support for antitrust enforcement and for labor organizing efforts in their industries, fearful of possible retaliation for their past opposition to the GOP's culture war, and sensing opportunities for using political power to secure market share and government contracts, especially for military "hard tech" production. However, Trump's tariffs and fiscal policies may push some of these capitalists back into the arms of the Democrats.

The second major class group opposed to Trump and committed to liberal democratic institutions are highly-skilled middle-class professionals with educational credentials. Before the 1980s, middle-class professionals were split between the liberal wings of the Democratic and Republican parties, but they shifted firmly into the Democratic camp by the 2010s. Some of these professionals are employed as managers, while others are non-managerial experts, either self-employed or with high job autonomy. This group includes doctors, lawyers, professors, engineers, and scientists, in

the private and especially the public sector. Trump's assault on expertise and institutions like universities and public sector agencies poses an existential threat to these groups.

Finally, there is the working class itself. For all the rhetoric about the Republican Party becoming a "working-class party," dealignment from the Democratic Party has not, on the whole, meant realignment into the Republican coalition (Meyer 2025). Why then did Trump gain so much with working-class voters in 2024? The Democrats' share of non-college educated voters fell from 47% in 2020 to 43% four years later. Measured by income, the party suffered a six-point decline among voters making less than \$50,000 per year, from 54% in 2020 to 48% in 2024 (Abbott 2024). Alarming for Democrats, the shifts were especially pronounced among lower-income Black and especially Hispanic voters, long thought to be securely in the Democratic camp.

Why did workers vote for an authoritarian candidate openly supported by oligarchs? The answer has to do with the difficulty of accurately perceiving and pursuing interests in the political arena, which we have already noted, and with the acute sense of economic strain felt across a broad swath of society in the second half of Joe Biden's presidency. Working-class voters recalled Trump's first term as a time of relative prosperity. During his campaign Trump stressed themes of inflation and bringing down prices, however disingenuously. With his tariff policies, Trump also tapped into a deep well of resentment among a sector of workers towards the free trade policies pursued by Democrats since the 1990s.

Trump's victory in the popular vote was a psychological blow for liberals, and encouraged Republicans to believe that they had been given a sweeping mandate to implement their program. But nine months later, claims that the election signified a deep shift among workers towards MAGA politics now seem grossly exaggerated. On issue after issue, ranging from the economy to his tax policies to trade, Trump's approval ratings have been poor. His most authoritarian moves, like deportations of immigrants without due process or deployments of National Guard troops into Los Angeles and Washington, D.C, poll even worse. This is not a picture of a party with a hegemonic project and deep social roots, but rather of a radicalized minority exploiting weaknesses in a polarized two-party system to carry out its project, by force if necessary. The overall picture is one of a divided and desperate working class that lacks any options it finds satisfactory. Lower-income and non-college educated voters are politically split, when they vote at all.

There are two major obstacles to re-anchoring democratic coalitions in the working class. The first concerns the *capacities* of workers. Erik Olin Wright (2000) distinguishes between what he calls the "structural" and "associational" powers of workers. The former denotes power held by workers simply as a function of their place in the economy. Some workers—say, Starbucks baristas—have little power to directly cause an economic crisis for capitalists or a political crisis for the government. By contrast, other workers—like the engineers of the sole wastewater treatment plant in Portland, Oregon, who struck in 2023 (Ehrlich 2023)—have enormous structural

leverage. It is difficult to say that the working class, *as a whole*, has lost any of its structural power in the post-industrial economy, which depends and will continue to depend on workers positioned at high-leverage choke-points. But it seems fair to say that this structural power has become much more difficult to *use*, in a decentralized political economy where average firm size has fallen dramatically and patterns of residential and community life have been transformed by suburbanization (Blanc 2024a). In other words, in a service-based economy, structural power is now distributed more unevenly across the working class.

Shifts in the balance of workers' structural power have been accompanied by a collapse in their associational power. For Wright, associational power refers to workers' agencies of collective action, especially labor unions but also political parties. Unions are "secondary organizations" built within the framework of the "primary organization" of workers generated by the production process itself (and corresponding to workers' structural power).⁴⁸ The American labor movement was decimated from 1980 onwards at the hands of a well-coordinated assault from business and the federal government—though American unions were already in a much weaker position by the late 1970s than their counterparts abroad. The social effects of union decline are well-known, and dire for working people. The impact for democratic politics is also obvious. It is simply more difficult to mobilize workers *as workers* when they are not part of class organizations. Without unions, working people lack not only a means for defending their immediate

⁴⁸ On the distinction between primary and secondary class organization, see Offe and Weisenthal (1980).

economic interests, but also a crucial filter for assessing information about politics. While it is not realistic to think that even a powerful labor movement could unify all workers behind a single party, or even prevent some from defecting to the right, it is certainly true that union weakness has accelerated the process of class dealignment (Levitz 2019).⁴⁹ Once the right is in power, union weakness begets further decline. Weak and defensive union leaders have been depressingly quiescent in the face of Trump 2.0's scorched-earth assault on organized labor (Loomis 2025).

The second and more decisive issue concerns *political representation*, which can be taken as a specific kind of associational power. Workers in the United States and around the world have drifted away from center-left parties that once represented their interests. These parties have instead come to depend on the votes of educated professionals and the money of liberal capitalists. What is driving this process of “class dealignment” (Gethin et al. 2022) that has everywhere devastated the left and empowered the populist right? Political-economic changes that have undermined workers' power have played an important role. But narratives that assume technological change translated automatically into working-class organizational decline tend to underrate the impact of political choices made by left-wing party leaders.

⁴⁹ But note that countries with high union density have not been immunized from dealignment. In the 2022 elections which put a right-wing coalition in power, the far-right Sweden Democrats scored evenly with the center-left Social Democrats among voters without a college degree, and came in a close second among workers (Aylott and Bolin 2023). Sweden's union density among blue-collar workers was 59% in 2022, among the highest in the world (Lund University 2022).

In other words, the possibility of effective pro-democratic class alliances between workers and liberals has been badly undermined by liberals themselves, who pursued policy choices in the neoliberal era that harmed the interests of workers. Sometimes these choices were taken by leaders situated within the working class movement, especially within the executives of social democratic and communist parties (Mudge 2018; Myers 2025). In other cases, they were undertaken by leaders of liberal parties in which the labor movement has always been something of a subordinate interest group, like the Democratic Party. The choices—to deregulate industry, to restructure trade, to cooperate with conservatives in the racialized “war on the poor”—were taken under the pressures of real economic problems following the long post-war boom, but they were choices nonetheless. In the leadership circles of left parties, they were often undertaken with the conscious intention of shifting the class basis of the party. Leading factions in the Democratic Party, for example, understood perfectly well that the trade policies of the Clinton administration would devastate Democratic-voting communities in counties that depended on manufacturing. But they gambled—wrongly—that these losses would be compensated by gains among suburban professionals in the “new economy,” plus women and racial and ethnic minority groups, and that the cash of liberal capitalists would substitute for the money and people-power of labor (Meyer 2025). This shift was, of course, congenial to the party’s donor class, whose interests were not well-served by

the New Deal coalition. The betrayal by left parties preceded working-class defection, not the other way around.⁵⁰

Trump's victory in 2024 is the bitter fruit of long-term trends in American politics and political economy. The objective possibility for a class coalition that can defend and deepen democracy exists, by unifying workers and holding onto middle-class professionals. But coalitions are not self-forming on the level of politics. There are deep historical reasons for the rightward drift of workers having to do with the accumulated choices of leaders in the Democratic Party over several generations. A strategy to re-align workers back into the coalition of the left—whether into a reformed Democratic Party, or a new partisan project—hinges on understanding workers' material interests, namely their need for a politics that goes beyond the defense of formal democracy to embrace their economic needs. In his election night speech in June, Mamdani quoted FDR to make the same point, more elegantly than I can:

As Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “Democracy has disappeared in several other great nations. Not because the people dislike democracy, but because they had grown tired of unemployment and insecurity, of seeing their children hungry while they sat helpless in the face of government confusion and weakness. In desperation, they chose to sacrifice liberty in the hope of getting something to eat.” New York, if we have made one thing clear over these past months, it is that we need not choose between the two. (2025)

⁵⁰ The naïveté of the Democratic establishment concerning the liberalism of American big business was on display recently, when Kamala Harris told Rachel Maddow of MSNBC that “I've worked closely with the private sector over many years, and I always believed that if push came to shove, those titans of industry would be guardrails of our democracy, for the importance of sustaining democratic institutions” (Kochi 2025).

The issue of working-class political representation brings us to the third topic of this review: the political party.

Parties and partisans

Workers push back the economic power of capitalists through myriad kinds of association, including labor unions, works councils, and class organizations in civil society, as well as non-class associations of civic, religious, or ethnic character. At times of heightened conflict, large social movement campaigns and mass strike waves can yield political concessions from elites even in the absence of labor-based political parties (Amenta et al. 2010). But the key form of popular power, the type associated with the deepest and most sustained kinds of democratization and reform, is the political party (Calnitsky and Wind 2025).

For workers, parties have three general characteristics that other forms of organization lack. First, unlike episodic social movement organizations which come and go with waves of contention, parties are capable of carrying on political struggle in a *continuous* way attuned to the rhythm of elections and parliamentary activity. Second, parties possess the unique capacity of linking social interests directly to the exercise of state power—what political scientists term “party government” (Schattschneider 1942; Mair 2013). And third, abundant historical evidence indicates that partisan activity is not necessarily limited to institutional politics, but can also play a direct role in building social power in civil society (de Leon 2014). Taking these three characteristics together,

it is possible to imagine an organization that is permanently organized, contests for government, and yet resists any tendency towards “cartelization” within the state by maintaining organic links with civil society and social movements (Katz and Mair 2009).

Scholars in the United States have increasingly come to the same conclusion. For example, Tabatha Abu El-Haj and Didi Kuo argue for the necessity of what they call “associational party-building,” meaning an approach that emphasizes building “strong” and “participatory” parties, in the form of organizations embedded year-round in local communities and deeply tied to voters. This approach seeks to go beyond prevailing thin conceptions of parties as merely “vehicles for funding elections, policy demanders, or heuristic brands” (2022:127). Abu-El Haj and Kuo recommend legal reforms and shifts in internal party practices to empower local party organizations, party workers, and party voters over outside consultants, donors, and “outsourced” civic groups. They argue that a turn back towards associationalism could be an important step towards reducing political polarization and rebuilding a more stable party system. Their prescriptions are echoed by political scientists like Daniel Schlozman and Sam Rosenfeld (2024), who locate the sources of partisan polarization and democratic breakdown in a decades-long “hollowing” process that has afflicted the major parties.

Abu El-Haj and Kuo rightly argue that association-building is not necessarily restricted to parties of the left. They point to efforts by Republican Party leaders in swing states to invest in local party organizations that can use “peer-to-peer”

mobilization and party-sponsored social events to boost voter registration and turnout. Both the Republican and Democratic National Committees have made some moves in the direction of association-building in recent years. In general, however, both of the major parties in the U.S. remain highly disintermediated, media-driven, and candidate-centered, while their state and national committees remain some of the weakest nodes in each party's extended network. It seems very unlikely that either major party would actually be able or willing to impose discipline on their most powerful co-partisans, namely elected officials embedded in the state and empowered through direct primaries, not party-controlled nomination processes.

This is especially true of the Republican Party, which is now totally in the grip of Trump's personalist rule (Heideman 2025). While winning electoral reforms like ranked-choice elections and multi-member districts is indeed daunting, it still seems more attainable to me as a path to transforming the party system than expecting the major parties to "associationalize" themselves absent these changes.⁵¹ By arguing for electoral reforms to create a genuinely multi-party system, Lee Drutman (2020) has a more realistic understanding of the tasks for political reformers, in my view. Compelling

⁵¹ Abu El-Haj and Kuo also neglect the possibility that a well-organized party with deep ties to civil society could at the same time be authoritarian. Contra what a generation of "mass society" theorists of totalitarianism assumed, interwar fascist parties were indeed embedded in thick networks of membership associations (Riley 2019). A "strong" and "participatory" Republican Party may be more, not less, dangerous to democracy.

the major parties to rebuild themselves at the local level probably comes after, not before, electoral system reform.⁵²

However, El-Haj and Kuo's arguments may be applicable to left-wing organizers seeking to revive working-class politics from *outside* the framework of the two major parties. Under their broad heading of associational parties, we can identify several more specific historical models of party relevant to working-class politics. These include *mass parties* (Kuo 2025), *vanguard parties* (Mandel 1983), and *movement parties* (Kitschelt 2006; Della Porta et al. 2017). These are ideal types carried over from historical periods with very different social and organizational conditions than the present, so I will use them only with careful qualifications. Still, each of these three associational party models can shed light on different aspects of DSA's party-building efforts from 2016 onwards, not least because these concepts are also emic categories for contemporary socialists.

Didi Kuo provides a succinct history of the mass party, which flourished between about 1870 and 1950. "The term 'mass party,'" Kuo writes, "referred not to electoral majorities but to parties with extensive networks within specific but broad segments of society. These parties placed a premium on *representational integrity*—how well they channeled the interests of their base—rather than how savvily they conducted campaigns" (2025:24, emphasis added). In the years before and immediately after the

⁵² The effect of New York City's ranked-choice voting system in empowering a candidate, Zohran Mamdani, with a strongly associational campaigning strategy may be early evidence in favor of this proposition, though it also argues against the idea that such reforms will tend to weaken populist candidates.

first world war, mass parties like the million-member German Social Democratic Party (SPD) played a crucial role in winning suffrage and a measure of social citizenship for workers. The capacities of these enormous political organizations to secure reforms was inseparable from their organic presence in working-class communities. For example, Vernon Lidtke (1985) draws an unforgettable picture of the SPD's "alternative culture" in Wilhelmine Germany, which enveloped party members from cradle to grave in sprawling webs of association. At the turn of the century, a social-democratic worker in a party stronghold like Hamburg might be a member of a party-affiliated choral society, a socialist gymnastics club, or a workers' cycling team. They would socialize at SPD-linked taverns and would look forward to seasonal party festivals. They could read local and national party newspapers, check out books from a party library, and (if intellectually inclined) attend evening classes on Marxism at a party school. Most importantly, a socialist worker would be linked to the party through their trade union.

Party members in the SPD and other mass parties had certain formal rights and responsibilities that distinguished them from non-member party voters. Party finances were, crucially, largely provided by members' dues, and member volunteers carried out most of the labor of committees and campaigns. In exchange, members had the right to vote for their own representatives to attend regional and national party conferences, at which delegates would set the party program and elect an executive leadership. A complex sequence of political, social, and technological shifts in the mid-twentieth century transformed the SPD and other mass parties into campaigning "catch-all"

parties more focused on winning support from middle-class voters than representing the proletariat. The capacity of these parties to envelop supporters in an alternative culture declined with the erosion of rigid class-based status distinctions in post-war societies.

Kuo has no illusions about the profound historical distance separating the conditions of party politics in the 2020s from those in the early 1900s. But she makes a persuasive argument for recovering the representational *ethos* of the mass party, and in particular its tradition of year-round partisan activity at local and regional scales. She advocates bringing functions like voter mobilization and political education that have been outsourced to para-party groups back into the fold of formal party organizations. Notably, however, Kuo (and the other associationally-minded party reformers like Abu El-Haj and Schlozman and Rosenfeld) mostly omits discussion of formal party *membership*, though this was a defining feature of the classical mass parties.⁵³ With the important exceptions of the Socialist and Communist parties, which enrolled tens of thousands of members at their height, formal and participatory membership has never been a part of the culture of American party politics, despite the dense networks of membership associations that once existed around the parties.⁵⁴

⁵³ Abu El-Haj and Kuo briefly acknowledge and then dismiss the idea of reviving party membership in their essay on associational party-building: "...there is little possibility for a return to the mass-membership party organizations of the past..." (2022:165). On changing patterns of membership in Western party systems, see Scarrow (2015).

⁵⁴ Reformers in the New Politics current within the Democratic Party between 1968 and 1972 advanced a system of formal party membership as part of their proposed party Charter, but the idea was defeated by party moderates in the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (Hilton 2021).

Kuo's model of associationalism—year-round organizing with local party offices, staff, and events—would, it seems to me, generate a kind of informal party membership and improve the accountability of elected officials to those everyday partisans. But this still falls short of creating a meaningful and empowered kind of party membership—of creating formal, “card-carrying” Democrats and Republicans who pay dues, carry out political labor, and elect representatives to sovereign party conventions with effective authority over candidates and office-holders. As we will see, the idea of being a “card-carrying” socialist is an important part of DSA's appeal to its own members.

Next, Ernest Mandel (1983) gives a brilliant defense of the much-maligned concept of a “vanguard” party. Mandel, unlike the pluralist political scientists, is a materialist and grounds his idea of the party firmly in the realities of the class structure under capitalism. Vanguardism, he writes, arises from a universal fact about the consciousness and activity of the working class under capitalism, namely that it is uneven across time and space. Workers and oppressed groups are not in a permanent state of struggle—strikes, movements, and protest waves are episodic and discontinuous. Workers' consciousness—their attitudes, knowledge, motivations—moves up and down with the rhythm of economic, political, and cultural developments in the wider society. This unevenness creates the necessity and possibility for “leading groups” to emerge within the labor movement.

Mandel writes:

You need a vanguard organization in order to overcome the dangerous potential brought about by the uneven development of class militancy and class consciousness.... [y]ou need a group of people who *embody a permanently high level of militancy and activity, and a permanently high level of class consciousness....*

[The organization] serves as the permanent memory of the class and of the labor movement, memory which is codified, one way or another, in a program in which you can educate the new generation which then does not need to start from scratch in its concrete way of intervention in the class struggle. (1983:5-6, emphasis added)

This leading group exercises authority, Mandel insists, not on the basis of its organizational or administrative functions but on its claim to a superior political consciousness demonstrated in the course of struggle: “What does ‘centralization’ mean? It means centralization of experience, centralization of knowledge, centralization of conclusions drawn out of actual militancy” (1983:6, emphasis omitted). This is the idea, in Marxist idiom, of “democratic centralism.” This view of parties strongly emphasizes the continuous flux and flow of class struggle, and the need for a flexible, constantly alert and prepared organization of revolutionary leaders ready for political opportunities to emerge. The language of “vanguards,” “cadres,” and “militants” suggest an image of the party as an essentially military organization, a motif of much Marxist writing on politics.

This view of party-formation has many strengths. However, it suffers from the same weakness shared by all of the revolutionary socialist tradition, namely the assumption that a working-class revolution is a viable path to democratic socialism in a capitalist democracy. There is very little support for this proposition. Social

revolutions—movements seeking to displace incumbent governments by force, and then rapidly transform class relations using state power—have never even come close to occurring in advanced capitalist countries (Calnitsky 2022). In functioning liberal democracies, workers rationally pursue reforms short of revolution, because revolution is deeply risky and has a poor track record in deepening democracy.⁵⁵ Vanguard party theory, and Leninist politics more broadly, were deeply shaped by a historical context—absolutist Russia—in which reforms were not possible and political organization was effectively criminalized. This gave rise to a profoundly disciplined and quasi-conspiratorial Marxist political culture, which persisted even after the Tsarist autocracy was destroyed. This legacy imprinted itself deeply on both orthodox (communist) and heterodox (Trotskyist and Maoist) revolutionary socialists in the decades after 1917.

Crucially, the legacy of Leninism left self-identified revolutionaries with few intellectual resources for carrying out effective politics under normal conditions of capitalist stability. Taboos on “parliamentary cretinism” going back to Marx’s day proved ill-suited to a context where most workers remained loyal to the reformist mass parties and skeptical of parties calling for revolution. The revolutionary socialist tradition has, at best, deeply conflicted feelings about mass parties. The tradition is

⁵⁵ In my view, a political (not social) revolution may be possible in an advanced capitalist country undergoing democratic backsliding. For example, “electoral” revolutions arguably occurred in South Korea in 2017 and 2025 in response to authoritarian moves by conservative presidents. The most important recent work on revolutions seems to leave this question open. See Mark Beissinger (2021) on *The Revolutionary City*, and Jeff Goodwin (2025) for a discussion from a socialist perspective.

indeed associational in the sense that it strongly emphasizes face-to-face contacts and agitation with workers and oppressed groups in the organizations and institutional contexts where they are to be found, especially workplaces, unions, and social movements. But the idea of patiently building up local and state party organizations, training professional politicians, and governing within “bourgeois” political institutions is inherently at odds with the spirit of revolutionary socialism.⁵⁶

A genuine vanguard party in the sense described by Mandel was always unlikely to emerge under the circumstances of capitalist democracy. That said, Mandel’s theory of vanguard *organization* (as opposed to a vanguard party) seems to me an essential ingredient in facilitating a kind of reformist militancy among workers and social movements, by transmitting the lessons of movement struggle from one cycle of contention to the next. The basic facts about the unevenness of workers’ consciousness and self-activity identified by Mandel in the 1980s are even more true today, when many workers are not even familiar with labor unions or aware that their job could be unionized. Within the labor movement, only a minority of workers are continuously active in organizing their coworkers, building the union, and bridging the distance between waves of collective action. It is to these “organic leaders” that labor and socialist organizers orient themselves (McAlevey 2016). Indeed, a modified conception of “vanguardism” along these lines is influential in DSA today, though more visible in the

⁵⁶ This is not to underestimate the deep support among workers that many communist parties (and more rarely Trotskyist parties) did obtain, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. But these parties, including the CPUSA at its height, were pursuing a de facto reformist strategy, which sometimes even placed them to the right of independent (i.e. non-Soviet aligned) socialist groups.

organization's work within the labor movement than its party-building efforts in the electoral sphere.⁵⁷

Lastly, the idea of a “movement party” is more generic, and could be applied without much distortion to many of the pre-1945 mass parties and all of the genuine vanguard parties. Herbert Kitschelt gives a simple but usable definition of movement parties. These are “coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organization and strategic practice of social movements in the arena of party competition” (2006:280). Kitschelt originally used the concept to understand how environmental activists in European countries in the 1970s and 1980s shifted from the social movement field to the electoral field by founding loosely-organized and middle-class oriented Green parties, which retained a “movement” flavor into the 2000s before their eventual professionalization and incorporation into institutional politics. Later, in the 1990s in Latin America and then in the 2010s in Europe, new left-wing movement parties emerged from large anti-neoliberal protests to challenge the austerity policies pursued by established parties (Della Porta et al. 2017).

The basic idea conveyed by the phrase “movement party”—of fusing radical mass protest in civil society to an ongoing, programmatic political organization—has a much longer history on the left. Writing in an era before most workers had secured suffrage, Marx and Engels tended to use the terms “movement” and “party” interchangeably,

⁵⁷ For an account of democratic centralist organizational practices that has been influential in DSA, see Feeley, Le Blanc, and Twiss (2014).

because without suffrage and institutionalized electoral competition the conditions for a clear distinction between movement and party did not exist (von Beyme 1985). The founders of scientific socialism did not live long enough to witness or adequately theorize the many contradictions involved in advancing a revolutionary proletarian movement under conditions of electoral democracy.⁵⁸ However, an excellent example of a movement party in Kitschelt's sense of activists who "try to apply the organization and strategic practice of social movements in the arena of party competition" *did* emerge during Marx's lifetime. On the other side of the Atlantic, where (white) workers, artisans, and small farmers did have political freedoms, the middle-class Northern abolitionist movement only posed a real threat to Southern slaveholders when they shifted in the 1850s from moral suasion to class-conscious "mass politics" and assisted in founding a movement party: the Republicans (Karp 2019; Tarrow 2021).

Aiming at an associational movement-party to revive working-class politics is one thing, but actually building it is another. The sociologist Manali Desai uses the phrase *party formation* to theorize this process. Desai uses party-formation as both noun and verb to capture different senses of the "historically evolved links between a party and the civil society from which its political power is derived" (2001:37). What are these "links?" "The concept of party formation," she writes,

⁵⁸ The underdevelopment of a specifically Marxist political theory would prove a major intellectual weakness of the revolutionary left in the 20th century (Miliband 1977). This weakness was arguably present in Mandel's own treatment of vanguard organizations, insofar as he underestimated the necessity of workers' struggle within (rather than outside) the reformist mass parties of his day. For Marx's own "lost theory" of politics, sketched *in medias res* during the revolution-counterrevolution cycle of 1848-1851, see Davis (2018b).

allows us to focus on multiple dimensions of the qualitative relationship between party and social base. The concept includes the nature of ties between party and social base, the duration and circumstances under which these ties were forged, the nature of campaigns fought under party leadership, and the degree of the party's hegemony in the social and political sphere, as well as the size and membership of the party. The term also grasps the historically evolved *capacity for reform* that a party possesses, given structural and other conditions, both limiting and enabling... (2001:39, emphasis added)

Desai's approach has the virtue of seeing parties, movements, and civil society through a materialist lens, again unlike the liberal political scientists. To explain the varying fortunes of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) in two regions it long governed, Kerala and West Bengal, Desai emphasizes the different "modes of insertion" of the CP in each region's popular movements, especially movements against caste discrimination.

From the 1930s onwards, communists in Kerala wove deep ties with their base by actively building anti-caste organizations of "untouchable" sharecroppers and poor peasants. This process required extraordinary acts of social boundary-crossing for upper-caste communists. Desai's description puts into perspective the challenges faced by today's middle-class organizers in DSA who "industrialize" by taking a blue-collar job:

[T]he [upper] caste origins of the CSP⁵⁹ posed potential problems in a context where the caste hierarchy was so steep that it even forbade eye contact with members of the lower castes. In this context, distrust and suspicion of the upper castes was high, and caste barriers had to be literally broken down by the organizers entering the houses of the tenants, sitting on the floor and eating with

⁵⁹ Communists in Kerala during this period were organized within the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), a left-wing faction of the bourgeois-led Indian National Congress party.

them, accepting their food, and minimizing to the greatest extent possible the daily rituals of pollution and separation...

Communist cadres attempted to declass themselves by wearing the peasants' traditional dress, adopting their way of living and speaking, and renouncing their own families.... (52)

Through such acts, and by leading public campaigns for land reform, the Keralite communists succeeded in rooting themselves in existing popular movements. By the 1940s, the CSP had achieved political hegemony, becoming “virtually indistinguishable from popular movements that sought to eradicate the salience of caste” (53).

The Bengali CP, by contrast, organized in a region without a comparable anti-caste movement and faced a more hostile colonial state and a nationalist party more dominated by landlords and urban rentiers than in Kerala. Desai shows how these different party formations led to drastically different capacities for winning elections and then, crucially, pushing through reforms against the resistance of elites. Kerala has long had the highest Human Development Index level in India owing to social policies and land reform implemented by the communists in government, while the West Bengal CP was never able to implement comparable reforms during its long tenure in office.⁶⁰ The point is that left parties with similar (indeed, in this case, identical) programs but different party formations will not have the same capacity to realize their goals.

⁶⁰ After 34 years in a governing coalition, the Bengali communists were ejected from office in 2011. The Keralite communists remain in government today, and Marxist iconography still adorns many streets and buildings along the Malabar Coast (Morris 2025).

I round out this discussion with an important study of party formation in the 2010s by the sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo (2018). Gerbaudo examines how left-wing activists in France, Italy, and Spain innovated new “digital party” organizations in the years of the Great Recession and Eurozone crisis. These parties—the Five Star Movement (founded 2009), Podemos (2014), and La France Insoumise (2016)—were at the forefront of a left-populist wave that slammed into European party systems in these years. They had a mixed heritage drawing on elements from existing green and anti-corporate movements and the organized socialist left, and espoused broadly egalitarian programs against the governing “caste” of center-right and center-left parties. They marked a very significant shift by the radical left towards electoral politics after years of anarchist abstentionism, and formed the first major wave of new left parties in the West since the emergence of Green parties in the 1980s—though they often preferred to describe themselves as “movements,” not parties (Della Porta et al. 2017).

Drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews with key leaders, Gerbaudo highlights some of the novel features of these parties. The digital parties are, he writes, highly “disintermediated” bodies split between charismatic “hyperleaders” and a “superbase” of members who debate and ratify party decisions through online platforms connected to party websites. These are parties for an era of networked social media, and draw their strongest base of support from the young “connected outsiders”—college-educated but precarious, and alienated from conventional politics.

With the new information and communication technologies introduced in the 2010s, especially smartphones and social media, these parties found that they could circumvent the intermediate layers of party organization—cadres, officers, official publications—that traditionally mediated between rank-and-file and top leaders. In the years of digital optimism in the first half of the 2010s, this “death of the cadre” and construction of direct links between party base and leadership seemed participatory and democratic. But Gerbaudo identifies crucial weaknesses in this form of organization. In practice, digital party democracy simply tended to ratify decisions already formed at the top, making for a merely “reactive democracy” that did not meaningfully empower members. This mode of organization also de-emphasized the face-to-face relational organizing that had once been central to left-wing mass parties, and inhibited them from developing deep organic links with civil society, especially the labor movement.

Though Gerbaudo focuses on a few organizations where these phenomena are most visible, similar processes of disintermediation are evident in politics all around the world, including in parties of the right. The most powerful political figures everywhere are becoming those who can master digital media and construct a pseudo-immediate relationship to their base of supporters. In the U.S., Donald Trump can certainly be seen as a kind of “hyperleader” in Gerbaudo’s sense, as can someone like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Participatory “e-democracy” tools, however, remain relatively uncommon in the United States. Decision-making authority within American political parties and campaigns remains where it has been since the advent of television and the

direct primary, namely, with politicians and the donors who invest in them. The key questions posed by Gerbaudo's analysis are whether the transformative changes in the information/attention environment created by new technologies can be made compatible with, first, real participatory democracy in political organizations and movements, and, second, effective linkages between party leaders, cadres, members, and supporters in civil society.

In some ways, the example of DSA shows an effort to avoid the digital party model, and prevent the emergence of an unaccountable hyperleader by means of membership-supervised candidate recruitment, cadre socialization, and routines of consultation between chapters and endorsed elected officials. Zohran Mamdani is in this respect a new kind of figure—a genuine NYC-DSA party cadre, face-to-face organization-builder, and relatively anonymous state legislator. But this “cadre candidate” has now been transformed overnight into a hyperleader with his own autonomous base of social power outside of DSA, raising difficult new problems—as well as opportunities—for his party organization.

Party formation in the twentieth century: A sketch

With these concepts, we can briefly sketch the changing historical conditions for working-class party formation in the advanced-capitalist countries. In Europe, working-class mass parties, both reformist and revolutionary, first emerged in the late 19th century, as industrial capitalism expanded beyond its British birthplace and

political forms of working-class socialism began to win hegemony on the left (van der Linden 2023). Workers' parties could take root deeply in the life-worlds of laboring communities that concentrated around urban industry. These parties, like the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the predecessors of the British Labour Party, were instrumental in winning full civic and political citizenship for those without property, and (from 1907 onwards) for women (Eley 2003). In the U.S., an independent mass party of labor never cohered, but from the 1890s onwards, movements of workers, small farmers, and the poor were gradually incorporated into the Democratic Party (on terms set by party elites). The political power of labor and poor people's movements were the key factors responsible for the construction of welfare states in the decades following the Second World War.

Working-class party-formation in the twenty-first century confronts a challenging social environment very different from that which faced workers in the era of the Second Industrial Revolution. A quarter of the way through the 21st century, the foundations that once anchored these parties have been smashed to pieces. Cohesive class communities and large-scale manufacturing employment have given way to dispersed, class-mixed communities and distributed, service-sector employment. Labor unions that once gave workers' enormous associational power and political heft have been decimated. Associations that provided a reservoir of social capital for ordinary people have similarly gone into steep decline, replaced by individualized forms of civic participation or, increasingly, withdrawal from public life (Putnam and Garrett 2020).

These changes have taken place over a long period of stagnant wages, rising cost of living, and worsening work conditions. Under these conditions, the modal response of working people has been neither resistance nor consent, but resignation (Chibber 2022a). Cynicism about politics deepened as left parties across the board embraced neoliberalism in the 1990s. Since the failures of reformist politics in the early 1980s, periods of center-left electoral success have not brought with them any meaningful challenges to deepening market-dependence.

The “cartelization” of center-left parties, and their capitulation to neoliberal capitalism, represented a historic defeat for the socialist and labor left. In Europe, radicals rooted in trade unions and new social movements fought struggles within the old parties of labor until the mid-1980s, longer than is sometimes assumed (Myers 2025). But by the later 1980s, neoliberal reformers were firmly in power within social democracy (and in the major Communist parties), and poised to implement their “Third Way” program from government in the decade to come.

The story within the Democratic Party is more complex owing to the decentralized, coalitional character of the party, in which labor was never hegemonic. The power of social movements and a rank-and-file upsurge among union workers in the 1970s left reformist possibilities open for a time. But the hostility of the Carter administration and an increasingly well-organized business lobby stopped the reform wing in its tracks. The devastating one-two punch of the Reagan landslide and 1980-1982 recession then shook the New Deal wing of the party to its foundations. Jesse

Jackson's social-democratic insurgency in 1984 was defeated by the collusion of the AFL-CIO, Mondale centrists, and the ascendant neoliberals.⁶¹ By the 1988 presidential election, the neoliberal Atari Democrats had decisively gained the upper hand over the social-democratic and civil-rights wings of the party. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton and his brain trust in the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) would consolidate that victory within the party, and cement the bipartisan dominance of neoliberal policies. With some modifications over time, Clintonite politics—if not the Clinton wing itself—would cling to power in the party right through the administration of Joe Biden (Meyer 2025).

The neoliberal capture of center-left parties across the West was accompanied and in some ways facilitated by changes in the sociology and politics of the radical left, the descendants of those who broke from reformist social democracy in the 1910s. The international socialist movement from its origins had always included some middle-class and even upper-class members. Students, intellectuals, and middle-class professionals were active as party members and “fellow travelers” in party-affiliated associations, like the many Popular Front groups for writers, artists, and students in the 1930s. But Marxist theory and party doctrine placed a very strong emphasis on “merging” the party with the working class (Lih 2008). The desired institutional anchor of socialist parties was always the working-class community. This strategy bore fruit during the Great Depression: from 1934 onwards, Communists in the U.S. made

⁶¹ With a helping hand from the majority faction of DSA, who tailed the labor bureaucracy and missed a genuine opportunity for a civil rights-labor alliance (Davis 2018a).

remarkable inroads in the labor movement, and by the mid-1940s found themselves in staff and leadership positions in many CIO unions (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2002).

With the onset of the Cold War, however, Communists were rapidly purged from the CIO, a task made easier for anticommunists because of a crucial weakness in the CP's party formation: the overrepresentation of communists in the union and CIO bureaucracy (who could be fired summarily) at the expense of party fractions in the rank-and-file (Richard 2016). Following the purge of the Communists, the smaller and less-radical Socialist Party retained some influence in the leadership and bureaucracies of big unions like the UAW, but was not able to fill the organizational vacuum left by the disintegration of Communist shop-floor branches. By the late 1950s, surviving militants in the rank-and-file had no political organization to turn to besides the Democratic Party. With each passing year, fewer workers remained who remembered the great battles of the 1930s, and who could transmit some of the lessons and ideas to new cohorts of union members. The threads of class memory frayed and snapped, while the leaderships of unions became willing accomplices of the conservative consensus of the Cold War (Schuhrke 2025). Meanwhile, socialists and communists trained in the 1930s and 1940s would play a very important role in the Civil Rights Movement. But they were forced by circumstances to downplay their politics (Nichter 2023).

These were the circumstances in which the New Left took shape on college campuses at the beginning of the 1960s. Some ties connected Old and New leftists, including through Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which had roots in the

youth wing of the Socialist Party and connections to the United Auto Workers. But the relationship between young and old was often tense, and in any case grew weaker as the decade proceeded and huge numbers of radicalized young people flooded into SDS before its chaotic implosion in 1969 (Dorrien 2021). A similar story could be told about the experience of young radicals in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who clashed fiercely with the older generation of Civil Rights leaders. At the same time, the women's liberation movement began to challenge deeply sexist norms within both the left and the wider society, opening another vector of conflict.

Young radicals could agree with the Old Left and progressive unions on the need to smash Jim Crow and pass a social-democratic Freedom Budget. But Cold War realities posed insuperable challenges to intergenerational left unity. The New Left could not accept the reflexive anticommunism of the Old, especially on the decisive issue of the Vietnam War. It was the Cold War party system, not just the social distance between college-educated students and blue-collar workers or the cultural affectations of young radicals, that rendered the New Left isolated from the mainstream workers' movement in these years. The separation of the left from labor reached its disastrous nadir during the 1972 McGovern campaign, when many (though not all) big labor unions withheld support from the antiwar Democratic nominee and worked to sabotage the party reforms advanced by the left-wing New Politics tendency (Hilton 2021).

But contrary to what is sometimes assumed, in the seventies the New Left made serious attempts to overcome this isolation and put the Marxist "merger" formula into

practice. Seventies radicals saw their task in terms of reaching oppressed groups *within* the working class—of organizing Black women workers, for example. Socialist feminists fought for reforms to decommodify housework and win a welfare state that would benefit all working people (Swinth 2018). Meanwhile, a now-forgotten rank-and-file revolt in the labor movement brought the libertarian spirit of the sixties into blue-collar America, especially in the rapidly-expanding public sector workforce (Winslow 2021). Many college-educated radicals undertook the “rank-and-file strategy,” getting blue-collar jobs in sectors like auto, steel, and public education to reform unions from within (Eidlin 2019). The organizational preferences of leftists varied widely. Some, like the Maoists of the New Communist Movement, opted for rigidly centralist parties. Others, especially feminists, embraced decentralized and “structureless” groups. Still others gravitated to organizations that were somewhere in between, like the democratic socialist New American Movement. The labor left was important in building rank-and-file reform caucuses in unions like the Teamsters and cross-union reform projects like Labor Notes.

No organizational form was perfect, and radicals could be bitterly sectarian towards one another. But they were generally united by a vision of change anchored in working-class organization and identity, now expanded to encompass a wider range of experiences and struggles *within* the class. By the onset of the savage early 1980s recession, however, the radical left had not had sufficient time to build a deep base in organized labor, which was now on the defensive. Meanwhile, more than a few aging

sixties leftists would embrace the neoliberal counterrevolution. Many more would drop out of politics as they settled into middle-class careers and started families. It was in these years, not the 1970s, that socialist and working-class politics entered its great crisis (Myers 2025).

In the 1980s and 1990s, radicals across the advanced capitalist countries broke decisively from the legacies of both the Old and New Left, in two important ways. First, radicals largely jettisoned class from their theories of the world, rejecting materialism and Marxism. Influential theories of social oppression shifted from emphasizing the struggle against special oppressions of particular groups within the working class, to downplaying common class interests and focusing mainly on experiences of discrimination in professional settings.⁶² The “cultural turn” in the human sciences reflected and accelerated the broad rejection of class analysis as a way of seeing the world and doing politics (Sewell 2005; Chibber 2017). Second, radicals embraced “movementist” and “horizontal” forms of organization as the only ethical alternatives to

⁶² The shift in emphasis is visible, for example, in the distance in accent and tone between two influential statements of “identity politics” from each decade. The 1977 Combahee River Collective statement which coined that phrase was a political manifesto drafted by self-identified socialists and working-class women of color. Twelve years later, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor, would coin the term “intersectionality” in a journal article focused on legal strategies for challenging race and gender-based discrimination in the professions, but without calling into question the basic framework of class exploitation supported by the legal system. During the 2020 Democratic primary, Barbara Smith, a drafter of the Combahee statement, would endorse Bernie Sanders for president (Smith 2020), while Crenshaw would take the opportunity of a *New York Times* interview to hit Sanders for supposedly downplaying the importance of racism. “You basically have a moment where every corporation worth its salt is saying something about structural racism and anti-blackness, and that stuff is even outdistancing what candidates in the Democratic Party were actually saying,” said Crenshaw, referring to Sanders (Ember 2020). Crenshaw endorsed Elizabeth Warren in the primary, at the most intense moment of identity-based conflict between the progressive and socialist movements of recent years.

the party-form, which was now seen as irretrievably contaminated by its association with hierarchy and domination.

By the 1990s, left “activism”—the language of socialism was now passé—was, with few exceptions, culturally coded as a marginal and middle-class vocation that posed no threat to capitalism and had little relevance for working people. The anarchist “folk politics” of the left could at best engage in defensive struggles to protect the surviving institutions once built by the class-rooted and party-organized left of the mid-twentieth century (Srnicsek and Williams 2015). Left-wing theory at the end of history resigned itself to “changing the world without taking power,” by building “prefigurative” institutions in the nooks and crannies of capitalist society.⁶³ This was in many ways a reversion to the petit-bourgeois utopian socialism against which Marx and Engels had set themselves 150 years before.

The ineffectiveness of the left in these years was epitomized by the quixotic third-party campaign of Ralph Nader in 2000 and the moralism of Nader’s Green Party. The labor left of the 1990s, for its part, hesitantly explored a more viable kind of independent party politics. For a brief moment during the Clinton administration, the Labor Party (LP) founded by a coalition of progressive unionists in 1996 looked like it might take off. The LP had a real working-class base composed of dues-paying members in unions like the still-powerful Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW). But LP

⁶³ The anarchist notion of “changing the world without taking power” was coined by John Holloway in an influential 2002 book by that title. For an astute ethnographic portrait of the culture and style of the nineties left by a participant-observer who would later become a central figure in the Occupy movement, see Graeber (2009).

leaders, fearful of throwing elections to anti-labor Republicans, refrained from launching any independent ballot-line challenges against Democrats until their moment of opportunity had passed (Ackerman 2016). The LP, like numerous third-party challenges before and after, crashed on the rocks of the first-past-the-post electoral system. It was also hindered by a fractured labor movement that was divided between conservative business unions and a minority of inclusive social movement unions. In the crucial fight around NAFTA in the early 1990s, the dominance of business unions within the AFL-CIO weakened U.S. labor mobilization against the free trade deal and blocked opportunities for independent politics to the left of the Democrats (Dreiling and Robinson 1998).

Despite large antiwar and pro-immigrant movements in the 2000s, no durable left-wing organizations were formed out of them, while socialist politics remained utterly marginal. But in the years of the Great Recession, to the surprise of many, popular disaffection with neoliberalism made a dramatic return around the world. It found expression outside of institutional politics, in the form of major social movements against austerity and repressive governance. In the advanced-capitalist world, Occupy Wall Street was the key movement, while the Arab Spring revolts raised hope for a democratic breakthrough in the Middle East. The mass protests would touch every corner of the globe, from Brazil to Hong Kong. But these enormous movements struggled to form organized political vehicles to take and hold state power, even in cases where they succeeded in overthrowing incumbent regimes.

In a panoramic narrative of the mass protest decade, Bevins (2023) emphasizes the debilitating weaknesses of the horizontalist left culture inherited from the 1980s and 1990s, which made it more difficult for radicals to navigate and organize the sudden explosions of popular energy. Radicals in the squares, encampments, and “temporary autonomous zones” of the 2010s were weakened by their anarchist skepticism of formal organization. Their “prefigurative” alternative to a class-rooted party politics, while seemingly participatory and democratic, actually implied a highly top-down and inaccessible form of organization, in which ordinary people with jobs and families are inevitably pushed aside by activists with the time and energy to endure constant meetings and “actions” (Smucker 2018).

Writing in the middle of this tumultuous decade, British theorists Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams called for radicals to overcome this “folk politics” common-sense by reinventing the party-form within an “ecology of organizations”: “Mass movements and parties should be seen as tools of the same populist movement, each capable of achieving different things. At their most general level, parties can integrate various tendencies within a social movement—from reformist to revolutionary—into a common project” (2015:168). As they wrote, the first hesitant steps in this direction were already being taken, with the left-populist challenges within the established party systems of the West (Borriello and Jäger 2023). In the U.S., the 2015-2016 Bernie Sanders campaign would sharpen the unfocused populism of Occupy Wall Street into a surprisingly advanced form of class politics, emphasizing the conflict between workers and

“billionaires,” and reintroducing the language of socialism and capitalism in a political culture where this had long been taboo. Crucially, Sanders was willing to take this message into the arena of the Democratic Party primary, where he would have a chance to reach a mass audience of voters.

The results at the Democratic National Convention in July 2016, where Hillary Clinton secured the nomination against Sanders by a 12% margin, obscured how close the contest had actually been. Clinton beat Sanders by a razor-thin margin in the Iowa caucuses, before losing badly to the Vermont senator in New Hampshire. A pair of victories in the first two primary states might have made the third contest in Nevada winnable for Sanders, and then set him up for a series of momentum-generating victories in Super Tuesday states. Sanders’s very favorable polling in hypothetical matchups against the leading Republican primary candidates, Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, strongly suggest that he would have won in November, unlike the deeply-unpopular Clinton (Ettingermentum 2025b). As it transpired, Sanders couldn’t save the Democratic Party from itself. But his campaign did a great deal to revive the American left by demonstrating that authentic working-class politics—indeed *socialist* politics—could be viable, even in a historical context where working-class organization and consciousness stood at a dismally low level.

This narrative brings me up to the case at hand: the Democratic Socialists of America, which was essentially re-founded in the months after Sanders suspended his campaign. I tell this story in my fourth chapter tracing DSA’s political development

between 2015 and 2025. In the remainder of this introduction, I briefly describe my data and methods and outline my chapters.

Notes on data, methods, and standpoint

Research material for this study was collected over a period of about seven years, beginning in June 2018 when I commenced fieldwork in the Portland, OR chapter of DSA. Over the course of that summer, I participated in the life of the chapter during a period of rapid growth for DSA, in the fervent atmosphere of the left-liberal Resistance movement (Meyer and Tarrow 2018). As a member of Portland DSA, I attended near-daily meetings of committees and work-groups, joined protests against ICE and far-right Proud Boys, and wrote for the chapter's newsletter. Throughout the experience, I took copious notes about what I saw and felt. I didn't enter the field with a well-defined research question nor a systematic research design, just an intuition that what was happening with DSA was somehow important and worth studying.

After returning from Portland, I stayed in touch with chapter leaders and conducted occasional interviews with some of them through 2020. This experience left me with a near-unmanageable mass of material: 34 interviews and about 78 typed fieldnotes, spanning hundreds of pages of text, plus a cluttered collection of digital and physical primary sources—screenshots, photos, documents, and miscellaneous material culture that I hoarded, magpie-like. A small fraction of this material ended up in my master's thesis on the “meaning of membership” in DSA, which was eventually

published in an obscure social movements journal, *Interface* (Purucker 2026).⁶⁴ I include that essay as an appendix to this dissertation to help illustrate how my thinking on DSA has evolved over time.

It was in the course of writing the thesis that I discovered the work of Theda Skocpol (2003) and Peter Mair (2013), who together gave me a vocabulary for understanding my experiences in Portland DSA. In retrospect, I probably overestimated the similarity of DSA to the mass-member “fellowship associations” studied by Skocpol in her classic contribution to the civil society literature, *Diminished Democracy*. In a later essay I wrote for the *Marxist Sociology Blog* (Purucker 2024), I got the balance right: DSA was less like the Rotary Club, or even an issue-focused movement organization familiar from the contentious politics literature. Rather, it was better seen in comparison to the membership-based political parties analyzed (or eulogized) by Mair. Inspired by Mair, I turned my attention towards the abundant political science writing on parties, while also exploring the smaller sociological literature on the subject (an edited volume by Cedric de Leon, Manali Desai, and Cihan Tugal (2015) was an important early influence).

In the years following the pandemic and the completion of my master’s thesis, my involvement with DSA forked in several directions. First, I decided to broaden my focus from a single chapter to the organization as a whole. I wanted to understand how DSA had diffused so rapidly and why it was holding ground even as other parts of the

⁶⁴ Though this article was not published until 2026, it was written mostly in 2021.

progressive-left ecosystem seemed to be struggling. I reached out to a handful of past and present national-level leaders of DSA and conducted some long interviews with them. I also attended three national DSA conventions (in 2021, 2023, and 2025) and a chapter-level convention in Oakland, California in 2024 to get a close-up view of democratic decision-making in the organization.

Second, I wanted to investigate a theme that had emerged in my MA thesis: the question of “paper members” in DSA, who are inactive but pay dues. With the help of friends in the Portland chapter, I managed to interview 19 of these difficult-to-reach individuals about why they joined DSA and what being a member of the organization meant to them. I envisioned this material as comprising a dissertation chapter but it has become a separate project over time. Third, starting in 2021 I took on a role as an organizer and mentor with the University of Oregon chapter of the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA). Though this was never intended as a research activity, it did over time greatly expand my network of contacts within DSA, and gave me hands-on experience as a DSA organizer working to build a social movement: the undergraduate student worker movement, discussed at the start of this chapter.

Some weaknesses of this study should be admitted. Crucially, I never designed my research project as a structured comparative-historical analysis. Though I do discuss numerous other organizations and political parties besides DSA, I make these comparisons only in a loose and intuitive manner derived from my unsystematic reading

of left and labor history.⁶⁵ From the start of my research, I have never been quite sure what DSA is a “case of,” i.e. what the proper axis of comparison should be. Was I comparing some members of DSA to other members? One chapter of DSA to other chapters? DSA to other left-wing organizations in the United States? To parties around the world? What about liberal and right-wing movements? And what about history—does it make sense to compare DSA today to left-wing formations of the past? I have never come up with a satisfactory response to these questions, unfortunately.

As the preceding discussion hopefully shows, while I am always working within some *implicit* comparative frame, the actual terms of my comparisons are rarely set out and defended. This could be seen as a function of my writing style or maybe a loose and disorganized manner of thinking. Nor have I gathered any primary source information on possible comparison cases, instead relying on secondary research. Even my discussion of DSA is substantially reliant on secondary sources. I have also not assembled any kind of quantitative dataset for purposes of making conclusive descriptive statements (e.g. about socialist elected officials) or statistical inferences (e.g. about the chances of success for DSA chapters operating under different political opportunity structures). For these reasons, this study does not meet the standards of a systematic comparative analysis, even of the “small-n” variety (e.g. Desai 2001; Eidlin 2016). Without explicit criteria for casing and comparison, I am obviously vulnerable to

⁶⁵ Mike Davis has been a particular influence and inspiration, especially his astonishing *Prisoners of the American Dream* (2018a).

telling a “just-so” story. I have tried to defend against this by highlighting moments of contingency and agency in the story I tell. It is up to the reader to decide whether I have succeeded or failed, and, if the latter, whether I have at least failed in a productive way.

Looking ahead

The question guiding this dissertation is big but deceptively simple: How can democratic decline be reversed? In this introduction, I sketched out my reasons for asking this question and reviewed some writing by political scientists and sociologists who are trying to answer it. My own answer builds on theirs. Democracy is under threat today because the class coalition sustaining it has been gravely undermined from within, by party leaders who embraced the neoliberal turn at the expense of their own historic commitments to an egalitarian society. Defending democracy will require new movements from inside *and* outside the historic parties of labor, taking place in both the political *and* economic fields, and aimed at consistently advancing workers’ immediate *and* fundamental interests in building a more democratic society. Socialism, I believe, remains the best term for this vision of working-class democracy, in both its “directional” and “systemic” aspects. But restarting the motor of working-class politics in the twenty-first century will require creative thinking about small-d democratic strategy, tactics, and organization.

What follows are two chapters elaborating this argument, from different angles. In chapter three, I consider socialism itself through the prism of my chosen discipline,

sociology. Sociologists, I argue, have largely neglected the study of socialism as a contemporary social and political fact, to their detriment. I review the literature on socialism in the main U.S. sociology journals, discuss its main themes and findings, and try to explain why socialism has not been on sociology's radar. I also make an argument that, in the face of existential threats to U.S. higher education and critical social science, it is necessary to rethink the meaning of public sociology by embracing a class-struggle understanding of our vocation.

In the concluding chapter, I narrate the story of DSA's political emergence since 2016. On the basis of interviews with DSA leaders and primary and secondary sources, I attempt to explain some puzzles about the organization's rise, including how and why it diffused so quickly in 2016 and 2017, why it followed a different trajectory than other organizations in the left-wing political field, and why it has managed to sustain itself across drastic changes in the political environment since 2016. I stress DSA's orientation towards movement-building and "merger" with working-class constituencies. I also deploy interviews and ethnographic observations to analyze DSA at a micro-level, considering how it has cultivated an engaged membership base that is the envy of other political organizations. I stress in particular the character of democracy in the organization and the role it plays in member socialization.

CHAPTER THREE

SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIALISM, PAST AND PRESENT⁶⁶

Abstract

Is socialism still relevant for sociology? Sociology and socialism are entwined logically and historically. But today, American sociology seems mostly silent about socialism. This essay argues that socialism should be placed back on the agenda of sociology. First, I argue that socialism is both a relevant social and political fact in the United States, and is superior to social justice as a framework for envisioning emancipatory alternatives. Second, I review the sociological literature on socialism since Erik Olin Wright's 2012 *real utopias* address. I find that both mainstream and critical sociologists have neglected the study of contemporary socialist politics, both in the U.S. and abroad, and that Wright's *real utopias* project has had little resonance in mainstream sociology. Third, I make a proposal for a "sociology of socialism" which emphasizes the comparative study of socialist organizations and movements. I conclude that contemporary socialism is not relevant for sociology but that it could be again, and that a disciplinary reengagement with socialism is both timely and urgent in the face of rising neo-fascism.

Keywords

Socialism, sociology, social justice, real utopias, critical sociology, political sociology, Bernie Sanders

⁶⁶ A shorter version of this essay under a different title appears in *Critical Sociology* (Purucker 2025). At a conference in Montreal where I presented an early draft, Michael Burawoy was in the room and gave me encouraging feedback. Tragically, Michael was killed in a hit-and-run accident just a few months later. I dedicate this essay to his memory.

Introduction

Is socialism still relevant for sociology? Sociology is a discipline oriented to the scientific study of the social. In the same decade that sociology was born, socialism emerged as a major ideology of modernity, one that aimed to elevate the social power of ordinary people to a leading role in human affairs.⁶⁷ For both sociology and socialism, the social is literally inescapable. These two traditions are entwined logically, historically, and to some extent politically.

Yet today the link between sociology and socialism appears enervated. Few sociologists write or teach about socialism. When they do, it tends to appear as an object of historical inquiry, one with little apparent relevance to the present. And for those sociologists who want to envision emancipatory futures, social justice is a more common framework for articulating alternatives than socialism.

This disinterest has persisted even over a period when socialism has experienced a remarkable revival in the United States. From April 2015, when democratic socialist Bernie Sanders announced his first bid for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, to April 2020, when he suspended his second campaign, socialism became a real and consequential movement for the first time in nearly 50 years (Karp 2020). Sanders waged formidable campaigns, garnering over twenty million votes in primaries and polling well against Donald Trump on each occasion (Agiesta 2016; Phillips 2020).

⁶⁷ Comte coined *sociologie* in 1839 (Bannister 2003:331) and the Owenite *New Moral World* declared itself for “socialism” in 1837 (van der Linden 2023:5-6). See also Williams (2014).

The campaigns resuscitated an almost-defunct organization, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and inspired young politicians like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to call themselves socialists and run for office (Tracy 2019).

After ending his second campaign, Sanders went on to exercise a significant influence over the Democratic Party platform and the domestic agenda of the Biden administration, while socialists in DSA made inroads in electoral politics and the labor movement (Heer 2021; Hillenbrand, Lewis, and Wang 2022). In the wake of Trump's victory over Kamala Harris, prominent commentators and Democratic politicians wonder aloud if the party ought to have embraced Sanders's message (Brooks 2024; Suter 2024).

It now seems clear that the Sanders campaigns represented the most credible political vehicle available for advancing, not only socialist, but also central *sociological* ideas—about confronting inequality and lifting up the most marginalized in our society, through reforms in areas like health care, education, and housing. Yet in the ten years that have elapsed since Sanders entered the scene, surprisingly few sociologists have written about his campaigns or the socialist movement he revived.

By contrast, the last time that socialism appeared on the political agenda in this country, it had a broad and deep impact on our discipline. Eric Hobsbawm, writing about the 1960s, noted that “[i]f any academic discipline represented [the] search for a critique of society as a whole, it was sociology, and this subject therefore attracted radical students in disproportionate numbers, and often became virtually identified with

the radicalism of the ‘new left’” (2012:365). Some of those students would go on to form the “disobedient generation” in sociology, and would make important contributions to the sociology and strategy of socialism, among other subjects (Sica and Turner 2005; Manza and McCarthy 2011).

This essay responds to a call from *Critical Sociology* for rethinking sociology in an era of crisis. My argument centers on the enduring relevance of socialism for our discipline. First, I make an argument for the contemporary importance of socialism, as both empirical reality and framework for articulating alternatives. Second, I explore one aspect of the relationship between sociology and socialism, by reviewing articles and books published by sociologists since the last major effort to build a bridge to socialism from within the discipline: Erik Olin Wright’s August 2012 ASA address.⁶⁸ Third, I attempt to explain why sociology has mostly neglected contemporary U.S. democratic socialism. Finally, I suggest some elements of an empirical research program on socialism, stressing the importance of seeing it from the vantage of political sociology.

A note on terms

Before proceeding, I need to define three terms. *Sociology* here refers to the practices, institutions, and discourses that constitute the professional academic discipline carrying that name.⁶⁹ The *social* is a meta-concept referring to the emergent properties of

⁶⁸ For reasons of language, time, and competence, I restrict my discussion of contemporary sociology to the United States.

⁶⁹ My discussion therefore excludes popular or lay sociologies that are independent of the profession—though I will argue that the professionalization of sociology ought to be seen as a problem.

relational ties between human beings. I take it to be the distinctive object and heuristic of sociology. Sociologists see the world through a social lens, building explanations and interpretations by reference to social forces, structures, and effects. William H. Sewell sees the social as the “ontological ground” of human life (2005:369). In contrast to economics, politics, or culture, the social concept has a “residual” quality. It has no particular institutional location: the domains of economy, polity, and culture seem to be subsets of social life, but the inverse claims, that social life is a subset of politics, economics, or culture, seem counter-intuitive (325). Rather than being associated with a defined institutional domain, the social is bound up with the institution-spanning concept of *society*.

Beginning with Comte, society started to acquire its modern definition as the “reified totality” of all social relations—including economics, politics, and culture—in some domain implicitly identified with the nation-state (Sewell 2005:322). This sense of society-as-totality coexists today alongside an older, Enlightenment meaning of the term, which defines society against the state or political society, usually with the modifier “civil.” In turn, civil society’s connotations of cooperation, association, and solidarity tie it back to the oldest, active meaning of “society” and “social,” as relations involving companionship and sociability between individuals.

The concept of society has been criticized in historical sociology for overstating the coherence and boundedness of actual human communities (Mann 2012). As Sewell observes, the usefulness of the concept is arguably in decline in the age of globalization

(Sewell 2005). Today, few sociologists take whole societies as their unit of analysis or invoke the term as an explanatory concept.⁷⁰ Instead, most sociologists rely on less generalized, middle-range concepts to explain social processes occurring at the sub-societal (or perhaps trans-societal) level. In my view, to call contemporary sociology the “science of society” is therefore misleading. It is, rather, the science of the social.⁷¹

Socialism is challenging to define, not least for socialists themselves. Göran Therborn admits that it is an “extremely loose designation” that has attracted partisans of many different social systems and political positions (1976:135). I opt here for a broad definition. Following Erik Olin Wright (2013), I see socialism in terms of social power: the idea that the overall direction of social systems (and especially of economic structures within social systems) ought to be determined by the collective, voluntary action of ordinary people. Socialism, for Wright, refers to systems in which this voluntary power exercises a predominant role, over and against private economic power or authoritative state power.

This definition seems capacious enough to cover most of the contemporary and historical traditions that have claimed the name “socialism,” including utopian socialism

⁷⁰ For a recent exception, see Alexander (2018). For a review of sociological debates about the society concept, see Rosenberg (2024). A convenience sample of titles, keywords, and abstracts of 33 recent publications by sociology faculty and graduate students at the University of Oregon turned up 41 usages of “social” but just 8 of “society.”

⁷¹ I also believe this definition is defensible on etymological, not just logical, grounds. The phrase “science of society” appears only twice in Harriet Martineau’s translation of Comte’s *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1855), where “sociology” first entered the English language. Comte much more frequently uses phrases like “social science” (59 occurrences) or “social physics” (30 occurrences) to characterize his new science. Both *sociale* and *société* share the Latin root *socius*.

(Taylor 2016), reformist socialism (Kenworthy 2019), socialism from above and below (Draper 2019), state socialism (Burawoy 2009), liberal socialism (McManus 2024), feminist socialism and socialist feminism (Bojar 2024, McDuffie 2011), religious socialism (Dorrien 2021), democratic socialism (Mudge 2020), and queer socialism (Aptheker 2022). Some of these traditions are firmly Marxist, some are consciously non- or anti-Marxist, and others have had an ambiguous relationship to Marxism. All of them are, or were, richly contested fields of meaning. Taken together, they have inspired some of the most consequential forms of collective action in history—massively more consequential than sociology, in Therborn’s frank assessment (1976:38).

I modify Wright’s usage in one way. The systemic aspect of socialism is an essential part of what makes it different from general notions of progress or reform. Socialism implies a new and different social system, world, or totality—what Marxists once called the “final goal” (Luxemburg 2008). But equally important is what might be called socialism’s *directional* aspect. Socialism exists in the capitalist world today, in the form of parties and movements oriented towards realizing that final goal. Socialist leaders and movements defined in this sense may or may not claim the s-word itself (or one of its familiar variants like communism or social democracy). Those that do claim the word might do so in a way that is merely nominal and with no authentic connection to socialism—at least in the eyes of their “real” socialist critics.

For analytic purposes, I do not attempt to adjudicate what is really socialism and what is not. In my review, I therefore include books and articles that explicitly address

“socialism” or one of a few variants, and exclude work that does not.⁷² This inevitably means that I leave out much research that is deeply relevant to the study of socialism but which might better be grouped under the sociology of the left or the sociology of the labor movement.⁷³ Both stand very near the sociology of socialism, but they are not my focus here.

Why engage socialism today?

“Socialism, on the contrary, is entirely oriented towards the future... It is indisputable that it... has rendered social sciences more services perhaps than it received from it. For it has aroused reflection, it has stimulated scientific activity, it has instigated research, posed problems, so in more than one way its history blends with the very history of sociology.”—Emile Durkheim (1985:159-160)

Socialism once exercised a powerful influence on sociology, and in an indirect way continues to do so. The two traditions are deeply entwined, as Durkheim’s quote above suggests. This is not the place to review a long and complex history, but a few general comments can be made.⁷⁴

⁷² This is a pragmatic, semi-nominalist approach to defining socialism. The determination of whether some historically-specific practice, organization, government, etc. is “actually socialist”—that is, actually directed towards social empowerment—can only ever be settled via empirical study and political practice. It is only semi-nominalist in that it retains Wright’s conception of social empowerment as the empowerment of ordinary people in the class structure of the capitalist economy. For a similar method employed to analyze the liberal tradition, see Bell (2014).

⁷³ For example, Usmani (2018) provides a compelling analysis of workers’ disruptive capacities and democratization, but his model does not include a role for socialist political organization or ideology.

⁷⁴ For penetrating essays on the historical relationship between the two, see Therborn (1976) and Bottomore (1984). On the youthful socialist politics of some leading mid-century U.S. sociologists, see Wald (2017). For the history of critical sociology in the U.S., see, *inter alia*, Burawoy (2005), McAdam (2007), and Fasenfest and McCarthy (2024).

Sociology and socialism in historical perspective

Socialism and sociology emerged in the same decade, the 1830s. According to some influential narratives of the sociological and socialist canons, each shares a common ancestor in the figure of Henri de Saint-Simon, who inspired Auguste Comte and the early utopian socialists alike (Bannister 2003; Picon 2003; Draper 1966). Each tendency emerged as an attempt to comprehend the “dual revolution” of bourgeois democracy and industrial capitalism, though from opposed class viewpoints (Hobsbawm 1962).

Besides their common linguistic root and foundational commitment to a social point of view, sociology and socialism have since the beginning shared certain orienting values and ideas. Generalizing broadly across a complex history, the two have tended to find agreement around values of rationality, scientificity, and progress. Tom Bottomore (1984:9) observed that “sociology necessarily embodies the idea of a conscious, rational regulation of society,” a principle which “comes very close to the idea of socialism.” Similarly, Dylan Riley recently described Marx’s basic “impulse” to the effect that “society is a creation of the human species, and potentially controllable by its rationality” (2022:40).

Each tradition matured in the *fin de siècle*, the years of classical sociology and the mass socialist parties of the Second International. Academic sociologists and socialists would mostly find themselves on opposite sides of the barricades in the conflicts of the era. Most sociologists were anti-aristocratic liberals or republicans, not socialists, and a

firm class barrier separated bourgeois sociologists from the proletariat. But the common focus of both upon the “social question” compelled sociologists to engage with socialist theories of the world. The intimate and vexed relationship between the two is perhaps symbolized by the close life-long friendship between Emile Durkheim and Jean Jaurès, the heterodox Marxist and leader of French socialism before 1914. Durkheim was a left-republican, not a socialist, but his circle included socialists like François Simiand and Marcel Mauss, Durkheim’s nephew.⁷⁵ Durkheim himself famously paid tribute to socialism for its role in stimulating sociological research and giving academic social science a worthy opponent against which to define itself (Durkheim 1985).

As a theory of socialism, Marxism was relatively weak in France. But in Central European sociology, Marxism’s influence was “strong and undeniable” (Hobsbawm 2012:242), though the political link to socialism was more fraught—membership in the Social Democratic Party could cost sociologists their jobs, as discovered by Robert Michels in Germany. Marxist socialism was marginal in the United States before the late 1910s, but a broader socialist politics flourished in the Progressive Era, and some reform-minded sociologists like Jane Addams and G.H. Mead moved in a common milieu with socialists (Romero 2020). Some influential American sociologists took Marx seriously: the founder of sociology’s Chicago School, Albion Small, wrote in 1912 that “in

⁷⁵ Mauss and Simiand taught at workers’ schools and cooperated with Jaurès in founding the legendary socialist newspaper *L’Humanité* in 1904, in the context of the Dreyfus crisis. Durkheim himself never joined the SFIO, yet “ostentatiously carried his copy of *L’Humanité* in the courtyard of the Sorbonne and invited Jean Jaurès to the tenth anniversary celebration of *L’année sociologique*” in 1908 (Bellah 1973:xxvii).

the ultimate judgment of history Marx will have a place in social science analogous to Galileo in physical science” (Hobsbawm 2012:241).

Reform-minded sociologists shared with socialists an interest in rational social reform and could join with them to fight the reactionary right, as during the Dreyfus affair in France (1894-1906). But with very few exceptions, sociologists could not bring themselves to support class struggle from below and the disorder it seemed to threaten. With the singular exception of W.E.B. Du Bois, who moved left after the Russian Revolution and embraced Marxism by the 1930s (Sinitiere and Mullen 2016; Goodwin 2022), none of the major figures of sociology’s classical era—spanning Ferdinand Tonnies’s *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887) to Talcott Parsons’s *Structure of Social Action* (1937)—sympathized with revolutionary socialism or syndicalism. In this regard Max Weber is emblematic. He was sympathetic at times in his career to the respectable reformist currents within German social democracy. But confronted by the shocks of the Russian and German revolutions, in the last year of his life he moved hard to the right, turning against parliamentary democracy in favor of a “plebiscitary” dictatorship that could crush the radical left (Allen 2017).⁷⁶

Over the years of the World Wars and the early Cold War, sociology would retain its association with the reform tradition of social democracy (or in the United States, progressive liberalism) and continue to oppose “socialism from below.” Like the academy as a whole, Cold War sociology was almost uniformly anticommunist, though

⁷⁶ On Weber’s severely warped judgment in the crisis years of 1918-1919, see Eich and Tooze (2017).

supportive of a kind of administrative “socialism from above” represented by the New Deal current of the Democratic Party.⁷⁷ Positioned on the left edge of this narrow ideological spectrum were Lewis Coser and C. Wright Mills. Coser, later an ASA president, cofounded *Dissent* magazine in 1954 as an organ for social democratic writing. Mills would do more than anyone to challenge the conservatism of the profession, and by the end of his life was moving clearly towards a Marx-inflected democratic socialism (Mills 1960; Treviño 2017). His writing would form the most important link from sociology to the New Left of the following decade.⁷⁸

Socialist politics had a direct and major impact on sociology for a period in the 1960s and 1970s, under the pressure of militant student movements and a revived Marxism. Sociology students were in the vanguard of campus confrontations at Berkeley, Columbia, Chicago, and elsewhere. Graduate students and young faculty in groups like the Sociology Liberation Movement, the Western Union of Radical Sociologists, and the New University Conference—many identifying as socialists and Marxists—successfully challenged the discipline’s orthodoxies and rewrote its canon. “Establishment” sociology was defeated swiftly, but with mixed results. As Michael Burawoy recounts, the assault of radical sociology had the unintended effect of rejuvenating and democratizing the discipline without bridging the social chasm between academic intellectuals and popular movements outside the university.

⁷⁷ The notion of socialism from above and below comes from Draper (1966).

⁷⁸ Mills himself popularized the term “New Left” in his 1960 open “Letter,” published in an early issue of *New Left Review*.

Sociology's "selective appropriation" of radical ideas did not ultimately include socialism—"now expunged from sociological vocabulary" (2005:316). As the movements of the 1970s declined, the disciplinary left redefined itself from a stance of "insurgency" to "critique," as it became clear that neither society nor the university would be fundamentally transformed.⁷⁹

This outcome can hardly be blamed on radical sociologists themselves—it was determined ultimately by the disorganization and defeats of working-class movements from 1980 onwards. Radical sociologists would remain numerous in the discipline—surveys conducted in 2006 estimated that 27% of sociologists identified as Marxists, a higher proportion than any other discipline (Gross and Simmons 2014:33)—but they found themselves confined mostly within the university, separated from the mass movements and organizations that could give their radicalism an autonomous basis and political heft.

Burawoy's prescription as ASA president in 2004 was an engaged "public sociology" oriented towards breaking down the walls between the discipline and civil society—a project closely connected to Erik Olin Wright's proposal for "real utopias." Writing in *Critical Sociology*, Burawoy characterized public sociology and real utopian theory together as an "integral part of the project of sociological socialism" (2005:325). But by 2005 there were few organized "publics" in civil society available to hear his

⁷⁹ The flagship journal of the sociological left, the *Insurgent Sociologist*, would acknowledge reality and rename itself *Critical Sociology* in 1987.

message, let alone those ready to struggle for socialism. A recent review of public sociology gives many examples of worthy causes aided by sociologists⁸⁰—promoting children’s playtime at school, supporting LGBTQIA+ youth with data-driven advocacy, aiding families affected by incarceration—but no discernible orientation towards the systemic transformation of social institutions, whether this be called “socialism,” “real utopias,” or something else (Smith 2023).

If public sociology has broken down some walls between the academy and civil society, it is less clear that it has contributed to a “sociological socialism.” Recent ASA addresses (Misra 2025; Romero 2020) have reiterated the need for a public sociology in dialogue with movements and marginalized communities, but they draw no connection to socialism, and seem at a loss to explain how public sociology can effectively fight back against the right-wing assault on the liberal academy (a point I return to at the end of this essay).

The contemporary relevance of socialism

So goes the history. But socialism is hardly the only “social fact” that has influenced sociological thought, and its influence in the years since Burawoy wrote has been minor, as I discuss below. Why take it up again today? I think there are three reasons to do so. First, as a rich literature in historical and political sociology attests, socialist politics

⁸⁰ And one rather questionable example of a “public sociologist,” Jessica Dawson, who “analyze[s] the intersection of social inequality and online narratives and algorithms in her work at the [U.S.] Army Cyber Institute” (Smith 2023:937).

organized as a mass movement in unions and parties is arguably a kind of fundamental cause determining a wide array of social outcomes. Political parties produce social effects through articulation—polarizing groups in civil society—and through the exercise of state power when in government (de Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2015). When socialist and labor parties are in office, or when they pose a serious challenge in opposition, they can have transformative effects on social and economic policy regimes, with enormous downstream effects on poverty, inequality, population health, gender egalitarianism, and patterns of culture (Korpi 1983; Esping-Anderson 1990).

Conversely, the absence of such parties can be just as consequential. The United States ultimately lacks an expansive, universalistic welfare state because of the weakness of its labor movement and the absence of a labor or socialist party (Lipset and Marks 2000). Eidlin (2016) points to the absence of a labor party to explain persistent differences in patterns of class identity and union density between the United States and Canada, while Usmani and Clegg (2019) explain the U.S. mass incarceration system as a cheap and punitive substitute for a welfare state. Sociologists are rightly attentive to the micro- and meso-determinants of these and other phenomena. The agency of left parties to change social institutions is not unlimited, and progressive change can be achieved through means besides parties (Amenta et al. 2010), as well as by social movements that target institutions and cultural fields separate from the state (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). But the power of parties lies in their capacity to combine programs of reforms with a permanent organization able to win and use state power over time. Considering

the urgency of simultaneously confronting multiple overlapping crises—of care, climate, and capitalism—it is striking that sociologists largely neglect the study of parties in general and of socialist parties in particular.

Second, socialism matters because it remains an important social fact. Contrary to the predictions of many commentators in the 1990s and 2000s, socialism was not killed off by the end of the Cold War and the rise of post-socialist Third Way politics. Parties and organizations claiming some link to the socialist tradition continue to exist in virtually every country on earth, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. These parties vary greatly. Some are marginal or illegal, while others are important parts of the formal political system. Still others exercise significant influence in civil society and social movements. At least four substantial socialist internationals continue to exist, together comprising several hundred parties and organizations.⁸¹ China remains governed by a powerful communist party, one now exercising a world-historic form of political agency in confronting the climate crisis (Tooze 2024).

Socialism today is plainly not the revolutionary force it once was. The most successful socialist tradition in the West, social democracy, has been in deep crisis in recent decades (Bandau 2023). Declining electoral fortunes for center-left parties have been driven by a sustained dealignment of working-class electorates from social democratic and labor parties that once represented workers' interests (Gethin et al.

⁸¹ These are the communist International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties (IMCWP), the Trotskyist Fourth International (FI), the social-democratic Socialist International (SI), and the democratic socialist Progressive International (PI).

2022). Today, right-wing populism is ascendant in much of the world. But social-democratic decline has opened space for other currents of socialism to revive. In the 2010s, a broad international front of left-populist movements emerged around the world, including a new generation of movement parties situated broadly in the socialist tradition (Della Porta et al. 2017). Some of these parties have been able to win elections against right-populists (Andersson 2024).

Most surprisingly, for a period of about five years, democratic socialist politics gained national influence in the United States with the campaigns of Bernie Sanders. While Sanders did not prevail, his campaigns had notable effects in civil society. They spurred the formation of a socialist movement anchored by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a left “proto-party” with an innovative organizational form. DSA members have won municipal and state legislative elections around the country, and the organization has many more members than any other socialist group since the 1960s (SocDoneLeft 2023).

The Sanders campaigns also had broader cultural effects. Surveys show that large proportions of Americans hold positive attitudes towards socialism and negative attitudes towards capitalism, with stronger pro-socialist attitudes among young people and Democrats (Pew Research Center 2022). A recent survey found that 17% of Americans identify as socialists, and these respondents have preferences that differ meaningfully from respondents who identify as (non-socialist) liberals (Melcher and Lindsay 2024:5). Today, a democratic socialist candidate is polling second in the field

for mayoral elections in New York City (Mannarino and Kennedy 2025). While socialism remains undeniably weak in the United States, it can no longer be safely ignored, even by its opponents.

The final reason for sociologists to take socialism seriously is normative. To its great credit, sociology has for decades been preoccupied with injustice. Sociologists are critical of capitalism, disparities of race and gender, and other forms of oppression. Most sociologists today are allergic to positivism and do not aspire to practice a “value-free” science. Many are interested in public sociology. In some ways sociologists are striving to overcome the limited meliorative outlook of their own reform tradition. To describe this broad progressive common-sense, sociologists often invoke the idea of “social justice.” Sociology is strongly identified with social justice today, both within the discipline and by critics of sociology. Social justice framed ASA presidential addresses in 2024 (Joya Misra), 2020 (Mary Romero), and 2000 (Joe Feagin). Some variant of “justice” has appeared in the title theme of recent sociology conferences including the ASA (2024, 2019), SSSP (2010, 2008, 2007, 2003), ESS (2022), PSA (2002), and MSS (2016). Many sociology departments (including my own) offer concentrations in social justice research and practice. The discipline now even has its own *Oxford Handbook of Sociology for Social Justice* (Dolgon 2024).

The problem is that social justice cannot do all that we evidently want it to be doing. Some conception of justice is indispensable for envisioning a better world (Geras 2017). But while justice is essential in clarifying the *desirability* of alternative

institutions, it is a category error to identify those institutions with the moral principle of justice itself. As Erik Olin Wright (2013) argues, equally important for emancipatory theory are the principles of *viability* and *achievability*: whether a desired institution (like universal basic income) would actually work on its own terms, and whether there exist social forces powerful enough to construct that institution.

In Wright's theory, these institutions are themselves embedded in a larger system of such institutions. The virtue of "socialism" in any of its various definitions is precisely to raise the idea of a systemic alternative to existing social arrangements. But even if we want to jettison the term rather than renovate it for a new era, the fact remains that it is the socialist tradition which has raised the issues of viability and achievability (or strategy) most acutely, over 150 years of political struggle and debate. It continues to do so today.

The sociology of socialism since Wright

The last major attempt to build a bridge between sociology and socialism appeared some 13 years ago, with Wright's 2012 ASA presidential address (2013). Wright called for sociologists to embrace an emancipatory social science oriented to the construction of "real utopian" institutions: desirable, viable, and achievable reorganizations of social life geared towards the social empowerment of ordinary people. Wright framed his theory as an attempt to rescue socialism from the pervasive sense that it was no longer a viable

alternative to capitalism, or even worse, that it might be “a distraction from dealing with tractable problems in the real world” (2013:2).

The question of sociology’s relation to socialism cannot be settled with a literature review. As with any deeply-politicized subject, the study of socialism is shaped by factors beyond the internal criteria of research programs—namely, the political power and cultural salience of socialism in the world beyond the academy (I return to this point below). Critical sociologists rightly point out that mainstream journal editors and publishers operate in a for-profit business model where possibly “controversial” topics like socialism might not get a hearing. And of course, sociologists might relate to socialism in many other ways besides studying it—for example, by supporting (or opposing!) socialist movements, as organizers and public intellectuals.⁸² Nevertheless, socialism is an important research subject in its own right, and I am not aware of any recent attempt to review and thematize the sociological literature on it.⁸³

With these qualifications in mind, I review what sociologists have written about socialism, taking Wright’s address as a convenient starting point. Did Wright succeed in reorienting the discipline towards the study of “real-utopian” socialism? Or—less ambitiously—did he succeed in elevating the study of socialism to the status of a major research program for sociologists? Also in this period, as we have seen, socialism came

⁸² See, for example, the March 2020 “Letter of Support from Sociologists for Bernie Sanders”: <https://medium.com/@SocForBernie/letter-of-support-from-sociologists-for-bernie-sanders-2d55f2e06c76>.

⁸³ For recent reviews of the literature on socialism in other disciplines, see Gallinat (2022) for anthropology, Carnevali and Ystehede (2021) for economics, and Simpser et al. (2018) for political science.

back onto the political agenda in the United States for the first time in many decades, and experienced a revival internationally. Did sociologists respond to these developments?

Data and methods

To understand how sociologists have engaged with socialism, I reviewed articles and books covering the period January 1st, 2013 to April 1st, 2025.⁸⁴ For journal articles, I searched in 11 periodicals located in the mainstream of American sociology, including flagship journals: *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, *Sociological Perspectives*, *Sociological Forum*, *Sociological Theory*, *Socius*, *Mobilization*, and *Contexts*.

I also reviewed three journals with a more critical reputation in the discipline: *Critical Sociology*, *Politics & Society*, and *Theory and Society*. Sociological research on socialism might be expected to concentrate in these left-wing journals, and my review confirms this assumption. However, because my primary interest is in how mainstream sociology has engaged socialism, and because the critical literature is quite large, I limit discussion of it to considering some of its formal aspects (publication rates and keyword distributions). My view is that, for reasons stated above, there are compelling scientific, political, and normative reasons for sociologists in the discipline's mainstream to engage

⁸⁴ My review excludes chapters in edited volumes, though includes edited volumes themselves. I am aware of a book chapter by a U.S. sociologist writing on DSA in a European edited volume (Birch 2020) and an article on Bernie Sanders in a British sociology journal (Taylor 2022). I am also aware of two unpublished dissertations by sociologists writing on DSA: Lowery (2020) and Robinson (2022).

with socialism today. It is at least arguable that socialism belongs near the center of the discipline's attention, not just in its critical corners.

For my searches, I used five keywords: "socialism," "social democracy," "communism," "real utopias," and "Sanders." Social democracy and communism name two major historical variants of socialism. "Real utopias" is included to capture articles that elaborate Wright's theory. And Sanders is included to identify articles that engage specifically with the Bernie Sanders campaigns and contemporary U.S. democratic socialism, with which Sanders is strongly associated. I restricted my searches to original research articles and excluded book reviews, editorials, or short commentaries. Searches looked for keyword hits in article abstracts. If my keywords appeared in an abstract, I would then code the article for inclusion or exclusion. Keywords appearing as proper nouns (e.g. an abstract that included the phrase "Communist Party") were included.

Searches were first conducted using the built-in search engines of each journal publisher. I then ran a search using the same keyword string in Google Scholar, which allows searches by journal title. I also conducted manual searches of all journals, again looking for keyword hits in article abstracts. For books, I searched for the same five keywords (or variants) appearing in titles or jacket copy. Searches were conducted in *Contemporary Sociology* to locate books published by U.S.-based sociologists, as well as in two independent scholarly publishers, Verso and Haymarket. Once candidate books were identified, I would code the webpage on the book publisher's website for inclusion or exclusion. For textbooks, I selected 10 recent editions of introductory volumes from

an assortment of major commercial publishers as well as two online, open-access ebooks. I searched for my keywords in textbook index entries (or full-text ctrl-F searches in ebooks). ASA presidential addresses were collected from the ASA website⁸⁵ and were searched via ctrl-F searches for keywords. I examined all 12 addresses from the period beginning with Wright's own address in 2012 and ending with Joya Misra's 2024 address.

I read abstracts, introductions, and discussion/conclusions for each candidate article from mainstream sociology journals. I read introduction and conclusion chapters in books. I read each ASA address in full. Textbook sections on socialism were skimmed. To compute rates of publication about socialism, I also calculated the total number of articles published in each journal and across journals during my period. A handful of articles and books were included in my list even when my keywords did not appear in their abstract or jacket copy, because I was able to confirm that they contained substantive discussion of socialism in their body text.⁸⁶ For example, Triplett (2022) does not contain any of my search keywords in its abstract, but includes extensive discussion of Cuban socialist history in its main text. I also excluded articles with incidental keyword mentions but no substantive discussion of socialism in their text. I

⁸⁵ <https://www.asanet.org/about/governance-and-leadership/council/asa-presidents/>.

⁸⁶ There exists a large interdisciplinary literature on "post-socialism" (or post-communism) emphasizing the causes and outcomes of market transition in former state-socialist countries (for a review see Keister and Borelli 2012). I included these "post-" articles only if their data range extends to the pre-transition period, as defined by the author in question (e.g. Walder et al. (2015) is included because its data range precedes transition). I rejected 11 articles on these grounds. Theory and review articles in the transition literature are included (e.g. Wu 2019).

aimed to be comprehensive in my review, but it is of course possible that some articles or books were missed.⁸⁷

Books and articles

I identified 25 books and 31 articles in mainstream sociology journals by U.S.-based sociologists about socialism, social democracy, communism, real utopias, or Bernie Sanders/contemporary American socialism in the period 01/01/2013 - 04/01/2025 (n=56). The articles represent 0.5% of all 5,917 articles published in issues of mainstream journals during the period.⁸⁸ By journal, 7 articles appeared in *ASR*, 4 in *Socius*, 4 in *Social Forces*, 3 in *AJS*, 3 in *Mobilization*, 2 in *Sociological Perspectives*, 2 in *Sociological Forum*, 2 in *ARS*, 2 in *Contexts*, 1 in *Social Problems*, and 1 in *Sociological Theory*. I characterize books and articles by keyword, regional focus, time period, and research method (qualitative or quantitative). I also consider what these studies contribute to our knowledge about socialism, both in terms of substantive empirical findings and contributions to theory. Finally, I try to describe the range of political orientations towards socialism present in this literature.

The most common keyword for books and articles together is communism (22 texts), followed by socialism (17), real utopias (8), social democracy (8), and just one for

⁸⁷ A list of all texts included in this analysis can be found at the bottom of the page at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/08969205251350399>, and in Appendix II below.

⁸⁸ I was not able to determine a rate for books, but it is obviously a small fraction of all sociology books published in this period.

Sanders (Fig. 1). Sociologists addressed socialism from diverse angles. For example, Bray et al. (2019) examine the emotional dynamics of workers' protests against the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1953. Lane Kenworthy (2019, 2022) mobilizes evidence from the Nordic countries to make the case for social democracy and against democratic socialism. And the contributors in Block and Hockett (2022) offer a set of real-utopian proposals for democratizing financial institutions.

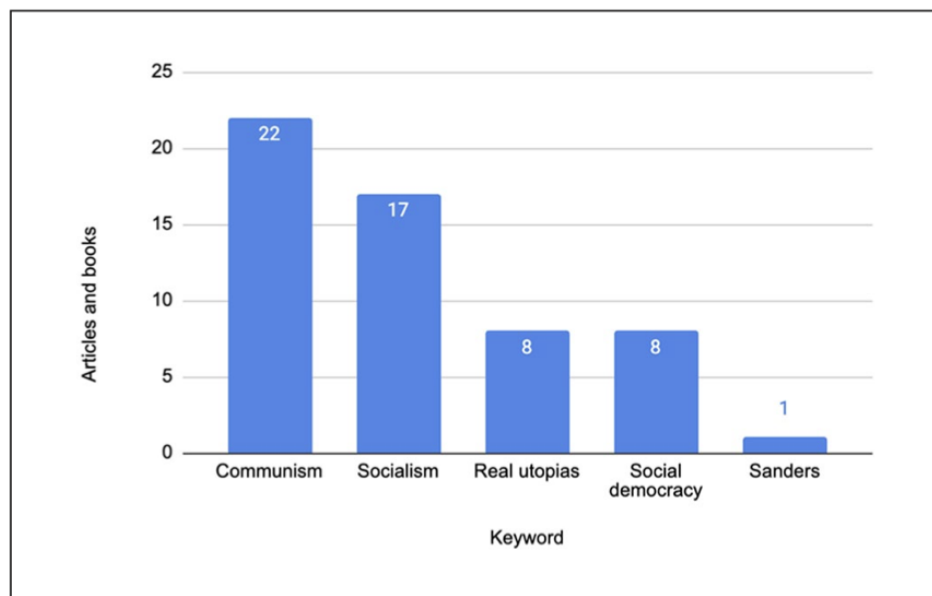


Fig. 1: Distribution of abstract and jacket copy keywords across mainstream journal articles and books, 2013-2025.

Most books and articles (43 texts) addressed a country or region other than the U.S or did not have a regional focus (Fig. 2). 14 texts focused on Europe, 13 on the U.S.,

and 11 on China. 16 texts had a global or non-region specific focus. Texts also vary by time period. A plurality of texts (22) address socialism in the contemporary period (2008-present) or do not have a specific period focus. 19 texts are set in the Cold War era (1945-1991), nine in the post-Cold War years (1991-2008), four in the World War era (1914-1945), and two in the pre-World War era (pre-1914) (Fig. 3).

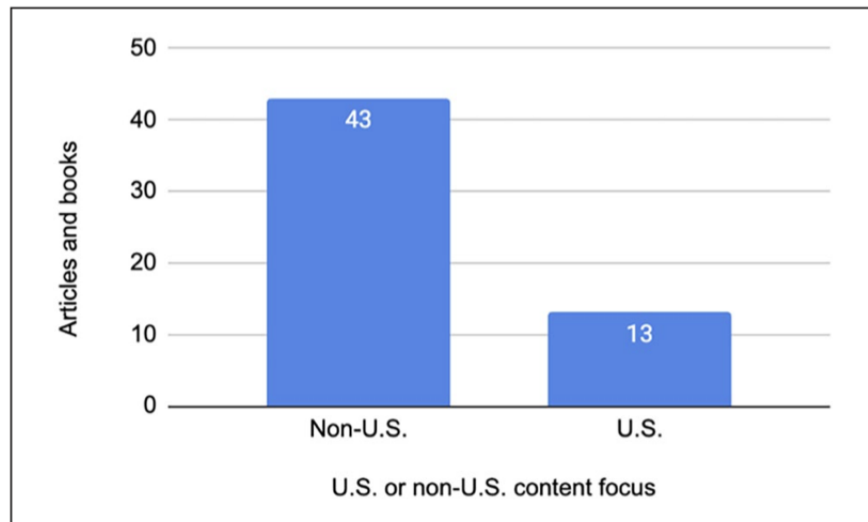


Fig. 2: Distribution of books and mainstream journal articles by U.S. or non-U.S. content focus, 2013-2025.

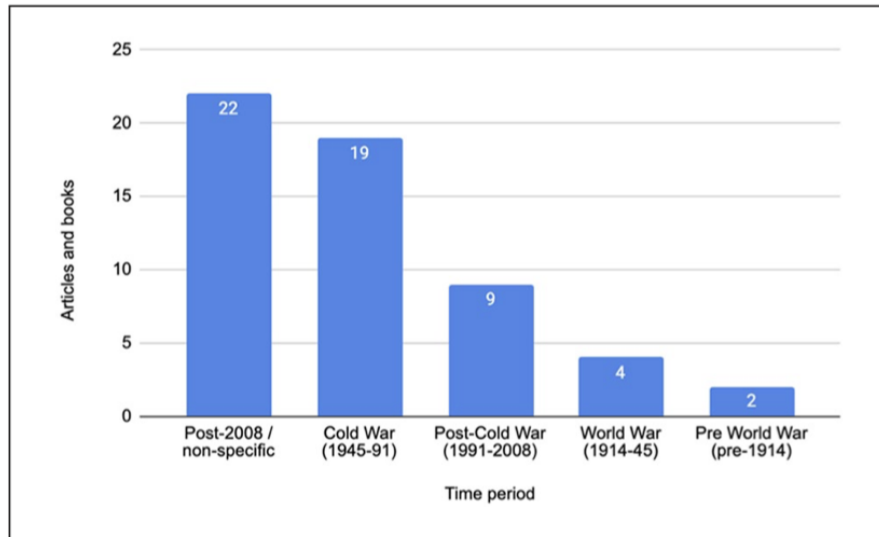


Fig. 3: Distribution of books and mainstream journal articles by time period focus, 2013-2025.

Among articles that had an identifiable method (i.e. excluding theory articles and literature review articles), most (16) used a primarily-quantitative method, while 11 employed a primarily-qualitative method (most of the books in my set used a mixed or historical/narrative method). Quantitative articles are diverse, addressing social mobility in post-transition China (Zhou and Xie 2019), the political economy of early-1990s recessions in the Eastern Bloc (Walder et al. 2015), and increasing rates of tolerance towards communists in the United States (Campbell and Johnson 2018), among other subjects. Broadly, these articles fall into a few recognizable subfields, including political economy, economic sociology, and survey-based public opinion

research. While some of the quantitative articles could be classified as works of historical sociology, most engage data from 1991 or later (12 texts).

Qualitative studies included textual analysis of state discourse on women's oppression in revolutionary Cuba (Triplett 2022), an argument for a real-utopian "social science of solutions" in American healthcare (Vinson 2022), and a "war-centered" historical sociology of revolutionary conflicts in Russia, Finland, Spain, and China (Osinsky and Eloranta 2014). Broadly, these are works of historical sociology that rely on secondary data or textual analysis, often complemented by quantitative data (e.g. Eidlin 2016). Of the 11 qualitative articles, only two are set in the contemporary period. I identified just one ethnography: a study of the coexistence of socialist and anti-socialist Vietnamese communities in Berlin (Su 2022).

Categorizing research by theoretical frame or subfield is rather difficult. However, one theoretical tradition in sociology is both easy to identify and strongly connected to socialism: Marxism. Is socialism mainly an interest for Marxist sociologists? Perhaps surprisingly, the answer seems to be no. "Marx" or "Marxism" appear as references in the theory sections of just seven mainstream journal articles. Of these, only a few can be classified solidly as works of Marxist scholarship, in the sense of elaborating Marxist concepts or addressing a classical Marxist research question. Burawoy (2021) reflects on a career spent elaborating "sociological Marxism." McCarthy and Desan (2023) critique what they call the "class abstractionism" of a fellow Marxist

sociologist, Vivek Chibber. And Eidlin (2016) takes on the traditional “reflection” model of party-formation shared by pluralist and Marxist theory alike. Most strikingly, Xu (2013) combines social movement theory with classical Marxist writing on the revolutionary vanguard to explain the emergence of Chinese communism in the years after 1917. But these are exceptions in a literature dominated by conventional (non-Marxist) quantitative economic and historical sociology. This conclusion applies also to the books, only a few of which (Blanc, Chibber, Anderson, Riley) are conventionally Marxist in any sense.⁸⁹

Has this literature made any significant contributions to our general knowledge of socialism? While it is written for a specialist audience, the article literature still makes some contributions of wide relevance. Here the study of inequality stands out. Zhou and Xie (2019) find that social mobility in China remains higher than in most mature capitalist countries, while Hansen and Toft (2021) demonstrate that class-origin inequalities in wealth are increasing over time in social-democratic Norway. In an innovative paper on the “redistribution of happiness,” Ono and Lee (2013) find that social democracies close the “happiness gap” between rich and poor, but increase the gap between single people and parents. Treiman and Walder (2019) demonstrate that the Chinese Communist Party’s mid-century practice of labeling households as “Good” or “Bad” classes had major impacts on individual life chances even many years after the

⁸⁹ Wright’s real-utopian theory is perhaps best seen as a strand of post-Marxism (Therborn 2018).

system was discontinued. Finally, Lei (2020) finds survey evidence of increasing dissatisfaction with inequality in China, indicating a possible “social volcano” in the People’s Republic.

The books in my review make notable contributions in two areas: the historical sociology of some major events and periods in socialist history, and institutional designs for real-utopian reforms. The historical sociologies use original data to reinterpret some major episodes in socialist history. First, Barry Eidlin (2018) constructs a systematic comparison between the United States and Canada to show that the Great Depression was the critical juncture for working-class political development in both countries, and that the failure of the U.S. left to form an independent labor party in these years had more to do with contingent political choices by ruling parties than deeply-set institutional or cultural differences between the countries.

Second, in a pair of impressive books, Andrew Walder reexamines the Mao era in China. He demonstrates that the Chinese party-state collapsed in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution “because of political processes within the party-state itself,” not due to an onslaught of protest from the streets (2019:22). Viewed from a wider frame, Walder shows that the Cultural Revolution itself was just one particularly dramatic episode of disorder in a whole era of crisis caused by the incompetence and recklessness of Mao’s leadership (2015). The Mao era, Walder concludes, was a tragedy that left China in a worse condition by the mid-1970s than it had been in the early 1950s.

And third, Eric Blanc (2022) offers a panoramic view of Russia's 1905 and 1917 revolutions from the Russian Empire's peripheries, showing that revolutionary strategy across the Empire—insurrectionary or electoral-democratic—was determined above all by the structure of local political regimes, and that “revolutionary social democracy” in Russia had much more in common with central European socialism than is commonly supposed.

The political implications of these arguments are significant. Walder's argument should (but probably won't) demolish any lingering affection for the Maoist tradition as a progressive form of socialist politics. Eidlin's argument suggests that the U.S. labor movement has been poorly served by its incorporation into the Democratic Party as merely one “special interest” among others. And Blanc's revisionist interpretation of the Russian Revolution calls into question traditional Leninist arguments that see the path to socialism as necessarily involving an insurrection that smashes the state, rather than a rupture triggered by electing a workers' party to power through conventional democratic institutions.

Of the real-utopian volumes, perhaps the most interesting and original is Gastil and Wright's blueprint for sortition legislatures (2019), by which legislators would be selected through a random biennial lottery. In an era marked by deep dissatisfaction with representative democracy, sortition reforms could offer a credible alternative to “plebiscitary” forms of populism that tend to empower the right—though the complex

issue of how sortition could function as part of a strategy for socialism is left mostly unexplored.

What about journals associated with the left of the discipline? I reviewed issues of *Critical Sociology*, *Politics & Society*, and *Theory and Society* over the same period as the mainstream journals (2013-2025). As one might expect, there is a large and diverse literature on socialism appearing in these three journals, much larger than that appearing in the 11 mainstream journals (Fig. 4). After filtering out reviews, transition articles, and articles which mention socialist keywords only incidentally, I identified 95 articles meeting my criteria, representing 6.8% of all 1,402 articles published in issues of these journals during the period—much higher than the 0.5% rate for the mainstream journals. Taken by journal, 3.4% of *Critical Sociology* articles concerned socialism or a variant, 5% of *Theory and Society* articles, and a remarkable 19.5% of *Politics & Society* articles. For comparison, the highest rate for any of the mainstream journals is 1.6% (in *ASR*).

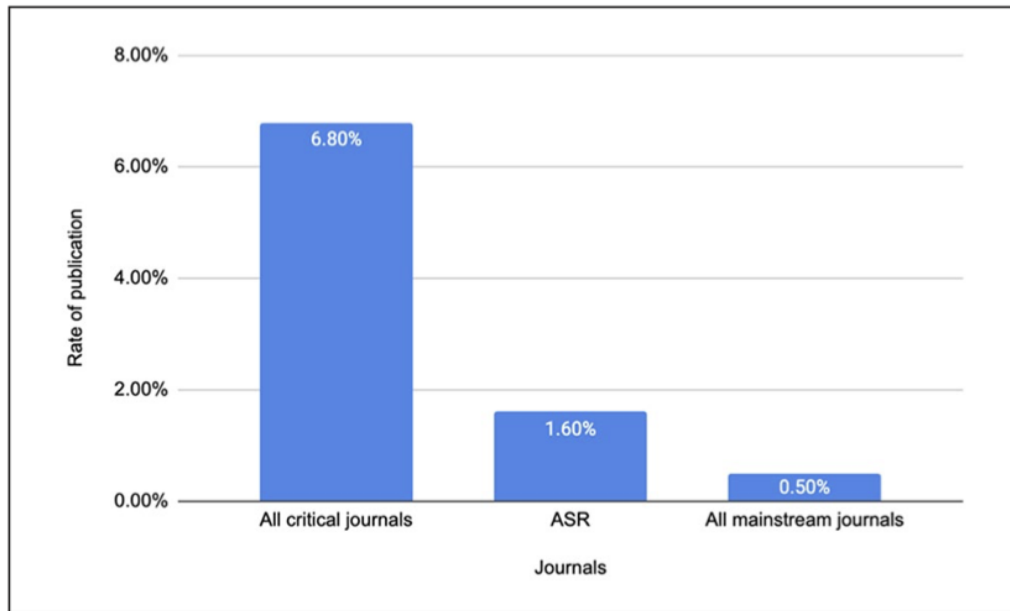


Fig. 4: Publication rates of articles on socialism by journal, 2013-2025 (as a percentage of all articles published).

Examined by keyword, 36 articles in the critical journals address real utopias, 34 socialism, 14 communism, and nine social democracy. Two articles concern Sanders or contemporary U.S. democratic socialism. The frequency of articles addressing real utopias is due almost entirely to *Politics & Society*, which has been the home for Wright's Real Utopias Project since its inception in the early 1990s. Just one article addressing real-utopian theory appeared in a critical journal other than *P&S* in this period (Emirbayer and Noble 2013).

Textbooks

Are sociologists teaching about socialism in the classroom? Assessing the content of sociology textbooks gives us one (imperfect) way to answer this question. I looked at 10 introductory sociology textbooks published since 2018 from the largest U.S. commercial publishers (and one U.K. publisher). All 10 textbooks feature at least one of my keywords (or a variant) in their text. Of eight textbooks with indices, socialism and communism appear in six, Bernie Sanders appears in three, and social democracy and real utopias appear in none. Of seven books with glossaries, communism is defined in five, socialism in four, while social democracy and real utopias do not appear.⁹⁰

Socialism and communism appear frequently in textbooks, usually in chapters on classical theory (in connection with Marx and Marxism) or in chapters on economic institutions. Conley (2020:607-08) gives a stripped-down definition that is repeated with slight variations across the textbooks: socialism is “an economic system in which most or all of the needs of the population are met through non-market methods of distribution.” Manza et al. (2018:167) opt for an explicitly Marxist definition: “In Marxist theory, a socialist mode of production is one in which the productive forces of society are collectively owned (not by individual business owners).” Connerly et al. (2021:524) engage fairly extensively with socialism, which they describe as one of the two “dominant economic systems of the modern era.” Khan et al. (2024:487) discuss

⁹⁰ While social democracy does not appear in any textbook, all books include some discussion of the welfare state and often also the concept of a mixed economy.

“state socialism” in harshly negative terms: “Thankfully, many of the worst states have disappeared.... Socialist states, such as the Soviet Union and Maoist China, no longer murder millions of their own citizens.” Sometimes textbooks seem rather ill-informed on the subject: Schaefer (2019:317-18) lists Russia as a “contemporary example” of a socialist state.

Sanders and U.S. democratic socialism are mostly absent in textbooks. Sanders gets brief mentions in three other texts: as a surprising example of a democratic socialist advocating for a reformed, “semi-socialist” capitalism (Connerly et al. 2021:533); as an innovator in online campaign fundraising (Conley 2020:185); and as revealing a “feminist generational gap” among younger and older women in the electorate (Benokraitis 2025 1-5c). In general, textbooks often mention socialism, but devote little space to it and treat it mainly as an economic system that belongs to the past, for better or worse.⁹¹

One textbook presents an exception to the general neglect of Sanders and democratic socialism present in this whole literature: *Introduction to Sociology*, by Giddens, Duneier, Appelbaum, and Carr (2020). Giddens and his coauthors open their chapter on “Stratification, Class, and Inequality” with a glossy two-page photo of Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez at a rally. They use the popular appeal of Sanders’s campaigns to introduce a discussion of the Marxist theory of class: “By the

⁹¹ Though Conley ambivalently defends the possibility of socialism by noting that “maybe it just hasn’t happened yet” (2020:608).

end of 2016, the ideas of Karl Marx had reached the height of popularity in modern politics through the presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders, and this laid the groundwork for the emergence of candidates like AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez] in 2018” (240). Giddens and his coauthors register the political importance of Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez’s affiliation with socialism, writing that “the 2016 elections signalled a major political realignment in the United States” with “strong populist currents” pushing forward outsider candidates from the left and right, while Ocasio-Cortez’s rise to prominence is “extraordinary,” “not simply [because] the candidate was a bartender, or still in her twenties, but that she was a self-identified socialist” (240). In this they are exceptional among sociologists in the texts I review.

ASA addresses

ASA addresses reflect the interests circulating at the peak of the sociology profession. Did other ASA presidents follow Wright in connecting the sociological enterprise to the movement for socialism? Brief references to socialism appear in four addresses.⁹² Ruth Milkman (2017) discusses the appeal of socialism for the “political generation” of Millennials in the 2010s, and mentions Sanders—the only president to do so.⁹³ Michele Lamont (2018:424-25) refers to socialism as one among several “historical cultural repertoires” that make solidarity more salient to French workers than American or

⁹² ASA addresses are published in the first volume of *ASR* the year after they are delivered. For example, Wright gave his address in August 2012, but it did not appear in print until 2013.

⁹³ Milkman gave her address in August 2016, about a month after the Democratic National Convention awarded Hillary Clinton its nomination over Sanders.

Israeli workers. Mary Romero (2020:6-7, 13) alludes to socialism and communism in her discussion of the social justice tradition in sociology: G.H. Mead and Jane Addams shared “a social democratic version of socialism,” C. Wright Mills punctured the argument that socialism “had become irrelevant in the postwar period,” and Harry Fairchild spoke out against “anticommunist hysteria” in the early 1950s. The only president who references Erik Olin Wright is Christine Williams, who briefly describes “expanding the private safety net and expanding the public safety net” as examples of “real utopias” (2021:198). Except for Milkman, socialism has not been an important reference-point for the discipline’s leaders.

Discussion

What conclusions can we draw from this survey? Two stand out. First, at least as sociology is concerned, my analysis confirms Melcher and Lidsay’s assertion that “[w]hile popular media has continually emphasized a growing embrace of socialist ideas in the United States, and the electoral success of socialist identifiers has unquestionably grown since 2016, this group has been largely ignored by the social sciences” (2024:10-11). This conclusion applies to both mainstream *and* critical sociology journals. Only two articles (both from critical journals) and one book in my review substantively engage U.S. democratic socialism or its standard-bearer, Sanders.

Gautney (2018) is an insider account of the 2016 Sanders campaign from a sociologist who worked for Sanders as a senior policy advisor. Though perceptive and

not uncritical, the book is more a work of journalism than a systematic analysis. Hetland (2024) presents a comparative ethnography of utopian politics in U.S. presidential campaigns, including the 2016 Sanders campaign. He favorably contrasts the “strategic” utopianism of Sanders against the “instrumental” and “prefigurative” utopianism of the 2008 Barack Obama campaign and the Green Party, respectively. Melcher and Lindsay (2024) provide the first estimates of the prevalence of socialist-identifiers in the U.S., four years after the 2020 primaries. They find, among other things, that socialist respondents are more likely to be Black than white (2024:6).

Two studies by sociologists published outside of my reviewed journals deserve mention. Altamura and Oliver (2022), both sociologists, parse a large dataset of voter behavior in the 2020 Democratic primaries to establish some basic facts about Sanders’s electoral coalition. They show that Sanders voters that year were disproportionately young, Hispanic, and politically independent, but that their support was substantially affected by both identity *and* ideological support for Sanders’s policies. Shuster et al. (2024) complement Altamura and Oliver’s study of voter behavior with a big-data analysis of Twitter posts by 21 million users in 2020. They demonstrate that Sanders supporters online were not a homogeneous group, but rather were divided into qualitatively different clusters by identity and ideology: moderate, progressive, and far-left. Together with Melcher and Lindsay, these studies debunk the “Bernie Bro” stereotype, showing that Sanders assembled a surprisingly diverse coalition for his “political revolution.” They also indicate that sociologists are in fact leading the way in

the study of U.S. socialism, especially through quantitative methods. But for whatever reason, this scholarship is not finding its way into mainstream sociology journals.

Nor, for that matter, is scholarship on other contemporary socialist movements and organizations around the world. There is a rich strand of political sociology in the literature I survey, like Bloom and Martin (2016) on the Black Panther Party, Xu (2013) on the early Chinese Communist Party, and Mudge (2018) on social democratic parties in the neoliberal era, but there is regrettably little research on the contemporary analogues of these parties and movements.

The second notable finding is the apparently low impact of Wright's Real Utopias Project on the mainstream of the discipline. Sociologists and other social scientists have continued to deepen and expand the real utopias research program. Several new volumes in the series have appeared over the last ten years with contributions by American sociologists. These include proposals for financial democratization (Block and Hockett 2022), sortition legislatures (Gastil and Wright 2019), and "bicameral" firms (Ferrerias et al. 2024). *Politics & Society* publishes many real-utopian papers. But these ideas haven't made their way into core disciplinary journals or textbooks. Nor has Wright's address become a touchstone for later ASA presidents.

Real-utopian theory makes just one appearance in the mainstream journal literature: an article in *Contexts* on "collaborative learning" systems in U.S. health care, involving greater participation by organized patient groups to accelerate the adoption of new treatments (Vinson 2022). This proposal seems to be desirable, viable, and

achievable. But notably, Vinson omits Wright's connection of real utopian proposals to anticapitalist strategy. Though she writes that collaborative learning systems can help overturn "entrenched power relations" in health care, she makes no mention of the most durable power-relation of all: the commodification of care in a profit-driven, capitalist industry. Similarly, in her ASA address, Christine Williams's brief mention of public *and private* safety nets as "real utopias" suggests a diluted, reformist understanding of the concept far from Wright's original meaning. Real utopias, when they appear in the mainstream literature at all, seem more "realistic" than utopian.

A few qualifications. First, my simple method doesn't allow me to determine relative publication rates by sociologists studying different subjects. I cannot conclude that sociologists are publishing on socialism less (or more) frequently than any other topic in our heterogeneous discipline, nor whether they publish on socialism more or less frequently than social scientists in other disciplines. I also have no basis for comparing the rate or content of what is published in sociology about socialism today to publication patterns from other waves of socialism.

Second, there are certainly sociologists publishing about issues deeply *relevant* to the study of socialism. For example, though they do not address socialism per se, Usmani (2018) and Kadivar, Usmani, and Bradlow (2020) present cross-national empirical analysis on the relationship between popular movements and democratization. When viewed as a social movement, socialism is perhaps unique in the degree to which it seeks to build *other* movements. Socialists themselves spend most of

their time writing and arguing about politics and movements that could advance the struggle towards socialism, and rather less debating socialism as such. Careful sociological studies of left-wing movements may therefore pick up on the presence of conscious socialist elements within those movements. Paris Aslanidis (2016:313), for example, in an influential article on populism, discusses the role of Marxist “Reds” he found organizing within the Greek *indignados* movement of 2010-2011.

Third, publication in flagship journals is just one indicator of interest. It does not mean that there aren’t many sociologists who have engaged with Sanders and democratic socialism in some way. A March 2020 “Letter of Support from Sociologists for Bernie Sanders” has 379 signatures from sociologists, including two ASA presidents (Milkman and Bonilla-Silva).⁹⁴ No doubt there are many sociologists who identify as socialists and who engage in movement activism that connects to socialism.⁹⁵ And

⁹⁴ “Letter of Support from Sociologists for Bernie Sanders”, <https://medium.com/@SocForBernie/letter-of-support-from-sociologists-for-bernie-sanders-2d55f2e06c76>.

⁹⁵ I am not aware of any recent studies that attempt to determine the proportion of sociologists (or other academics) who identify as socialists. Research on the politics of professors suffers from the same methodological flaw identified by Melcher and Lindsay (2024), by placing respondents on a binary scale that includes options for “liberal” or “conservative”, but not “socialist” (see, e.g., Gross and Simmons 2014 and Jaschik 2017). A computational analysis looking at the social media use of academics in 2020-2021 similarly disaggregates ideology by the conservative/liberal binary, with no mention of socialism (Havey and Her N.D.). Presumably, many of the 27% of sociologists self-identifying as “Marxist” in 2006 would also identify as socialists (Gross and Simmons 2014:33). However, the proportion of Marxists in the discipline seems to have declined over time, at least insofar as membership in the ASA Marxist section is a reliable indicator. Marxist section membership stood at 414 in 2008, or 1.7% of the membership of all ASA sections that year. In 2024, Marxist section membership was 267, or 1.1% of all section members. It is striking to note how many sociologists self-described as Marxists in Gross and Simmons’s 2006 survey—more than a quarter of the discipline—but did *not* hold membership in the Marxist section. See “Section Membership Data,” ASA: <https://www.asanet.org/communities-and-sections/sections/section-membership-data/>, as well as McAdam (2007).

socialism has occasionally been a major theme in the ASA. For example, the 2016 ASA conference featured socialist speakers like Walden Bello, Amy Goodman, and Kshama Sawant on a plenary panel discussing the legacy of the 1999 Battle of Seattle.⁹⁶

Sociologists also engage directly with parts of the contemporary socialist movement as public sociologists, by appearing on podcasts, speaking at conferences, and publishing in magazines and journals connected to the movement. For the contemporary U.S. democratic socialist movement, there are a few key publications and venues where sociologists might share their work: *Jacobin*, a quarterly magazine; *Catalyst*, a scholarly journal associated with *Jacobin*; *The Dig*, a long-form interview podcast, also associated with *Jacobin*; and the annual Socialism Conference held in Chicago.⁹⁷

Sociologists engage fairly often in these venues. Of the authors identified in my review, 12 have also been published in *Jacobin*. Among 345 articles published in print issues of *Jacobin* magazine since 2011 with academic authors, 69 were by sociologists, or 20% (a distant second behind historians). In *Catalyst*, sociologists are well-represented: 55 out of 190 authors published in journal issues since 2017 have been sociologists, or 29%—more than any other discipline.⁹⁸ Out of 349 academics appearing

⁹⁶ “Rethinking Social Movements,” 2016 ASA conference program: https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/am_2016_insert.pdf; remarks from plenary discussion on the Battle of Seattle, 2016 ASA conference: https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/beyond_battle_seattle_transcript_2016.pdf.

⁹⁷ I did not attempt to determine whether a sociologist appearing in these venues was U.S.-based, but most appear to be. Rates were determined by manual coding of each issue or podcast episode listed on the websites <https://jacobin.com/>, <https://catalyst-journal.com/>, and <https://thedigradio.com/>. *Jacobin* publishes many graduate students, and these are included in my counts.

⁹⁸ The high rate of sociological articles published in *Catalyst* may have something to do with the fact that it is edited by a sociologist, Vivek Chibber.

on *The Dig* since 2016, there were 42 sociologists, or 12%. Sociologists appeared on *The Dig* more often than political scientists or economists, but less often than legal scholars and historians. Out of 160 academic presenters at the Socialism conferences in 2019, 2022, and 2023, 13 were sociologists, or 8%.⁹⁹ Sociologists appearing in these venues shared research on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from the challenges that would face a hypothetical Sanders White House (McCarthy 2020), the deficiencies of Pierre Bourdieu’s class analysis (Riley 2018), and the “models and bottles” party scene of super-rich men (Mears 2024).

Without data comparing the engagement of sociologists with other social movements and/or with other waves of socialism, I cannot draw firm conclusions about the meaning of this involvement. My impression is that sociologists *do* engage substantively and frequently with socialism in this way. However, engaging with a movement is not the same thing as producing knowledge about that movement—few of these sociologists are sharing research about socialism itself.

Explaining sociological disinterest

The major puzzle emerging from this review is sociology’s overall disinterest in contemporary U.S. democratic socialism. Given the historical salience of socialism to the discipline and the potential of socialist politics to address myriad social problems at

⁹⁹ Data for the 2019, 2022, and 2023 Socialism Conferences come from personal communication with an event organizer. Data was not available for other years of the conference. Around a quarter of total conference presenters (160 out of 631) were academics.

their source, why would sociology fail to engage it when it returns to the political agenda, as it did from 2015 onwards?

Two complementary answers suggest themselves, one “external” and the other “internal.” Sociological disinterest is determined above all by the objective political weakness of socialism. Bernie Sanders may have run impressive campaigns but he did not, in the end, prevail. If he had, it seems plausible that sociologists would find socialism a more pressing topic of research. And of course, if socialism today was like it was in the heyday of the Socialist Party and IWW (1901-1919) or the Communist Party (1934-1948)—when it expressed the aspirations of millions of workers for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism—then social science would be hard-pressed to ignore it. Clearly we are a long way from the time when socialism posed a living revolutionary threat to capitalist society, the era when Durkheim could rightly call it “a social fact of the highest importance” (1985:159-60).

But this raises a question. I have argued that, at least in the United States, socialism today is *stronger* than at any point in the last fifty years. By some measures—formal organizational membership, number of socialists in elected office, and (most notably) vote share for a socialist presidential candidate—socialism today is as strong or even stronger than it was during the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s. Certainly, socialists of the 2010s and early 2020s scored more electoral successes than did the New Left.

The 1960s comparison is illustrative. Socialist ideas circulated freely in the social movements of the era, and exercised a growing influence as the “long sixties” advanced. Some of the most committed young radicals (including a young Bernie Sanders) joined socialist organizations like the Young People’s Socialist League, Students for a Democratic Society, and smaller Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist, and Maoist groups. These organizations had an outsized ideological effect on the student, antiwar, and women’s liberation movements, even if only a minority of students actually joined an organization. In turn, the campus struggles had a profound effect on sociology.

Fifty years later, socialism returned in the form of the Sanders campaigns, but this generation of socialism was *not* a campus-based movement. Though Sanders drew strong support from young voters including college students, and had some campaign infrastructure on campus in the form of “Students for Bernie” chapters, the real energy and focus of the Sanders “party” was located elsewhere, in large cities and key primary states. In many ways this was an advantage for Sanders and an advance for socialist politics as a whole, which had long been sequestered around universities. But it meant that the locus of socialist organization-building (in the form of DSA) between his 2016 and 2020 campaigns would be municipal, not campus-based. Pro-Sanders students were left with few obvious things to *do* on campus, especially once the primaries were over.

By contrast, the social movements that did sweep across some university campuses in the first half of the 2010s—Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and the

anti-sexual assault movement—weren't limited in this way (Milkman 2017). Crucially, these other movements involved direct forms of contentious action against power-holders, on and off-campus. Student Occupy encampments clashed with campus police, and anti-sexual assault activists combined legal advocacy with daring protests against administrators. Most dramatically, at the University of Missouri in 2015, student athletes identifying with the Black Lives Matter movement forced the resignation of their university president in response to racist incidents on campus (Eligon and Pérez-Peña 2015).

These movements, which surely involved many sociology students, reinforced sociology's well-established "trinity" of class, race, and gender scholarship, spurring research on populism, racial justice, and feminism—but not socialism, which was a minority current within Occupy and marginal within Black Lives Matter and campus feminism. Their contentious repertoires also had the crucial effect of involving young people in mass, face-to-face direct action against powerful authority figures—the kind of experience that can transform a person's consciousness and make them a life-long movement activist.

By contrast, the fact that socialism was reborn in a quintessentially institutional context—the Democratic Party primary process—deprived its youngest partisans of exactly this kind of experience. There was nothing comparable for Sanders-inspired student socialists to the experiences of, say, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the Civil Rights Movement, which flowed into the Berkeley Free

Speech Movement, the antiwar movement, and women's liberation—and all of which together provided an ecosystem in which specifically *socialist* ideology could be reconstructed, and then elaborated into research programs by graduate students and young professors who had taken part in the struggles.

To be sure, the Sanders campaigns did leave an organizational residue on some campuses in the form of the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA), which expanded rapidly in these years (in many places evolving directly out of Students for Bernie chapters). But despite the new cultural energy around socialism, YDSA chapters were mostly unable to galvanize a broader movement of students to fight for Sanders's "College for All" program (A. 2021). YDSA (and DSA) also did not benefit from direct sponsorship by Sanders, who kept the organization at arm's length. Any forward momentum was halted by Sanders's decisive defeat in March 2020 and the cessation of face-to-face organizing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Under these conditions, young socialists could not find a way to complete the circuit between Sanders's strong popularity with young people and a participatory grassroots movement on campuses.

Finally, there is the broader historical fact of socialism's accumulated defeats. Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement certainly experienced serious setbacks after the 1970s, and their radical wings were mostly crushed. But moderate strands of these movements did eventually break through in national politics and culture, and radical strands of feminism and Black Power survived in local movement communities. The fate

of socialism after the 1970s was different—it was desperately weak in the United States over the whole neoliberal era.

For socialists to have any chance of success advancing their program requires a deep embeddedness in working-class life. But the key organizations of the working class, labor unions, were decimated in this period by deindustrialization and a sustained employer offensive. And of course, socialism has retained its status as an official, bipartisan ideological enemy of the U.S. ruling class down to the present day, in a way that was never true for movements demanding racial or gender equality.¹⁰⁰ Taken together this has meant that the reservoir of consciously socialist young people who might find their way into professional sociology and write about socialism was much smaller than that available for other social movements.

But are there also theoretical reasons why socialism is not salient for sociologists, conceptual obstacles that impede research? My review suggests one possibility. The definitions of socialism present in the literature I review are overwhelmingly economic and systemic in character. Economic sociologists, for example, see a “transition” from socialism—in Russia, China, and elsewhere—when economic institutions shifted from central planning to market coordination. This approach to thinking about socialism is shared with Marxists, who see socialism and capitalism as competing systems of production with different class relations—or more expansively as entirely different

¹⁰⁰ A 2023 House of Representatives resolution “denouncing the horrors of socialism” passed with majority support among Democrats (Schnell 2023), including leaders of the Democratic Women’s Caucus and Congressional Black Caucus.

forms of society. Similarly, a recent review of the political science literature on communism bluntly declares it to be “dead,” apparently because of “systemic political transformation” in the former state-socialist world (Simpser et al. 2018). Wright’s own real-utopian theory conceptualized socialism as an economic system or structure, or as elements within such a structure.¹⁰¹

Some concept of socialism as an organized system or totality is clearly essential to retain. In fact, one of the virtues of socialism, as I have argued, is exactly its orientation towards systemic change instead of discrete reforms. But socialism-as-system is historically rare. There just aren’t many cases, and (to American eyes) all of those are faraway countries that require specific expertise to research. The system-based definitional frame also helps to account for the neglect of Sanders and U.S. democratic socialists, who certainly haven’t been able to found a new society.

But this is a standard to which no other major ideology or social movement is held. No sociologist would accept the claim, for example, that feminism is irrelevant or “dead” because there are no existing social systems—economies, states, societies—that we would judge truly feminist or gender-egalitarian (however we want to define that idea). We would respond, rightly, that the systemic aspect, or potential, of feminism is not the only relevant quality of feminism. We would point to feminism’s character as an ideology, a politics, or movement, all of which are aimed in some sense at systematicity,

¹⁰¹ As Dylan Riley points out, there has long been a party-shaped hole in the Real Utopias Project (2020:101).

at totality—a world free of sexist oppression—but none of which are defined solely by their ability to realize this possibility.

With a broader political and ideological definition, one can indeed find socialism in every country around the world, in every year and just about every city. Viewed from this angle, the idea of “post-socialism” looks rather different even in its paradigmatic case. Socialism didn’t cease to exist *in* Russia when the Soviet Union dissolved, even if Russia itself—as state, society, economy—was no longer “socialist.” Socialism persisted as a politics, a discourse, and a popular aspiration. Thirty years after socialism was supposedly crushed, a mixed communist and democratic socialist coalition came in second place in federal parliamentary elections against Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party (Lobanov 2021).

Freeing ourselves from systemic and economistic definitions of socialism would, I think, help open our minds to new possibilities for research. To this I now turn.

For a political sociology of socialism

What are the most pressing questions for the sociology of socialism today? My review of books and mainstream journal articles indicates some existing areas of strength. Since 2013, sociologists have contributed much to our understanding of socialist history and political economy. The real-utopian literature on alternatives to capitalism is also impressive. Where this literature is weak is the *political* sociology of contemporary socialism, especially in the United States.

This genre of work would focus above all on socialist parties, movements, and organizations. Of the 13 books and mainstream journal articles that address socialism in the U.S., only four are works of analytic political sociology (Bloom and Martin 2016; Eidlin 2016, 2018; Paret and Levenson 2025), and none of these address socialism in the contemporary (post-2008) period.¹⁰² The absence of political sociology is also true of studies addressing contemporary socialism in other regions of the world: of 14 contemporary texts with a non-U.S. focus, none focus on parties, movements, or organizations.¹⁰³ Sociological work that does address contemporary socialism in the U.S.—Altamura and Oliver (2022), Shuster et al. (2024), and Melcher and Lindsay (2024)—provides us with a valuable quantitative picture of socialist support in the electorate and population, but lacks qualitative detail and is mostly descriptive, not explanatory.

What is most needed are comparative studies of socialism as party and social movement, including its forms of organization and mobilization, its framing strategies, and its linkages with groups in civil society. As forms of organization, political parties possess unique capacities to connect social interests to the struggle for state power. But

¹⁰² The remaining nine studies are split between articles examining public attitudes towards communists (Cambell and Johnson (2018); Schwadel and Garneau (2017); Twenge et al. (2015)) and arguments focused on the viability of social-democratic or democratic socialist institutions (Kenworthy (2019) and Adler (2019), respectively). Gautney (2018) is an account of the 2016 Sanders campaign, discussed above. Vinson (2022) is a case for a real-utopian reform to the U.S. healthcare system. Scarritt et al. (2025) examine the appeal of social-democratic policies to conservative voters. Riley (2022) is a set of short essays addressing various aspects of American politics, economy, and culture.

¹⁰³ Several articles in critical journals discuss contemporary socialist parties around the world, including those in Bolivia and Uruguay (Anria et al. 2021), Nepal (Ismail 2017), Kerala (Agarwal 2023), and southern Europe (Branco et al. 2024).

because socialist parties advance programs that fundamentally threaten the interests of capitalists, these parties face intense opposition upon entering government. This, in turn, can only be overcome by linking the party to mass movements in civil society to break capitalist resistance. A political sociology of socialism would examine the causal mechanisms present at each stage of this three-part process of party-formation, party-in-government, and mass mobilization. How do socialist parties take shape and begin competing for state power? Upon entering the state, what determines the exact forms of capitalist-class opposition? Finally, what mechanisms are involved in articulating the party-in-government to the movement in the streets, so that “non-reformist reforms” can be pushed through?

There is a rich historical literature on the problems of socialist strategy in capitalist democracies (e.g. Miliband 1977; Przeworski and Sprague 1988), addressing a few well-known cases of the “democratic road to socialism” in Europe and Latin America. Sociologists have also produced some superb comparative-historical studies of party formation (Ackerman 2021; Desai 2001), and the centrality of party formation to political sociology has recently been emphasized by Martin and Judd (2020). Unfortunately, empirical cases of stage two and especially stage three of the “democratic road” are rare in recent history. But it is still possible to construct testable research designs focused on the first stage of left party formation, of which there are many contemporary cases around the world (including some young parties that are now in government).

What seems especially urgent to understand is how new socialist party-formations confront the question of class dealignment: the drift of working-class and poor voters away from left parties, and the rise of a middle-class “Brahmin left” in many countries (Gethin et al. 2022). In other words, what determines the social composition of new left parties today? How can left parties effectively root themselves in parts of the working class and oppressed social groups, so that they have the capacities to realize their programs once in office? And once such parties do enter government, how can their party bases effectively insulate and control leaders on the hostile terrain of the state?

Answers to these questions will require sociologists to engage in fine-grained qualitative work of the kind that is mostly lacking in the literature reviewed above. We need studies that “look inside parties” to focus on how they are organized and how they mobilize their partisans (Mudge and Chen 2014:322). While quantitative studies—say, large-scale surveys of socialist officeholders, or event analysis of party-related protest activity—can illuminate some structural processes involved in party-formation, these methods can’t reveal the complex micro-mechanisms at work. How do party actors actually go about “articulating” new social constituencies to the party? How do party activists develop a durable collective identity? When mass social movements do kick off, how do existing socialist political organizations relate to them? These kinds of questions are best explored through interview and ethnographic methods that elicit rich qualitative data.

In my own work, I have concentrated on the problem of party membership, which has declined as a structural feature of civic and political organizations for many years, but which is experiencing something of a revival in the form of DSA (Purucker 2026). Well-organized party memberships with autonomy from party leaders may be crucial to overcoming the twin risks of leadership bureaucratization (the vice of communist parties, especially), on the one hand, or leadership opportunism (the social-democratic vice) on the other. Reconstructing membership-based organizational cultures faces steep challenges in the contemporary era. But some left parties and social movement organizations around the world have managed to retain meaningful forms of membership democracy down to the present day. Studies of socialist party membership structures, membership identity formation, and membership democracy are themes ripe for comparative exploration.

These are some broad themes for a political sociology of socialism. In the United States, there are also quite a few specific questions about the emergence of socialist politics that sociologists could address. We lack a good account of how exactly DSA proliferated so rapidly in the year after Bernie Sanders suspended his first campaign: in less than a year, the organization ballooned from a handful of small chapters to over 300 by the end of 2017 (Heyward 2017). DSA's role in the 2017-2018 anti-Trump Resistance movement has been largely neglected—it gets no more than brief mention in existing studies of the Resistance (Meyer and Tarrow 2018; Fisher 2021). We have very little information on the DSA members elected to local office in recent years—more than 200

have held office since 2017. Other puzzles concern DSA's diverse repertoire of contention—encompassing everything from local brake light repair clinics, to marches on Washington, DC to directly organizing workers into unions—and the surprising coexistence of multiple internal political tendencies within the organization (at least five “caucuses” are represented on DSA’s National Political Committee today).

The concepts of political sociology are still the best tools for exploring socialism, which is fundamentally a political ideology and movement, not a cultural or intellectual phenomenon, nor an economic system that spreads in the interstices of capitalism. However, the study of socialism could benefit from the attention of scholars working in other fields. A cultural sociology could entail, for instance, a study of contemporary socialism’s “keywords” and the subtle differences in meaning attached to these concepts by different groups within socialist organizations (Williams 2014). Scholars of race and gender could help explain some of the more puzzling things about DSA—like the fact that an organization with an overwhelmingly white and male membership nevertheless elects many women of color to office (Crawford 2023). Finally, there is a special need for sociologists with skills in analyzing online communication networks. Social media and groupchat communication platforms are central parts of socialist culture today, but scholars of online political networks have tended to neglect leftists and focus disproportionate attention on the online right (Freelon et al. 2020).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ But see Barnes (2020).

Conclusion

Is socialism still relevant for sociology? The answer depends on where you look. In this article, I began by making a case for socialism's contemporary relevance to sociology, stressing its political and normative dimensions. In my review of the literature, I found abundant engagement with socialism in critical journals, and much less in mainstream journals. But even in these mainstream journals, sociologists have made valuable recent contributions to our knowledge of socialism, both past and present.

But in one important way, socialism is evidently *not* relevant for sociology. With a few exceptions, neither mainstream nor critical sociologists have taken up the challenge of understanding socialism in the form that it has taken in the contemporary U.S., namely, the “political revolution” of the Bernie Sanders campaigns and the emergence of a small but real socialist movement in civil society. Sociologists have also mostly neglected contemporary socialist organizations and movements elsewhere around the world. I have suggested some reasons why this may be so, emphasizing the relative weakness of contemporary socialism as a student movement, as well as the tendency to conceptualize socialism in systemic and not political terms. I then suggested some possible points of departure for sociologists interested in rejuvenating the study of socialism, stressing the importance of comparative political sociology focused on parties, movements, and organizations.

At a time when the neofascist right is rising around the world, socialism may seem like a far-off dream. But the rise of Trump, Elon Musk, and the rest of the

billionaire class to power should make the study of socialism more, not less, urgent. At the time of writing, the centrist leaders of the Democratic Party appear determined to “play dead” while Trump and Musk rampage through the federal government. Meanwhile, the only major political leaders galvanizing resistance to them are socialists: Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Peoples 2025). Their example should remind us of a basic fact about socialism: that its natural home is not in any “system” but on the barricades, in the field of insurgent politics and anticapitalist social movements. Sociologists hoping to understand how Trump can be resisted could take a cue from them, and turn their attention back to the study of socialism in the U.S. and around the world—its organizations, strategies, leaders, and partisans. If we really hope to construct new institutions that embody our values of social justice, then there’s no substitute for politics.

Coda: For a class-struggle sociology

In the above essay, I write mainly in the voice of a critical sociologist assessing his discipline from the inside, not a socialist considering it from without. In this coda I want to shift to the latter perspective and ask: what is to be done? That is, supposing socialism remains desirable and possible in this age of crisis, what can sociologists contribute to achieving it? The standard response of sociologists to this sort of question is to look outward—to be “engaged,” to conduct “participatory” research, to speak to movements, policymakers, and “communities” outside the university. This is the project

of public sociology as envisioned by Burawoy and many others inspired by him. It is also implicit in my own argument for a sociology of socialism: our discipline can contribute to the cause of socialism by studying and writing about it while in continuous dialogue with socialists themselves.

This kind of public sociology aims to move outwards from the university to civil society. This outward-orientation is vitally important. But I think that there is another possibility for building bridges between sociology and civil society, on the one hand, and between sociology and socialism, on the other. This approach depends less on sociologists' position as intellectuals and more on their *economic* position. This is what I call *class-struggle* sociology. A class-struggle alternative to public sociology retains the ultimate goal of pushing outward towards civil society and the working class, to generalize sociological consciousness and, perhaps, socialist consciousness. But to go "out," it first looks "in." What do I mean?

The fundamental weakness of public sociology, the reason why it failed as a vehicle for advancing a "sociological socialism" (Burawoy 2005), is that the "publics" in American society are badly degraded, atomized and disorganized. Where they do exist, these publics mostly lack the capacities to win major reforms to social institutions. For all that engaged sociologists talk about "emancipation" and "structural" change, the actual strategic agencies with a historical track record of achieving such change—namely, labor unions and workers' political organizations—are mostly absent from our focus. A long review of recent work in public sociology makes no mention of

unions or the labor movement, and the word “worker” appears just three times (Smith 2023).

This is odd, because academics are starting to wake up to their own status as workers. In a recent interview, Todd Wolfson and Rotua Lumbantobing, the newly elected leaders of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), highlight the growing crisis of higher education in the U.S., and call on university workers to “do much more to meet this moment.” Wolfson and Lumbantobing aim to shift the AAUP from its traditional role as a professional advocacy organization into “a fighting union and a stronger and more democratic organization.” This, they say, is “the only way we can hope to realize our vision of higher education as the bedrock of democracy and an engine of social progress and social mobility” (Lumbantobing, Winant, and Wolfson 2024).

This is a vision of academic “engagement” very different from conventional public sociology. It does not center the content of our research or teaching. Instead, it leverages our position as workers in a defined institutional setting, the university. The university is a workplace, one that sociologists share with many others, including blue-collar and undergraduate student workers. This workplace, like a hospital or a kindergarten, can’t be shifted overseas. And it is increasingly central to the reproduction of finance capital, the state, and even social life more broadly. By organizing on a class basis, university workers can exercise real power over these institutions. This is a form of power decisively greater than the power of professional organizations like the ASA to lobby

policymakers for small reforms, or the power of individual engaged sociologists to support publics outside the university. A robust academic labor movement is today the only means available for university students and workers to defend their interests, against both neofascist Republicans *and* neoliberal Democrats, in red states and blue states.

A class-struggle vision for sociology, crucially, would not stop at the edge of campus. The ultimate potential of industrial organizing on the terrain of the university is to galvanize “spillover effects” that reach beyond local struggles (Purucker and Monroe 2024). This is the strategy in a nutshell: sociologists should organize on an industrial basis within and across their universities. Higher education unions can be schools in which to carry out public sociology, teaching other workers and learning from them. These unions can link together with others in different sectors of the economy to fight for classwide demands. Eventually, the organized pursuit of working-class power will require the formation of a labor party, of which a militant, democratic federation of higher education unions could form a significant part. By these means, a strategy that first looked “in” towards the university is ultimately able to go “out,” but this time with the concentrated associational power needed to win *political* power and use this power to fight for transformative reforms.

At the far horizon, this form of sociological “engagement” opens up truly radical possibilities for transforming our discipline and our society. As I have argued at several points in this essay, labor-based political parties have uniquely powerful capacities for

achieving redistributive reforms even in the face of capitalist resistance. The root causes of the major social problems that preoccupy sociologists—inequality, poverty, discrimination, environmental breakdown, and so on—are only “on the table” when an organized working-class party puts them there.

This, in turn, could open sociology itself to transformation. The reason that right-wing forces can stir up popular hostility to the university is the fact of educational polarization—the “diploma divide” that separates workers with and without college degrees (Abbott 2024). To confront educational polarization at its source, reformers could again take up Bernie Sanders’s call for “College for All”—a free and universal right to a higher education for anyone who wants it. This would be the ultimate form of public sociology: throwing open the doors to the university by making it free for everyone. Sociology departments would need to be radically expanded, and the research interests of sociologists might change as their classrooms fill with first-generation, working-class, and non-traditional students. With the democratization of the university, the need for “public” sociology as a distinct kind of practice may fade away.

To accomplish this, sociologists should follow Wolfson and Lumbantobing’s lead, “meeting the moment” by organizing our coworkers and taking back our universities. Pursuing this class-struggle strategy, however, will require sociologists to give up any residual attachment we may feel for sociology as a *profession*. The professional organization of sociologists as guild intellectuals is a major obstacle to the kind of inclusive industrial organizing that will be necessary to win battles against university

managers. Critical and public sociologists, then, might have to be willing to break the tacit truce with professional sociology that Burawoy was careful to insist upon back in 2005 and openly take a side in the class struggle.¹⁰⁵

This is an optimistic, real-utopian vision for transforming the university through militant action from within. But in a recent essay, Dylan Riley sketches another, more difficult, road to renewal, a path sociologists and other academics may be forced to walk if they choose *not* to organize and fight while they still have jobs. Contra Arendt, Riley reminds us that classical fascism followed a strategy not of smashing civil society but of *colonizing* it, capturing associations and civic institutions for the right. The right today is no longer willing to tolerate in a pluralist mode the fact that colleges and universities are centers of dissent, however politically marginal. The Trump administration and Republican governors are trying to purge the left from academia, by leveraging federal research funds, controlling the flow of international students, threatening spurious lawsuits, and stocking boards of trustees with conservatives. Judging by the miserable cowardice demonstrated by university presidents in the face of Trump's extortion—and the eagerness with which even blue-state institutions repressed student movements for Palestine—the right may very well succeed. But they might wish they hadn't.

I give Riley the last word:

But herein lies an irony of which the Trumpists seem blissfully unaware. For, far from exercising great cultural influence as the right claims, leftist and progressive

¹⁰⁵ As a first step, the ASA could come out in support of United Auto Workers' president Shawn Fain's call for a nationwide general strike to take place in May 2028.

intellectuals in the US have for decades been cordoned off as a privileged but largely irrelevant clerisy within the university-NGO complex. Here they have formed what Gramsci would have called a traditional intelligentsia, speaking to itself in its own arcane language and leaving the left at a severe disadvantage. It is not outside the realm of possibility that the Trump administration's attempted destruction of this cordon sanitaire might create the conditions for left intellectuals to establish a more intimate link to the political and social forces of the day from which they are presently cut off. If so, Trump would have had a hand in the creation of a new modern prince adapted to the age of social media, virality and artificial intelligence, in addition to the ubiquitous culture industry. MAGA would be midwife of the very thing it most fears. (2025)

CHAPTER FOUR

DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM FROM SANDERS TO MAMDANI

Abstract

How did democratic socialism move from the margins to the mainstream in the United States? Between 2015 and 2025, socialist politics made remarkable progress in a country long assumed immune to it. At the start of the period, the three major wings of the U.S. left—radicals, progressives, and the labor left—were each disorganized and demobilized. By the end of the period, which was dominated by the figure of Donald Trump, a key section of the radical left had matured into socialists, progressives had moved left and won over a large part of the Democratic base, and the labor left was showing signs of life. During this period, for the first time in a century, socialists were able to compete seriously for major elected offices, with Bernie Sanders and Zohran Mamdani as figures bookending the decade. Here, I draw on ethnographic and interview data to present a narrative of democratic socialism’s emergence and political development. I make three arguments: first, that the key to democratic socialism’s emergence is a combination of political opportunity in the U.S. party system and organizational innovation in civil society; second, that the main themes of democratic socialist politics and organization were already consolidated by 2019; and third, that democratic socialism should be seen less as a social movement and more as the nucleus of a new “movement party” formation within the U.S. political system, one that is anchored by but not limited to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). I describe a simple theoretical model to represent how DSA and its chapters grew in this period, emphasizing the interacting effects of membership participation in social movements and high-profile electoral campaigns by “cadre” DSA members.

Keywords

Socialism, organizations, social movements, ethnography, political parties, political sociology, Bernie Sanders, Zohran Mamdani

Prologue: Meeting a red-diaper baby

Portland, Oregon DSA chapter general meeting, a Sunday afternoon, 9 February 2020.¹⁰⁶

I find a seat near the back of the room, farther back than where I usually sit. By the time the meeting gets started, the chairs on the main floor are all filled, and there's the usual throng of working group, campaign, merchandise, and caucus partisans standing at tables lining the back and side walls of this grand old Freemason hall, now owned by SEIU. Quorum is 96 members today, and we've passed that threshold comfortably—like we have every month since last summer.

A man slips into the seat next to me, before things get going. He's older, white, late forties or early fifties. He's holding a baby girl. He might be her grandfather, I think at first. But no, he's clearly her father. He holds her tenderly, proudly. I haven't seen them before. Like she does every meeting, our co-chair Hannah asks the room how many people in the audience are here for their first Democratic Socialists of America meeting, and a few dozen hands shoot up, including his.

He introduces himself to me. His name is Johan and her name is Cypress. Am I fine sitting next to a baby?, he asks. She can be squirmy. Yes, that's fine. Cypress stares at me with big, brown eyes.

Throughout the long meeting, Cypress doesn't cry, but she IS squirmy. She's constantly dropping her pacifier and a little plastic ball. Each time I bend down to pick them up for Johan, whose hands are full, he looks sheepish. "I'll pay you after," he whispers to me, jokingly. "Mutual aid," I whisper back with a smile.

Despite the slippery infant in his arms, Johan listens attentively, and follows along on the printed agenda he picked up at the front of the room. First there's the land acknowledgement—this is Chinookan land, stolen in the Willamette Valley Treaty of 1855. Then there's a RED Talk—our version of a TED Talk—about Antonio Gramsci, the Italian theorist. There are updates about our campaigns for universal pre-K in Multnomah County, our role in recent labor victories at Clark College and Grand Central Bakery, and a big neighborhood canvass for the Bernie Sanders campaign. Supervised by our Treasurer, we "pass the hat" like we're in church, to supplement our monthly dues revenues. Albert Lee, a chapter member and our endorsed candidate in the Democratic primary against Congressman Earl Blumenauer, updates us on his

¹⁰⁶ Some names are changed.

campaign. There's an invitation from the Tenants Rights Working Group to bring out supporters to a coalition effort to change an affordable housing zoning ordinance.

Speakers from each campaign and working group walk up to a lectern and speak into a microphone—an example of the accessibility principle in DSA culture. If someone tries to speak from the floor without a microphone, a chorus of reminders from comrades will insist that the speaker wait for a mic. Sometimes speakers will get the room to chant—“when we fight, we win!” “Union busting? That's disgusting!” I recall that at one of my first general meetings, a few months after the Gaza border massacres in March 2018, Hannah, who is herself Palestinian, led the room in a thunderous chant of “INTIFADA, INTIFADA!”

Because the chants are sometimes amplified by the microphones, Johan gently covers Cypress's ears, though she doesn't seem to mind the noise.

There's some business for the general assembly, too—bylaws revisions. Kyle, the chapter's pre-eminent bureaucrat, has some proposals to smooth out the agenda-setting process, and also cut out some superfluous organizing committees. There's one contentious item, a move to officially delegate fundraising responsibilities to the Treasurer, merging his authority with the working group that had previously overseen this task. There's debate, a question from the floor—in the local Democratic Party, there are rules against this kind of thing.

There's a motion to amend the proposal and strip out this language. Other speakers, including the current Treasurer himself, stand and speak in support—the Treasurer and Fundraising teams are already de-facto integrated. We shouldn't be using the bylaws to prescribe a separation of powers that we can't meet with our current capacities.

As they often do during discussions about chapter structure, ideals of accountability and, perhaps, democracy are in conflict with the realities of scarce labor in the organization. We're all volunteers, after all. In a different social movement organization, this proposal might have raised accusations of a leadership trying to centralize power at the expense of oversight. The fact that it doesn't exemplifies another principle of DSA culture—“assuming good faith,” trusting one's comrades to act out of a sincere motive to advance the collective good.

Ideological divisions in this “big-tent” Left organization that could have injected tension don't come into play here, either. Discussion of the amendment is ended by a clever move from an anarchist comrade who has, ironically, mastered Robert's

Rules—he calls the question, and moves the floor to a vote. We raise our voting cards, and the original motion passes, with a few dissident votes against.

It's not the most exciting chapter meeting, but it's efficient and the mood is upbeat. Mass meetings like these are a necessary part of the work of running a political organization with over a thousand members on its rolls. To a newcomer like Johan, the range of chapter campaigns, the division of labor, and the commitment to democracy must have been impressive.

But it's not just about campaign updates and voting on bylaws. For a DSA member, a general assembly gathering like this is a place where you can feel collective power, and political self-efficacy.

Crucially, DSA is a venue that's accessible to people who might not otherwise be able to participate—and who might not otherwise be able to imagine themselves as political agents. Like a new father, worried about the future for his infant daughter, who responds not by withdrawing into private life and building a lifeboat for those closest to him, but rather by expanding the circle of mutual support, building a political family that will be there for her, even when someday, he can't be. DSA has given Johan that opportunity.

“I'm raising a red-diaper baby,” he said to me at the start of the meeting, grinning.

Introduction

At the beginning of 2015, the political situation of the American left was not exactly hopeful, but it was less bleak than it had been in many years. On the debit side of the ledger, there were some painful new liabilities incurred, along with some decades-old debts. The latter were a heavy burden: the failure to build an independent party of labor—the last major opportunity came in the 1930s; the decimation of unions from 1980 onwards; the inability of Democratic Party progressives to halt the neoliberal turn of the party in the 1980s and 1990s. By 2015, the labor movement was in deep decline,

riven by internal conflict and strategically reliant on a Democratic establishment with little interest in or evident need for its support. The landscape of socialist organization was more or less barren, as it had been since the later 1970s.

The Obama administration had yielded some mild policy achievements—the Affordable Care Act, Wall Street reform, the Paris climate agreement—but was overall a bitter disappointment for progressives. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan dragged on, while destructive new interventions occurred in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The 2009 stimulus had been too small to avert a prolonged period of slow growth and high unemployment, while the housing market was devastated. Labor’s priority, a modest reform to union election procedure, was deprioritized in favor of health care reform and never passed. An energized Republican Party seized control of the House in 2010 and the Senate in 2014, while Democrats suffered historic losses at the state level. Obama’s personal charisma and campaigning skill helped him win reelection in 2012. But his chosen successor, Hillary Clinton, was a much weaker politician than Obama—though in 2015 she had the air of inevitability owing to her grip on the Democratic establishment.

These were the liabilities for the left. But there were some unexpected credits. The financial crisis and ensuing global recession detonated large scale protest movements around the world, starting in the Arab world and then spreading to Spain and Greece. In the United States, the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011-2012 did much to reintroduce a language of populism and class inequality to American political discourse. In 2014, Black radicalism returned to the scene in the form of the Black Lives

Matter movement, which fought against not only Republicans but also a Democratic Party and Black political establishment seen as complicit in the racialized war on crime. The labor left pulled off a major victory of its own in 2012, when a reform leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union won a strike against the mayorship of Rahm Emanuel, a leading figure of Democratic centrism. The anarchist radical left, for its part, had been instrumental in the Occupy Movement. But the failure of Occupy to develop enduring organization or shift the policies of the Obama administration opened political space for a new socialist milieu to emerge, centered around the New York-based publication *Jacobin*.

This was the scene in 2015. Ten years later, the picture looks rather different. In some ways, American politics is much more reactionary and dangerous. The defining figure of the post-Obama years is unquestionably Donald Trump. Though less than a year has passed since its demise, the Biden administration can already be judged as an almost total failure, politically and morally. Biden failed to realize the essential *raison d'être* of his presidency: banishing Donald Trump from public life. Instead, he would be the first Democratic president since Jimmy Carter to leave office with a net negative approval rating. The second Trump administration is now taking a sledgehammer to the administrative state and basic civil rights. Though extremist right-wing mobilizations and organized violence have actually declined since their peak in 2020, political violence is certainly more salient in the wake of the September assassination of Charlie Kirk, a

prominent conservative media figure.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, establishment Democrats and centrist pundits are despondent about the party's prospects. But they seem unable to reckon with the actual causes of their failure in 2024—namely, their decision to back Biden until the last possible moment, and then after him his listless vice president Kamala Harris; their utter refusal to change course on Biden's militaristic foreign policy, especially with regards to Israel; and their mismanagement of economic policy in the wake of the pandemic.

But from the point of view of those standing to the left of liberalism, there are some unexpected glimmers of hope. In summer 2024, key progressive leaders including Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez threw their weight behind the doomed Biden-Harris campaign. But immediately after Trump's victory in November, Sanders pivoted to cast blame on Biden and the party establishment for selling out the working class (Heer 2024). The arrival to power of a coterie of tech-industry titans including Elon Musk gave Sanders an opportunity to return to his strongly populist, class-focused message of 2016. His "Fighting Oligarchy" tour, soon joined by Ocasio-Cortez, capitalized on the rage of the Democratic base, which for the first time was being directed against not only Trump but also the party leadership which had failed to stop him. Sanders and especially Ocasio-Cortez have seen their approval ratings jump, while support for establishment Democratic figures and the Democratic Party itself stand at

¹⁰⁷ Journalist Alain Stephens suggests an explanation for the surprising decline: "Political violence may be declining largely because the would-be perpetrators feel they don't need it anymore. The American far right, once relegated to the fringe, now sees its formerly "extremist" ideas being enacted through mainstream institutions" (2025).

historically low levels. On the back of the Fighting Oligarchy tour, Sanders and the progressive faction seem ready to intervene aggressively in party primaries ahead of the 2026 midterms.

For labor unions, the new Trump administration poses an immediate and deadly threat, one which the leaderships of major unions and the AFL-CIO have done little to resist. But unlike in 2015, there now exists a small, fragile, but real and growing rank-and-file movement of workers, in both established unions and at unorganized corporate behemoths like Amazon. Assisted by a tight labor market and a series of favorable NLRB rulings, unions won some notable victories in the Biden years, though labor law reform again eluded them. A cross-union network of federal workers has grown rapidly since January. Leadership elections in major unions like the UAW, UFCW, and the AFT have been contested for the first time in decades.

These are notable developments. But the most dramatic change was in the position of the radical left, those who are unafraid to speak of alternatives to capitalism. In June, a democratic socialist, Zohran Mamdani, triumphed over the moderate ex-governor Andrew Cuomo in the race for the Democratic nomination to be the next mayor of New York. And unlike the progressives, the democratic socialists have built growing linkages with the rank-and-file movement. A survey at the end of summer suggests the possibility of democratic socialist leadership within the Democratic base, and of hegemony over non-socialist progressives (Abbott and Sunkara 2025).¹⁰⁸ This is

¹⁰⁸ See pp. 62-63 above.

buttressed by Sanders's unique position as a major leader of both the Democratic progressive and the independent socialist wings of the left, and now by DSA member Greg Casar's chairmanship of the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC).¹⁰⁹

This change in position of the left, in an era defined by the ascendance of the right, is significant for several reasons. The political importance should be obvious. The left is filling a vacuum left open by a discredited Democratic establishment. During the 2017-18 Resistance movement, rank-and-file Democrats viewed Trump as a fluke. Trump was seen as a barbaric interloper who only won because of the Electoral College, the Comey letter, and Russian interference, while the Democratic establishment was spared blame for Clinton's loss. The Resistance movement did shift the party leftwards by electing more liberals and progressives in the context of the historic 2018 midterm wave. But the Resistance was *not* the Democratic equivalent of the Tea Party that had transformed the GOP in the years before Trump. The latter movement was galvanized by the hated figure of Barack Obama, like the Resisters who loathed Trump. But unlike the Resistance, the Tea Party was also motivated by disgust at its own party's "Republican In Name Only" establishment. The Resistance, by contrast, made folk heroes of elite figures like Nancy Pelosi and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and avoided reckoning honestly with the failures of Clintonism and the Obama presidency.

¹⁰⁹ Sanders was a cofounder of the CPC in 1991. He continues to pointedly describe himself as an independent, not a Democrat (Leonhardt 2025).

The Sanders wing of the party, though energized by the 2016 primary and including a vocal faction of anti-establishment left populists, generally muted its criticisms of top Democratic leaders, who in any case retained enough legitimacy with the party base. In 2020, party elites connived against Sanders, but it was ultimately rank-and-file Democratic voters who backed the arch-establishment Joe Biden that year, convinced by his promise that bipartisan normalcy could be restored with Trump out of power. Progressives in Congress as well as social movement groups like the Sunrise Movement largely cooperated with the party establishment during the Biden years, angling for policy gains through Congress and executive action (Sammon 2021).

But in 2025, the long-delayed revolt of Democrats against the literally-decaying representatives of their party—since 2022, all eight members of Congress who have died in office have been Democrats (Metzger 2025)—finally arrived. Trump’s victory against Kamala Harris, and the subsequent perception that Democratic leaders are accommodating themselves to Trump, has infuriated the Democratic base, including many voters who backed moderate candidates in 2020 and 2016. The fact that the pushback against Trump is being led mainly by progressives and democratic socialists—the Berniecrats of 2016 and 2020—is a major development that could augur a political revolution in the party in 2026. The party’s approval ratings among self-identified Democrats are historically poor. A June poll showed 62% of Democrats saying that the party’s leadership “should be replaced” (Oliphant and Lange 2025). An August survey reported more than one in three Democrats describing their party as

“weak” and “ineffective” (Sommerlad 2025). The party’s Congressional leaders, Hakeem Jeffries and especially Chuck Schumer, suffer from poor approval ratings, even among Democratic partisans (Kiley 2025). In June, Jeffries’s 8th Congressional district in Brooklyn broke for Zohran Mamdani, but Jeffries refused to endorse him until late into the general election. Schumer, meanwhile, never endorsed Mamdani and even refused to state whether he voted for the Democratic nominee in November. He is widely expected to face a primary challenge in 2028 from the party’s left, possibly by Ocasio-Cortez, if she does not run for president.

The left is still far from power in the sense of being able to pass and implement deep reforms. Even as mayor, Mamdani will require cooperation from moderate Democrats in Albany to tax the rich. Even a left-led Democratic Tea Party in 2026 will still face a White House, Supreme Court, and likely a Senate controlled by the right, to say nothing of power at state and local levels in the ultra-decentralized American polity. But events since February—when the Fighting Oligarchy tour launched and when Mamdani began to take off in polls—show that the left is now firmly *contesting* for power, not just criticizing it from the outside. And the challenge is playing out in venues far from the D.C.-New York axis. Populists and socialists preaching working-class politics have won elections or run strong campaigns in some surprising areas. Dan Obsorn, a union leader backed by Bernie Sanders and running as an independent, out-ran Kamala Harris by 14 points in Nebraska in a long-shot bid against a Republican senator, and is gearing up to run again in 2026 (Guastella and Sunkara 2024).

Democratic socialists last year won election in deep blue cities like Portland, Oregon and Los Angeles, but also red- and purple-state cities like Louisville, Kentucky and Smyrna, Georgia. And in late 2025 an intriguing new phenomenon started to become visible: left-wing candidates describing themselves as socialists but who are not members of DSA, including the mayor-elect of Seattle (Westneat 2025).

How should this left-wing revival be explained? Here, I concentrate on one strand of the story: the emergence of democratic socialism and DSA. Democratic socialism, I argue, took shape in the middle of the 2010s as the confluence of tendencies from above and below, in the context of a favorable political environment for insurgent left movements. The breakthrough of the Bernie Sanders campaign of 2015-2016 validated the argument of a current of radicals that a left-wing campaign within the Democratic primary process could open up new possibilities for radical politics. Building on the lessons of both the Sanders campaign and prior social movements, and in the context of the anti-Trump Resistance, part of the left wing of Bernie's primary coalition—young, mostly white, highly-educated, but economically precarious—entered DSA, which for several reasons could position itself as the natural home for this constituency. Unlike myriad other socialist groups before and since, DSA was able to grow rapidly and more-or-less sustainably for a period of several years.

Democratic socialists took advantage of a modest opening in the party system, one opened less by mass Democratic polarization against their party's establishment and more by, first, the economic strain of the early 2010s among downwardly-mobile

but highly-educated young professionals, and second, the hollowing out of the Democratic Party around the country. In these years, socialists in DSA managed to create a unique organization on the U.S. political landscape, one that combined membership-rooted mobilization capacity with a distinctive brand placing it to the left of orthodox American progressivism. The absence of a charismatic “hyperleader” in DSA—space created by Sanders and then Ocasio-Cortez’s decision to stay aloof from the organization—created room for a strongly membership-driven culture to take root, and encouraged these members to explore opportunities outside the electoral field—though it also left the organization open to destabilization from its left flank. But momentum from chapter-led electoral victories in New York, plus contingent political struggles within the organization in the 2017-2020 period, resulted in the defeat of a residual anarchist faction and stabilized DSA’s basic structure and political parameters by late 2019. As the ethnographic excerpt quoted above indicates, the democratic and membership-rooted culture of the organization fostered more intensive forms of commitment and identity-formation than in rival progressive organizations, with downstream effects on DSA’s mobilization capacities.

A process of uneven maturation unfolded over subsequent years, as DSA’s leaders and chapters navigated their way through challenging ups and downs of American politics. Key periods include Sanders’s campaigns in 2015-2016 and 2019-2020, the 2017-2018 Resistance, the pandemic and 2020 George Floyd uprising, the early “progressive” Biden administration (January 2021 to February 2022), the later

“militarist” Biden administration and Gaza genocide, and the second Trump administration, culminating in the victory of Mamdani in the New York mayoral primary. At the end of 2025, the key political question facing democratic socialists concerned their orientation towards the ferment in the Democratic Party base, a question complicated by DSA’s difficult relationship with its star national politician, Ocasio-Cortez.

Here, I focus heavily on the first five years of democratic socialism’s revival, stressing first the developments in 2015-2016 that made DSA a viable container for the radicalized Millennials in Sanders’s coalition, and second the diffusion of a workable organizational form in the new DSA chapters that blossomed in the Resistance years. I emphasize the relative coherence and persistence of DSA as a democratic membership-based organization in contrast to the decentralized movement groups and candidate-centered campaigns that dominate the U.S. political field. Persistent membership-based organization enabled socialists to participate actively in key social movements, especially the labor movement and the Palestine solidarity movement, in a way that candidate-centered progressive organizations could not. Membership-based organization also gave socialists an edge in contesting elections, through unmatched volunteer-based field operations and credibility derived from direct participation in social movements between campaign cycles. The post-2016 DSA, as I argued in the first chapter, needs to be interpreted as a kind of *movement party*.

But in the final analysis, it was candidate-based electoral campaigns—the party in the movement-party compound—that proved decisive in these years. The victories of DSA-backed insurgent candidates Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Julia Salazar, and Rashida Tlaib in summer 2018 drove a large surge in DSA membership and created strong incentives for continued investment in candidate-based electoral work, a recruitment pattern that would be repeated in years to come. The last step in political-organizational consolidation was set in late 2019, when major structural reforms proposed by an anarchist faction of DSA members were defeated and the organization mobilized again for Sanders in his second campaign for the presidency.

I sketch a simple model of DSA's development and consolidation that specifies the impact of these various factors. In simplified form, this model involves four factors: (1) *electoral recruitment*, through which high-profile campaigns drive new members into DSA; (2) external *movement participation*, which provides members with opportunities for political training and constructs linkages between party and class; and (3) internal *cadre socialization* which generates solidarity, trust, and commitment among activist members. These three factors in turn facilitate the recruitment of (4) trusted *cadre candidates* in further election campaigns to boost DSA's public profile and recruit new members to develop as cadre.

This model is intentionally stripped-down, stressing general forms of activity—electoral campaigns, movement work, the political and cultural development of members—over the substantive political orientations taken by DSA. With a few

significant exceptions, the content of political conflicts within the organization has been largely irrelevant to DSA's growth, though the *form* of the conflicts—open, sometimes fierce debate between self-organized membership groups—has been a very important mechanism for socializing members into activists and cadres. The factional-democratic mechanism of membership development is almost exceptional on the landscape of U.S. civil society organizations today.

To tell this story, I rely on a combination of secondary journalistic sources and primary data, including interviews with key national DSA leaders and primary source documents from within the organization. In this chapter I lean more on narrative description and wear my theory lightly. But I am guided throughout by the concepts set out in my first chapter concerning materialism, democracy, and party formation. I frame my analysis with a discussion of U.S. political economy in the 2010s and early 2020s. Despite democratic socialism's remarkable advances in the field of electoral politics, I end on a cautious note. There are severe limits set on socialist party formation by *class* formation—that is, the economic (not just political or institutional) obstacles to building a working-class mass party in the contemporary United States.

Translating socialist political advances into changes in social power relations will require socialists to find a way to use state power to reorganize labor and support its mobilization against business. That is to say, a revived and empowered socialist political project can only go so far if a fighting labor-left is not also rebuilt. Developments in the 2015-2025 period suggest the first stirrings of a rebuilt “militant minority” in the house

of labor, but no more than this. The “movement” in DSA’s movement-party compound is necessary in the short term for building a stable organization of committed activists, but it is also a long-term investment in rebuilding social power in civil society, one whose outcome is still highly uncertain.

From Sanders to Mamdani: An interpretive narrative

Legacies and circumstances: Before Bernie

I have already sketched the political landscape facing American leftists in 2015. Here I will survey the economic terrain. Charles Tilly writes that it is the basic distribution of economic power resources that determines the opportunities for political challengers: “[o]ver the long run, the reorganization of production creates the chief historical actors, the major constellations of interests, the basic threats to those interests, and principal conditions for transfers of power” in society (1978:194). For example, from its origins in the 1820s, the American labor movement—one of the oldest in the world, which generated the first labor parties anywhere¹¹⁰—was continuously made and unmade by successive waves of union organization and violent counter-action from business and the state, with each cycle of struggle and defeat narrowing the scope of future possibilities (Davis 2018a). The Civil Rights Movement and the (incomplete) Second Reconstruction would never have been possible without the antecedent process of

¹¹⁰ Urban-based Workingmen’s Parties bloomed for a few years in the Jacksonian era—the first formed in Philadelphia in 1828—before withering away in the 1830s.

economic transformation that occurred in the rural South from the 1930s onwards (McAdam 2022). The neoliberal political movement that emerged within the Democratic Party in the 1980s was based on new centers of economic power in the Sunbelt and the suburbs with roots in the military-industrial complex established in the 1940s. Economic facts are the necessary starting point for a materialist analysis of both institutional politics within a party system (as with the Democratic neoliberals) and of contentious politics by excluded outsiders (as with labor and the Civil Rights Movement). As we will see, contemporary democratic socialism is something of a hybrid case, both included and excluded in important ways.

What were the “major constellations of interests” relevant to left-wing politics in the mid-2010s? The sectoral balance of the U.S. economy by the end of the Obama era reflected the long-term shifts from factories to finance inaugurated in 1973 with the (U.S.-initiated) dissolution of the global Bretton Woods system (Stein 2011). Deindustrialization and deunionization were not compensated by wage or union growth in the service sector. The bifurcation of the labor market between low-wage service and residual manufacturing jobs versus high-paying salaried professions hollowed out the middle class and set the stage for social polarization between those with college degrees and those without. Simultaneously, a kind of economic and political polarization occurred within the ranks of educated professionals, with proletarianization intensifying among once-securely middle-class jobs like teaching, nursing, and social work (the downwardly-mobile “sociocultural professions”). The ascendancy of finance capital

since the 1980s set the stage for the 2008 financial crash, the origin of the worldwide “crisis decade” of the 2010s (Tooze 2018). When the U.S. real estate bubble popped, the trans-Atlantic financial system seized up and threatened a general economic crisis. After the devastating failure of Lehman Brothers, the Bush and then Obama administrations moved quickly to restructure and recapitalize the Wall Street megabanks. A new financial regulatory regime was imposed on the banks. But Wall Street CEOs were never held accountable for the reckless business practices of the boom years. And while investors got billions through bailouts and Federal Reserve quantitative easing, ordinary homeowners faced foreclosure and years of destroyed credit.

After the crash, the American economy as a whole was characterized by “secular stagnation” and a slow recovery. Weak growth returned from 2011 onwards, but unemployment remained high, particularly among Black workers and young people. The collapse in the housing market and the Obama administration’s failure to bail out homeowners caused a collapse in household wealth and consumer spending while spiking indebtedness. Poverty increased while wages stagnated in a loose labor market. Though official employment figures had recovered to pre-recession levels by 2015, youth unemployment remained elevated, while the consequences of underemployment and foregone mobility during the recession period would endure. Union density continued to decline across Obama’s two terms. By 2015, it stood at a paltry overall rate of 11.1%, and a dire 6.7% in the private sector, with substantial and long-standing unevenness in

density across states and regions (BLS 2016). Most damningly, during the first half of the decade mortality rates for white working-class men increased, as more and more succumbed to “deaths of despair” (Kolata 2015; Hochschild 2020). While the crisis management strategy of centrist liberal governments was ultimately successful on its own terms, it had drastic social and political costs in both the U.S. and Europe. Writing about the latter, economist Cédric Durand puts the point forcefully:

The full force of the ECB [European Central Bank] securities-buying programme amounted to €60 billion a month, the equivalent of 40 million monthly pay cheques of the French minimum wage. The class antagonisms arising out of a decade of such policymaking are clear. While central bankers and government officials converged in thinking that public interest and financial stability were aligned, those on stagnating low and middle incomes grew increasingly unconvinced. The extension of macroeconomic policy via macro-prudential regulation managed to stabilize finance but caused serious collateral damage. This laid the ground for a repolarization of politics—mainly, although not uniformly, to the advantage of the far right. (2019:211)

The crisis, recession, and weak recovery coincided with a major transformation in the forces of production: the widespread diffusion of smartphones and social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter. By 2015, 68% of Americans owned a smartphone, 62% of adults used Facebook, and 23% used Twitter, with rates higher for those under the age of 50 (Anderson 2015; Duggan 2015). In these years the platforms were suffused with optimism and associated politically with the dominant neoliberal wing of the Democratic Party, as Silicon Valley had generally been since it first entered the political stage in the 1970s. Smartphones and new digital payments systems would

give rise to gig economy companies like Uber and GrubHub, and create a new class of precarious on-demand gig workers while disrupting industries like transport, logistics, and entertainment. By the second half of the 2010s, the locus of innovation and capital accumulation in the U.S. economy had shifted away from Wall Street and towards Silicon Valley, where it remains.

The new peer-to-peer information and communication technologies bypassed traditional uni-directional media technologies like TV and radio, endowing the “connected outsiders” of the 2010s with new capacities for action (Gerbaudo 2018). The new technologies would play an important role in the two major U.S. protest waves of the early decade: Occupy Wall Street (2011) and Black Lives Matter (2014). The initial Occupy mobilization in Zucotti Park and the subsequent rapid diffusion of protest encampments around the country and world were driven by viral “connective action,” not face-to-face organization building (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). A similar mechanism was at work with Black Lives Matter, but the real contribution of information and communications technology to racial justice mobilization was the smartphone camera: the ability of ordinary people to record and rapidly share graphic, unfiltered footage of police criminality. Significantly, this content also reached large numbers of young white middle-class people on Twitter and Facebook. Black Lives Matter punctured the image of the Obama administration as marking a post-racial era and triggered the broad cultural awakening around the persistence of social injustice in the United States, what would later become known and demonized as “wokeness.” BLM

would culminate in the great George Floyd uprising of summer 2020, both the largest protests in U.S. history and the first protest wave against racism where white participants would outnumber Black (Kazin 2022:312). This would have been unthinkable at the start of the decade.

By 2015, public opinion already showed a large increase in the percentage of Americans who regarded racism as a serious social issue. Occupy and especially Black Lives Matter exposed masses of young people to militant protest. But the origins of Black Lives Matter as a furious response to racialized *class* inequality, in neighborhoods of concentrated economic disadvantage, would tend to be obscured as the decade proceeded and the main spokespersons of racial justice became college-educated people of color. This would leave “intersectional” themes vulnerable to co-optation and dilution by the (white and Black) Democratic establishment, most notoriously in the 2016 Clinton campaign. The diminishment of the class context of racial injustice, and the understandable emphasis placed in the movement on Black identity and leadership, would soon pose difficult political and cultural challenges to an overwhelmingly white democratic socialist movement. Still, BLM’s role in challenging public opinion and giving birth to a new Black radicalism were major achievements that mark it as *the* crucial social movement of the whole decade in the United States.

Occupy was more important in a negative sense, as the last gasp of anarchist hegemony on the radical left. It did lead to an uptick in public interest and discourse about inequality, and its uncompromising hostility to finance capital and populist

distrust of establishment politicians were salutary. But it was not until the Sanders campaign that class themes truly reemerged onto the scene, in large part because Sanders paired Occupy's economic populism with a serious political threat that forced the establishment to respond. Occupy's "achievement," in reality, was a demonstration of what kinds of activism did *not* work: "leaderless," horizontal, and prefigurative politics, which resists formal organization, depends on constant intensive involvement from an aristocracy of activists, and has no ability to positively engage with institutional politics. The repertoire and frames of anarchist street politics would not disappear—they would reemerge periodically in the guise of antifa groups, temporary autonomous zones, and Palestine solidarity encampments, and a minority would try to update them into an incoherent "libertarian socialist" politics within DSA—but from Occupy onwards they would no longer be hegemonic among radicals, many of whom would take the negative lessons of Occupy into groups like DSA.

What about the labor left? For the most part, unions were on the defensive during the 2010s. The major initiative of the AFL-CIO was a failed lobbying attempt to secure a mild labor law reform from the Democratic Congress in 2009-2010. A handful of inspiring moments of rank-and-file initiative dotted the first years after the 2008 crash—the Republic Windows sit-down in Chicago, labor-driven protests around the struggle to defend public-sector collective bargaining in Wisconsin—but only one real victory occurred, in the Chicago teachers union reform effort and 2012 strike. The success of the teachers union strike could only be a relative one in the absence of city or

state-level political power for labor—the union could not prevent Obama consigliere Rahm Emanuel’s savage cuts to “underperforming” schools in Black neighborhoods—but it did provide a crucial example of a major bottom-up strike that channeled community power around itself. The roots of the 2018 “red state revolt” and more distantly the reform efforts and teacher militancy of the Biden era are to be found in the 2014 CTU struggle.

The strike also had a formative influence on socialists a few years later, who studied its lessons through influential narratives like *Jacobin* writer Micah Uetricht’s *Strike for America* (2014) and especially union strategist Jane McAlevey’s ubiquitous *No Shortcuts* (2016). The inspiring example of the Chicago teachers led socialists to identify K-12 education as a strategic sector to pursue what they called the “rank and file strategy.” A few months after helping to lead a spectacular grassroots teacher strike in West Virginia, DSA members in the state teachers’ union published a pamphlet titled “Why Socialists Should Become Teachers,” arguing that “[w]ith socialists active in our organizing, we’ll be in a strategic position to make bold, visionary demands to take on the capitalist class” (DSLCL 2018). Besides the Chicago teachers’ struggle, the Fight for 15 movement organized by the Service Employees International Union mobilized coordinated protests of low-wage workers around the country to agitate for increases to the minimum wage and for union recognition, though it only found traction with the former demand.

The last point to make is to consider the dynamics of the party system as perceived by the young connected outsiders, the precarious Millennials with the material interest and biographical availability to become movement activists and potential organization-builders. By 2015, Millennials in their twenties and early thirties had lived through quite a lot of political failure. The wars, disasters, and financial crisis of the George W. Bush administration did not predispose young people to trust Republicans. But anti-Bush liberalism had *also* come to be seen as a failure. It is difficult to overstate the rage and impotence felt by left-leaning Millennials upon watching the Democrats squander large congressional majorities in 2008-10 with a paltry health care reform, inadequate stimulus, and zero consequences for the architects of the financial crisis, let alone more ambitious reforms to the political economy.

Similarly the Democrats' about-face on closing Guantanamo and ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Obama's appointment of the hawkish Clinton as his Secretary of State, disillusioned many who had believed him a foreign policy dove. The swift incorporation of the antiwar movement into the Obama coalition and subsequent demobilization of the two million-strong Obama for America organizing machine helped ensure that the left would have little independent voice in the administration or any effective means of counteracting the Tea Party bloodbath in the 2010 midterms (Sifry 2017).¹¹¹ Divided government would give Obama a convenient alibi for his own diminished second-term ambitions—though it was not insignificant that the rabid right

¹¹¹ In retrospect, Occupy can be seen as the frustrated final charge of the 2008 Obama grassroots.

insisted on constantly denouncing the president—Wall Street’s savior—as a “socialist.” Obama’s high personal favorability and the magic of negative partisanship helped detoxify the s-word, coding it favorably, or at least neutrally, for rank-and-file Democrats and left-leaning independents too young to recall the Cold War. By 2016, 56% of Democratic Party primary voters expressed more positive feelings about socialism than capitalism, 47% of voters signaled they would support a socialist presidential candidate, and 52% of adults under the age of 40 felt positively about socialism (Russonello 2015; Daalder 2015; Saad 2019). Twenty-five years on from the end of the Cold War, these were remarkable ideological shifts.

The Sanders campaign

Many narratives of the left-wing revival in the U.S. during the 2010s trace its beginning to the Occupy Wall Street movement.¹¹² The occupations, protests, and advocacy of Occupy-aligned activists, it is argued, signaled the beginning of a revival for the radical left, which would a few years later lead to the 2015-2016 Bernie Sanders campaign and, more distantly, to the left-wing electoral and social movement campaigns of the second half of the decade. Guido Girgenti, an Occupy participant who would later co-found the

¹¹² See, for example, Thier (2021) and the books and essays reviewed in Fong and Offenbacher (2021), discussed below. A few days after the 2024 presidential election, left-wing commentator Krystal Ball, looking back on the 2010s, remarked that “on the left, of course, it was Occupy, pointing the finger at the 1%, and then *directly out of Occupy* is the Bernie Sanders grassroots movement” (Ball and Kulinski 2024, 56:45, emphasis added). The other major social movement of the early 2010s, Black Lives Matter, came too late to have been a direct influence either on Sanders’s decision to run or on the main themes of the campaign, though it did have an important effect during the campaign and on democratic socialist politics post-2016, as I discuss below.

Sunrise Movement and become media director for Justice Democrats, described Occupy as “a ‘bridge’ between the late-20th-century left, which was small, fragmented, and ineffectual, and a 21st-century left that aims to build a majoritarian, multiracial, class-conscious movement that operates both inside and outside the political system to materially improve people’s lives” (quoted in Thier 2021).

Is this accurate? Periodizing social movements and isolating their political and cultural impacts are not straightforward tasks, in part because doing so raises inherently political questions. But addressing the Occupy issue is unavoidable in any account of democratic socialism’s emergence. In a careful analysis of newspaper articles between 2002 and 2013, Sarah Gaby and Neal Caren (2016) show that Occupy did indeed produce a large and durable increase in U.S. media discussion of inequality. Mentions of inequality “roughly tripled” compared to the level of coverage preceding Occupy (421). Perhaps surprisingly, the increased attention to inequality was *not* an automatic result of the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the deep ensuing recession—Gaby and Caren found no increase in media discussion of inequality between 2009 and September 2011, when Occupy began. Additionally, they note that references to inequality were significant themes in coverage of the 2012 presidential election and the 2013 New York City mayoral election, whereas inequality had not been a prominent theme in any earlier major elections in their period. These discursive changes in media were undoubtedly meaningful, even if they did not greatly shift underlying patterns of public concern

about inequality.¹¹³ Gaby and Caren conclude that Occupy increased the salience of inequality for media and political elites during the second Obama administration, and this certainly would have helped prepare the political ground for some kind of class-focused populism to emerge after Obama. Despite the relatively small size of Occupy mobilizations (which were much smaller than comparable protests in Europe during 2010-2012), it seems clear that the movement spoke for a huge number of Americans suffering under the weight of the housing crisis and recession.

But in other ways it is seriously misleading to assert a direct link between Occupy and Sanders, in the sense of Occupy providing a *necessary* condition for his campaign. In a provocative article on the 10th anniversary of the movement, Christie Offenhacher and Benjamin Y. Fong (2021) argue that Occupy represented more the close of an era for the left than the start of one. They argue against the notion that “Occupy, in some meaningful way, made possible the success of Sanders’s campaigns.” Rather, they contend, Occupy “constituted not a beginning but an *end* — of decades of nonstrategic activist-ism, of self-defeating horizontalism, and of protest without politics.” At the level of personnel, there is not much evidence for the claim of a direct continuity between Occupy and Sanders. Numerous Occupy activists did go on to play some role in the campaign, once it was up and running. But among the Occupy faction that was interested in electoral politics, Sanders was not the first choice for a presidential

¹¹³ 63% of Americans in 2015 supported a more even distribution of money and wealth in the country, up from 57% in 2011, but still firmly in line with general trends since 1985, when 60% of Americans answered affirmatively (Newport 2015). Occupy built on decades of popular dissatisfaction with economic inequality.

candidate. Occupiers were more interested in Elizabeth Warren, a prominent Wall Street critic, and initially backed a “Ready for Warren” campaign started by liberal mobilizing groups MoveOn.org and Democracy for America, before switching to Sanders and launching “People for Bernie” in April 2015. But Sanders was already considering running as early as November 2013 (Eidelson 2013), and had been testing the waters with events in key primary states throughout 2014. Though he was a high-profile supporter of Occupy during its peak, the movement does not figure in Sanders’s own narrative of why he chose to run (Sanders 2016). As Offenbacher and Fong point out, the campaign also never worked directly with People for Bernie, or even acknowledged the group.

Personnel is one thing. But on a deeper level there was a world of difference between Occupy’s strategy, tactics, and forms of organization and those of the Sanders campaign. Occupy anarchism involved “horizontalism (no formal leadership), prefiguration (attempting to model the desired future society in the movement’s own practice), autonomy from the state and other political organizations, mutual aid, and defiance of government authority.”¹¹⁴ Famously, the movement refused (or was unable) to formulate clear demands during the height of its influence. There was a clear continuity in style and tactics between Occupy and the earlier alter-globalization movement of the later 1990s and early 2000s, with anarchist intellectuals like David Graeber playing a role in each.

¹¹⁴ Hammond (2014), quoted in Fong and Offenbacher (2021).

The Sanders campaign, by contrast, was very different. It had a clear leader, a program of concrete demands, and the goal of winning and using state power—all ideas disavowed or at least ruled out by anarchism. And though he sometimes invoked the concept of “the 99%” popularized by Occupy, Sanders would mainly use a traditional vocabulary that framed politics as a conflict of classes: between the poor, the middle class, and the “working class” (he is one of few U.S. politicians to ever use this phrase) on one side, and billionaires, corporations, and big banks on the other. This is rhetoric that Sanders had been using, essentially without change, since the 1970s. Rather than the logical outcome of Occupy protest politics, what Sanders in fact represented was a major and long-overdue shift in the center of gravity on the radical left, from a diffuse anarchist common sense to a class-focused—if not yet class-*rooted*—socialist politics (Panitch and Gindin 2017).

The Sanders campaign launched in April 2015 and ended 14 months later in June 2016, when Sanders, with no path to victory, endorsed Hillary Clinton ahead of the Democratic National Convention. Sanders opted to run after Elizabeth Warren, the progressive senator from Massachusetts, confirmed to him that she would not enter the race. The Vermont senator had first come to prominence in late 2010 for his eight-hour filibuster against an Obama-brokered compromise that extended Bush-era tax cuts for the wealthy. Sanders was a unique figure on the American political scene. As he bluntly informed a classroom of high schoolers in 2003, “I’m not a liberal. I’m a progressive,

and there's a difference."¹¹⁵ Throughout his career he has more often used the term “progressive” to describe his politics, but unlike many closet-socialist progressives, he did not run from the socialist label.¹¹⁶ Sanders traced his own political heritage to at least three historical stands of the American left: Martin Luther King Jr., the Civil Rights Movement, and the Poor People’s Campaign; FDR and the 1944 high-point of New Deal liberalism, Roosevelt’s Economic Bill of Rights; and, most radically, the revolutionary anticapitalism of Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs, about whom Sanders produced a documentary a few years before becoming mayor of Burlington.¹¹⁷

Before founding the Progressive Caucus in 1991, Sanders had played a key role in forming the Progressive Coalition during his tenure as mayor of Burlington. In the 1990s, Sanders and his allies built the Coalition into a statewide political organization to support his campaigns for Congress. In 1999 the coalition formalized itself as an independent statewide party, the Vermont Progressive Party, which still exists today. Sanders entered Congress in 1991 as the first independent in decades, and one of a small handful of socialists who have ever held office on Capitol Hill. He is also one of very few members of Congress who can claim to have founded his own third party. All three features—his independence, his socialism, and his history as a

¹¹⁵ ““I’m Not a Liberal” -- Bernie Sanders Explains Political Revolution to High Schoolers (2003).” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lv7iflHYx_E.

¹¹⁶ Greg Guma, who wrote a book on Sanders’s mayoral years, noted that “[e]ven when Sanders ran for mayor of Burlington in 1981, “Bernie never mentioned the word ‘socialist’ in his campaign” (quoted in Kruse 2015). In 1980-1982, however, Sanders served as an elector for a presidential candidate of the tiny Socialist Workers Party (SWP), endorsed several SWP candidates, and spoke at an SWP rally in Boston, though he was never a member of the party (Putterman 2020).

¹¹⁷ For Sanders’s own articulation of democratic socialism, see Sanders (2020).

party-builder—distinguished Sanders from other leading lights in the progressive movement in the early 2010s, notably Warren, whose focus on anti-monopoly regulations placed her closer to the reformist lineage of the original Progressive movement of the 1910s than the movements invoked by Sanders.¹¹⁸

Besides being an independent and a socialist, Sanders was (and remains) an independent socialist, in the sense of standing aloof from formal socialist organizations. In the early 1960s while a student civil rights activist at the University of Chicago, Sanders did have a brief, formative experience with the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), the youth arm of the Socialist Party of America (SPA). YPSL, Sanders would later say, “helped me put two and two together. In other words, we do not like poverty, racism, war, exploitation, but what do they all have in common?” (quoted in Kampf-Lassin 2019). But he did not remain attached to the party after leaving Chicago for New York and then Vermont. Despite his self-identification as a “democratic socialist,” Sanders never joined the SPA's main successors, the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee (DSOC, 1973-1982) or the Democratic Socialists of America (1982). Like many young people radicalized in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s,

¹¹⁸ At the time of Sanders's entry into national politics, the “progressive” label was up for grabs. Two years before he cofounded the Congressional Progressive Caucus in 1991, policy thinkers in the centrist Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) launched their own think tank, the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI). In the early 2000s, veterans of the Clinton administration founded another centrist policy shop, the Center for American Progress (CAP). In retrospect, Sanders—a bitter enemy of the DLC and PPI—may have held onto his identity as a democratic socialist in order to help distinguish his version of progressivism from that of the New Democrats. Thirty years after the launch of PPI, it seems safe to say that Sanders's definition of the term has won out. Within the Democratic Party and contemporary U.S. political culture, “progressive” is firmly coded as a left-wing position. “Liberal,” meanwhile, seems to have become less popular as a label within the Democratic tent.

Sanders internalized socialist and radical ideas without staying attached to a traditional socialist party organization. Instead, Sanders devoted himself to building independent progressive politics in the Green Mountain State.

Sanders disagreed with DSA's strategy of exerting influence within the Democratic Party, which he had struggled against in Burlington. In a 1983 profile of Sanders, John Margolis wrote that Sanders "disdains what little nationwide Socialist movement there is (the Democratic Socialists of America) for its gradualist philosophy and its ties to the Democratic Party" (Margolis 1983). But despite his lifelong political independence from the Democrats, Sanders's choice to run in the Democratic party primary was, in retrospect, crucially important. Though he had built a successful third party in Burlington and then Vermont, in presidential politics Sanders was deeply shaped by the experience of the Jesse Jackson campaigns in 1984 and 1988. Jackson pioneered the strategy of running as a left insurgent in the Democratic primaries at the head of a "Rainbow Coalition" of the Black poor, women, and progressive labor unions. After tepidly backing Mondale in 1984, Sanders endorsed Jackson in 1988 and delivered Vermont delegates to his side. Though he admired Ross Perot's independent bid in 1992, Sanders did not support third-party presidential campaigns after the Jackson efforts. Sanders made no endorsements in the open Democratic primaries of 1992, 2000, 2004, or 2008, though he ultimately backed the Democratic nominee in each race.

As discussed above, the final count of delegates at the 2016 Democratic National Convention obscured how close Sanders ultimately ran the Clinton machine. The consistent strength of Sanders in hypothetical polls against Republican candidates, and Clinton's razor-thin margin of victory in Iowa, suggest a possible scenario where Sanders grabbed early momentum heading into the delegate-rich contests on Super Tuesday. As things transpired, Sanders won 13 million votes and 22 states in the primary, but ultimately fell short. Sanders's political strength had multiple sources, including his personal qualities (his authenticity, consistency, and independence) and his message. But equally significant was his campaign operation. For almost the whole duration of the campaign, Sanders received virtually no support from institutional actors in the Democratic Party. No members of Congress and few state or local Democratic politicians were willing to cross Clinton, and Sanders had trouble hiring experienced campaign staff. Established liberal organizations, labor unions, and corporate media outlets would also be unlikely to support him, and big-money super-PAC funding wasn't an option. Sanders had no choice but to run a grassroots campaign.

The Sanders "revolution" had one important predecessor: the 2007-2008 Barack Obama campaign. Though the Illinois senator would start his campaign with more institutional support than Sanders would ever receive, Obama was still running against the powerful Clinton machine and needed a robust field campaign. The campaign's Obama for America (OFA) network accumulated an enormous list of voter contacts and

involved a staggering two million volunteers. Early in the campaign, Obama—himself a former community organizer—tapped experienced organizing strategists like Marshall Ganz to train a cadre of volunteers the tried-and-true skills of community organizing, including leadership development and face-to-face relation building (McKenna and Han 2015). But after Obama’s victory in November 2008, OFA’s grassroots energy was demobilized by the president-elect’s transition team, who feared a mobilized base outside of their control.

OFA’s massive network was rolled into the Democratic National Committee and allowed to become little more than an email list that the party would tap to solicit donations and thank-you notes to members of Congress who backed the president’s agenda. An historic opportunity to rebuild the Democratic Party from the ground up was squandered by officials in the White House, the DNC, and the professional consulting class. In 2012, after four disappointing years, OFA and other progressive groups marched into battle again to help Obama win reelection, and then again (much less successfully) in the 2014 midterms (Milkis and York 2017).¹¹⁹ But the idealism and bottom-up agency of 2008 was gone. The liberal “netroots” were demoralized and disorganized.

¹¹⁹ Zohran Mamdani knocked doors for Obama in 2008. His first experience as a campaign organizer came during the 2014 midterms. After college, Mamdani participated in a training put on by the Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) and then worked as a staff organizer for MoveOn, where he ran a voter phone-banking operation that made nearly 400,000 phone calls for the Democrats (Remnick 2025). Tascha Van Auken, Mamdani’s field director and a key architect of NYC-DSA’s electoral strategy, received her first political training as a staff organizer in Pennsylvania during the original Obama 2008 campaign (Goodman and González 2025).

During OFA's 2008 heyday, online organizing tools were still in their infancy. But already by the late 2000s, a liberal "blogosphere" had taken shape online, providing new channels for progressive activists to network and mobilize support for favored causes and candidates. The leading organization in this new ecosystem was MoveOn, which made use of cutting-edge email petitions to mobilize liberal voters (Karpf 2012). At its left edge, the blogosphere mixed with anarchist and socialist online networks dating back to the alter-globalization movement of the 1990s. By the mid-2010s, the blogosphere had evolved into a vibrant online space of left-wing discourse on Facebook and especially the microblogging site Twitter. This was an important contextual difference between the Obama 2008 and Sanders 2016 campaigns. Peer-to-peer social media platforms and alternative progressive blogs like *Daily Kos* and *Common Dreams* helped Sanders pull in an unprecedented amount of small-dollar donations following his campaign launch.

The Sanders campaign picked up steam fast. Through spring and summer 2015, Sanders drew shockingly large crowds on campaign stops in Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, and elsewhere, far larger and more energetic than most Clinton campaign events. Of necessity, the campaign focused its limited resources on the states that would vote first, while Clinton had the support of loyal surrogates in every state on the map. To have a shot at sustaining momentum deep into the primary, the Sanders campaign needed some way of holding events and recruiting support in later-voting states where it lacked staff capacity.

The solution that Sanders staffers hit on later became known as “distributed organizing.” Volunteers in areas where the campaign didn’t have a direct on-the-ground presence were given tools to host local “barnstorms” where they would recruit rank-and-file Sanders supporters to host an “endless number of new events” (Grim 2019b). Volunteers held 650 barnstorms that generated countless further spinoff events: phone-banks, house parties, and small fund-raisers, each pulling in new supporters and small-dollar donors. As they had eight years before in the first Obama campaign, the face-to-face gatherings and “relational” method of organizing gave many thousands of Sanders supporters an experience of collective action and political socialization rare in an age of civic disengagement. This was reinforced, to a much greater extent than in the first Obama campaign, by an online scene of Sanders supporters on Facebook and Twitter.

The Sanders base was heterogenous but driven forward by a massive surge of energy from young voters of all races. Interviewed in March 2016, in the heat of the primaries, the Marxist historian Mike Davis was asked to assess the meaning of the Sanders insurgency. Davis, a longtime critic of the “barren marriage” of the labor movement with the Democrats, acknowledged that the Sanders campaign was the true “novel and unexpected” phenomenon of the 2015-2016 presidential cycle. Trump represented the logical evolution of far-right nationalism within the Republican Party dating back at least to Pat Buchanan. But the base mobilized by Sanders within the Democratic primary signified a “generational revolt astonishing in its scale, passion, and

inclusivity.” The strength of Sanders among young voters of all races, especially the children of immigrants, portended a future “realignment” of the party in a “coherent, more leftward direction” (Movaghary-Pour and Davis 2016).

Stirrings in DSA

It was in this context of grassroots mobilization for the democratic socialist insurgent that the existing infrastructure of the socialist left became politically important for the first time in decades. At the start of 2015, Sanders was the most prominent democratic socialist in the country, and he was about to become much more so. But he wasn’t the only one who held onto the “s-word.” A few small socialist organizations dotted the landscape, survivors of the long fallow period of the post-60s decades. There were perhaps six of any note: the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Socialist Alternative (SAIt), the Green Party of the United States (GPUS), the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), and the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL).

Putting it bluntly: the orientation of these groups towards Sanders had no bearing whatsoever on his decision to run or on the overall course of his campaign. None of them had an active membership of more than a few hundred. With the minor exception of SAIt, which had managed to elect its leader Kshama Sawant to the Seattle City Council in 2013 and again in 2015, none had any experience running a successful

electoral campaign.¹²⁰ Nor did any of them have a meaningful presence in the labor movement or other social movements, outside of a few big cities like Chicago. Nevertheless, a presidential campaign by a popular socialist—Sanders was already generating buzz in progressive circles by 2014—would inevitably open opportunities for these organizations, so it is important to understand their different orientations towards Sanders.

The six groups descended from different left traditions, including Marxism-Leninism (PSL), Trotskyism (ISO and SAlt), and libertarian eco-socialism (GPUS). These organizations disagreed vociferously with one another on many questions. But with one exception, socialists from each group all agreed that the Democratic Party as such was an enemy of the working class and the “graveyard of social movements.” Campaigning on the Democratic ballot line was anathema. Socialists might tactically support Democrats against Republicans as the “lesser of two evils.” But when and where a socialist group was sufficiently organized to run one of their own for office, there were just two acceptable options: running as an independent in a nonpartisan election (such as for most municipal elections¹²¹), or on one’s own third-party line. Running in Democratic Party primaries, especially for the office of the presidency, was tantamount to running “as a Democrat,” and therefore represented a violation of a core Marxist principle: that the working-class required “political

¹²⁰ SAlt also ran competitive City Council campaigns in Minneapolis in 2013 and 2017, though it fell short both times.

¹²¹ Though non-partisan elections conducted without a ranked-choice voting method still impose penalties on left-wing candidates via the spoiler effect.

independence,” meaning its own party—and its own ballot line. The American left’s rigidity on this question was a crippling weakness because American electoral institutions impose severe penalties on third parties. If one had to pick a single reason why the United States lacks an independent labor party, it is that American electoral rules—single-member electoral districts and first-past-the-post elections, and to a lesser degree onerous petition-signature requirements for third-party ballot-line access—create very strong pressures towards a two-party system (Drutman 2020).¹²²

The exception to the ballot-line interpretation of political independence was to be found in DSA, a lineal descendent of the Socialist Party of America (SPA). The SPA and its great tribune, Eugene Debs, were the leading representatives of American radicalism in the first two decades of the twentieth century. At its height in 1912, the party claimed over one hundred thousand members nationwide, and Debs gathered several million votes in his epic campaigns for the presidency. In its urban bastion of Milwaukee, the SPA—branded locally as the Social-Democratic Party (SDP)—governed for long

¹²² On the basis of a comparison with Canada, Eidlin (2018) argues that electoral institutions alone cannot account for the absence of an independent left third party in the U.S. Canada has similar electoral institutions but sustains a “two-and-a-half” party system in which the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) sometimes plays an important role, especially at the regional level. The refusal of the Canadian liberal and conservative parties to incorporate agrarian and labor movements in the 1930s created an opportunity for an independent party project to succeed, first in the shape of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (founded 1932) and later in the form of the NDP (1961). Eidlin is right to stress the contingency of ruling-party response to social movement challenges in creating opportunities for independent party-formation, especially in a period of intense class struggle like the 1930s. But the evidence for the two-party bias of Anglo electoral institutions outside of these rare windows of intense social struggle is, in my view, overwhelming. In the volatile 1910s and early 1920s, the U.S. Democratic Party mostly refused to incorporate the militant industrial labor movement, and though there was no shortage of efforts to form independent left parties, these projects almost all failed, with the singular exception of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party (FLP, 1918-1944). And even the FLP lasted only twenty-six years before merging with the state Democratic Party.

stretches and sustained a vibrant party organization with thousands of members. The “sewer socialist” machine in Milwaukee was probably the high point for municipal left-wing politics in American history, and the closest thing ever achieved in the U.S. to the “alternative culture” of German Social Democracy, which flourished at the same time. In 1912, roughly one out of every 100 Milwaukee residents was a member of the party. Eric Blanc writes that “[h]ad the Socialist Party of America been as strong as Milwaukee’s SDP, it would have had about one million members — roughly the same size as German Social Democracy, the world’s largest socialist party” (2025d).

The SPA’s golden age lasted only about a decade, however. The party was split apart in the apocalyptic years of the First World War and the eruption of international communism, and would exist in the shadow of the Communist movement for most of the interwar period. Socialists indirectly influenced FDR’s New Deal platform and held sway in the leadership of some notable CIO unions, including the UAW in Detroit and the needle trades in New York. But the SPA was never able to rebuild its pre-1919 organization within the working class, and it took on a more middle-class character through the 1920s. Like the Communists, the Socialists were pushed to the margins in the Cold War. Their greatest achievement would be to train key cadres of the early Civil Rights Movement and later the student movement (Nichter 2023; Isserman 1987). The organization split in 1972 over the Vietnam War and generational attitudes towards the New Left and the New Politics reformers within the Democratic Party.

The key successor organization formed the following year, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), was led by one of the SPA's leading figures, Michael Harrington. DSOC took a friendlier attitude towards Democratic Party liberals, feminists, and gay rights activists, while the majority faction of the former SPA—now calling themselves Social Democrats, USA—would drift steadily rightwards towards neoconservatism. DSOC was the leading force behind the struggle for a full-employment plank at the 1976 Democratic Party convention, and would help found Democratic Agenda, a coalition of progressive unionists, feminists, minorities, and liberals within the Democratic tent. Democratic Agenda backed Ted Kennedy against Jimmy Carter in the hard-fought 1980 primaries, but Kennedy, and the dying New Deal coalition, fell short. DSOC suffered a split during the 1980 primaries and Democratic Agenda fell apart shortly after (Stanley 2012).

In 1982, two years after Carter's crushing defeat by Ronald Reagan, DSA was founded as a merger of DSOC and the socialist-feminist New American Movement, mostly on the former's terms. Like DSOC, DSA pursued a strategy of "realignment." Realignment had originally been conceived by socialists in the late 1950s as a desired strategic outcome of the Civil Rights Movement. The struggle for Black political power in the South—in which Black and white members and sympathizers of the SPA played a very important part—would destroy the basis for conservatism in the Democratic Party. This in turn would open the doors to an alliance between Blacks, Northern liberals, and organized labor which together could restart the engine of New Deal reformism. The

first step of this realignment did in fact eventuate as white southern Democrats fled the party. But the shift of the Democratic Party into a vehicle for social democracy was blocked by the emergence of the New Right within the Republican Party, the business offensive against organized labor, and the rise of Democratic neoliberalism represented by Carter and suburban “Atari Democrats.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, realignment took on a different meaning for DSOC/DSA and its leading figure, Michael Harrington. The term now denoted a strategy of working around liberal or progressive Democratic Party leaders and union officials. DSA’s most prominent elected official of the era, David Dinkins, personified the strategy. At the time of his election to the New York City mayoralty in 1989, Dinkins was serving as the powerful Manhattan borough president.¹²³ As Harrington recognized, the missing piece to these later versions of realignment was a mass social movement from below comparable to the Civil Rights Movement or the labor movement of the 1930s. The stock criticism of DSA leveled by groups on the “independent” socialist left, like the Independent Socialists (IS) and its successor Solidarity, was that it was a middle-class group that preferred maintaining access to party and trade union leaders instead of channeling power from below and outside.

Importantly, left criticisms of DSA tended to elide the distinction between an insider strategy of influencing liberal and progressive Democratic Party leaders, on the

¹²³ His successor, and later the Democratic Party nominee to challenge Rudy Giuliani in 1997, Ruth Messinger, was also a DSA member.

one hand, and on the other hand staging popular challenges to the party establishment *from below*, by means of Democratic primaries. After the defeat of the Rainbow Coalition and the rise of Clintonism, the latter possibility—of an insurgency within the party but independent of the corporate-political establishment—remained merely hypothetical for twenty years. The Obama 2008 campaign briefly seemed like it might revive the spirit of the Rainbow. But the illusion was quickly dispelled after he won the election and demobilized his supporters.

By the 2000s, DSA was reduced to fewer than 5,000 members, mostly over the age of 40, and few active chapters. But in the 2010s, the organization experienced a small revival in the context of Occupy. Of the six socialist organizations listed above, only DSA would enthusiastically back Sanders. Despite the organization's closeness to liberal figures within the Democratic Party like Dinkins, Ron Dellums, and Major Owens, DSA mostly avoided presidential politics after 1988, when the organization supported Jackson in the primaries. DSA did not support another candidate in a Democratic presidential primary for nearly thirty years, though it grudgingly backed John Kerry and enthusiastically supported Barack Obama after each secured the party nomination. The organization notably refrained from supporting the third-party campaigns of Ralph Nader in 2000 or 2004. To its credit, in 2012 DSA declined to re-endorse Obama, who had disappointed progressive hopes for a clear break from neoliberalism (Duhalde 2022:180).

By 2014 a new strategic perspective was germinating in DSA, along with a new youthful energy. Years before 2017, when DSA would go “viral” and explode in size, the organization was already undergoing a quiet process of renewal. Not for the first time in the history of socialism, the younger activists were grouped around a new publication project.¹²⁴ In 2010, *Jacobin* magazine was launched by Bhaskar Sunkara, a college student and the ambitious 21-year old editor of the blog of DSA’s youth section, the Young Democratic Socialists (YDS). *Jacobin* aimed to provide a popular Marxist magazine that was more accessible than intellectual journals like *New Left Review* or *Monthly Review*, yet not as attached to the Cold War paradigm as *Dissent*, the traditional organ of American social democracy. Sunkara and his early co-thinkers were versed in what Sunkara would later call a “non-Leninist, as opposed to anti-Leninist” Marxism.¹²⁵ The founding group of *Jacobin* writers, most with ties to DSA, conceived socialism as the extension of democratic social relations to economic institutions, including both market and workplace. Soviet-style central planning had failed to satisfy the needs and desires of working people where it had been implemented. The left should be open to alternative economic models. Details varied, but most of the *Jacobin*

¹²⁴ Besides classic left-wing journals like *Partisan Review* (founded 1934), *Dissent* (1954), and *New Politics* (1961), Sunkara also acknowledged an inspiration from the conservative right: “When he decided to start a new magazine, in the summer of 2010, Sunkara looked to William F. Buckley’s *National Review* [1955] as a model. That magazine had been careful to define itself as conservative, not Republican, and it had taken certain positions—encouraging Barry Goldwater to run for president in 1964, for instance—even when they might spell short-term trouble for the Republican Party. In a similar way, Sunkara says, he hoped to use *Jacobin* ‘to cohere people around a set of ideas, and to interact with the mainstream of liberalism with that set of ideas’” (Baird 2019).

¹²⁵ “Celebrating 10 Years of Jacobin Magazine,” 25:30, *Jacobin*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dEMqGzPc20>.

intellectuals favored some kind of participatory market socialism, a system which balanced a comprehensive welfare state and democratic control of key industries with market relations between firms.

But designing the institutions of a democratic socialist society would be idle without a political strategy for achieving them. *Jacobin's* strategic vision mixed classical Marxist principles with a realistic analysis of contemporary politics. Sunkara and his co-thinkers broke sharply with post-Marxists who dissolved class struggle into an amorphous stew of discourse and symbolic politics. In this respect they were different from European left thinkers active in the movements of the squares (including future leaders of Podemos, the Spanish left-populist party), for whom cultural theorists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe were key influences. Contra the post-Marxist left, for *Jacobin* the working class was still at the heart of socialist strategy. Socialists should get back to basics and start rebuilding working-class organizations, especially labor unions.

But *Jacobin's* insistence on centering working-class agency did not imply a view of the proletariat as a *revolutionary* agent. Even in the chaos of the great financial crisis, social revolution along the lines of the Russian or Chinese examples was simply not in the cards, at least within advanced-capitalist countries with strong, democratically-legitimated states. The road to socialism would proceed through struggles to transform and democratize political institutions, not smash and replace them in an insurrectionary rupture. But the “democratic road” was riddled with traps

and obstacles that could not be reliably surmounted through one-off social movements, and certainly not with Occupy-style anarchism. What was required was no less than a new party of the left that could exercise simultaneous power in legislatures, streets, and the workplace.

Along with its political innovations, *Jacobin*'s editors also sought to upgrade left-wing aesthetics. The magazine had an appealing design and an irreverent, punchy style meant to engage younger readers and socialist-curious liberals. By late 2014, *Jacobin* had established a niche for itself. Its print magazine circulated to 7,000 subscribers, several thousand more than its venerable older counterpart *Dissent* (Sunkara 2014; Schuessler 2013). Its high-volume, non-paywalled online blog—by 2014, the blog published multiple new articles every day—attracted a steady following, too. Its online articles were short and sharp, written to grab attention in the churning attention economy of Twitter.

In summer 2014, the new cohort of DSA activists, almost all in their twenties or thirties, cohered into a group that they called the Left Caucus. This was a small network of about 25 people, many with experience in YDS and active on Twitter (interview with Neal Meyer, 2023). Influenced by ideas germinating in the pages of *Jacobin*, in August the Left Caucus circulated a seven-point “Where We Stand” document (2014). The caucus expressed a desire to build a “mass socialist movement in the US with the ultimate aim of a revolutionary transformation of society from capitalism to democratic socialism.” That would involve bringing DSA closer to “intersectional struggles and our

theoretical understanding of the interconnections between anti-capitalism and struggles against racism, sexism, and homophobia.”¹²⁶ It called for supporting candidates who openly identified as socialists, and committed itself to the “long-term goal of building a working-class socialist political party.”

The group urged DSA to depart from some of its traditional foreign policy stances, including its affiliation to the Socialist International (SI), and called for engaging with the Palestine solidarity movement—a controversial stance in an organization with many Jewish members sympathetic to Israel.¹²⁷ And they encouraged the development of a larger “activist cadre” of members, with education in “Marxist theory” to cultivate “explicit socialists” able to connect immediate movement work to the long-term horizon of a post-capitalist world: “‘Progressive’ activism is not enough - DSA must be an organization of *socialists* organizing for *socialism*” (emphasis in original). These ideas would all later become common sense in DSA, but at the time they represented significant departures from the organization’s tradition. At the 2015 DSA national convention, the caucus tried and failed to pass a resolution to withdraw the

¹²⁶ Though DSA and especially *Jacobin* have been associated with a class-first critique of intersectionality, in fact the language and imagery of intersectional politics have been present within DSA since 2014, when Black Lives Matter introduced Black feminist themes into wide usage among American activists. The Left Caucus document was circulated in August 2014, during the first great explosion of Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri. The document is an important early example of how Marxist democratic socialists would seek to constructively engage the racial justice movement in the 2010s.

¹²⁷ Describing the period of DSA’s rapid growth in 2016-2017, Duhalde recalled a moment when “I said something in Yiddish for the first time and I could see the faces of the people who didn’t understand what I was talking about... I was like, I can’t say that anymore. It wasn’t like, because I offended people. It was just [that] the demographics had so changed. People don’t have those cultural references [anymore]” (interview with David Duhalde, January 24, 2024).

organization from the SI. The same proposal would pass overwhelmingly just two years later, in a DSA transformed by the influx of twenty thousand new members.

But perhaps more important than any specific idea contained in the caucus document was simply the fact that the tendency existed at all. In a short preface, the authors called for more “explicit debates” and a “pluralist organizational culture” in DSA. From 2017 onwards, new “caucuses” of members would proliferate in the national organization, hosting their own websites and organizing within chapters to advance their goals. They are all, in some sense, descendants of the Left Caucus.¹²⁸

In 2015, the Left Caucus and *Jacobin* milieu identified the Sanders campaign as a major opportunity (Guastella 2015; Sunkara 2015). Sanders wasn't putting forward a detailed program for effecting a transition to socialism. His policy package was solidly social-democratic. The fact that he called himself a “democratic socialist” was felicitous but ultimately not why socialists should support him. More than policy or the socialist label, his real strength was his *politics*: a class-focused appeal and especially his call for a “political revolution” against the bipartisan “establishment” and Wall Street oligarchy—an approach that Sunkara would later term “class-struggle social democracy”

¹²⁸ The Left Caucus was not the first organized tendency in DSA's history. For example, a “New Directions” caucus briefly existed in the later 1980s, which sought—unsuccessfully—to reverse the flagging energy of DSA chapters deep into the Reagan era (Mosley 2020). The Left Caucus itself would grow rapidly in 2016–2017 with the explosive development of the larger DSA organization. Swelling with new activists who did not know one another and who lacked familiarity with the circumstances of the pre-2014 DSA, the caucus threatened to become a kind of incoherent clearinghouse for all who identified with the “left” of DSA. The original Left Caucus leaders closed admission to the group in spring 2017 and folded the project that summer, just at the moment that the first organized tendencies of the “new DSA” were forming in the lead-up to that year's national convention, held in Chicago.

(Sunkara 2019). And his decision to run in the Democratic Party primary actually gave him an opportunity to reach a mass audience, unlike quixotic third-party efforts. From these premises, *Jacobin* would be an early and consistent champion of Sanders against his critics, including liberals who favored Clinton for her moderation and technocratic credentials, progressives who preferred Clinton (and later Warren) for her supposedly "intersectional" approach to racial justice, and far-left socialists who couldn't see past Sanders's heretical decision to run "as a Democrat."

It wasn't an accident that Sunkara emerged from DSA's youth section, YDS.¹²⁹ It was here that DSA's pre-2016 political renewal began. In the 1990s, YDS was the most dynamic part of the organization, playing an active part in anti-apartheid and student-labor solidarity activism (Kreider and Duhalde 2022). But by 2006, the group had dwindled to a small handful of chapters. David Duhalde served as YDS's national youth organizer in 2006-2008. He describes the dire condition of the organization in the late Bush years:

My first week, a chapter wrote in to say they were disaffiliating. I soon realized that our annual outreach conferences of a hundred or more students masked that effectively we had maybe five chapters across the whole United States. In fact, some of the chapters only had one remaining member. (Duhalde 2024)

Some left-wing students were being drawn to other organizations like the ISO, which had a comparatively robust student section with more cadres available to provide political education for student activists. Many more young people were attracted to

¹²⁹ YDS was renamed YDSA in 2017.

single-issue nonprofits like United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) which offered them the chance to do immediate "movement work." Duhalde had encountered the "donut problem" that had afflicted DSA and other left-wing groups for decades: "DSA was a 'donut' as it had no center drawing cadre. Activists would become socialists, join DSA, and then conclude mass movement work was easier to do outside of DSA" (2024).

Duhalde responded to this problem by working to rebuild chapters in schools outside of New York City, where many universities already had established socialist clubs affiliated to groups other than DSA. Instead, he reached out to colleges and universities in smaller cities where an existing left organization was less likely to be active. A DSA-YDS group on Facebook helped Duhalde connect with new contacts at schools who wanted to form chapters. Before the emergence of new online platform technologies like Facebook and large Twitter DM (direct message) chats, it was difficult for organizers like Duhalde to track and coordinate between nodes of the emerging socialist network, and for budding young leftists to find and connect with each other. The widespread diffusion of new technological affordances among young people in the early 2010s—groupchats, Facebook groups, the Twitter feed and DMs, and Google suite tools like Docs and Drive—transformed possibilities for socialist organization building, just as they were transforming other social movements like Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and the Arab Spring protests (Tufekci 2017).

However, to take advantage of these new affordances would require a younger generation of millennials in YDS who had skill with the new tools and norms of digital communication. This wasn't necessarily a smooth process. Duhalde recounts a "big fight" on the DSA NPC—then based physically in New York—to update the organization's nineties-era website:

That was like an important fight for two reasons, I would say. Chris Maisano was part of that fight, too. We were... me, Chris, Remeike [Forbes] from Jacobin, we're all like, we need a new website. The old guard and the old people were like, why do we need a new website? It was [a] fascinating fight for me, David, because it showed it was the first moment I realized that there's some people really just don't want to change. Because it was so obvious to me, as a 20-something in their mid 20s at that time that like, we needed a new website. The website was embarrassing. It was not easy to use, [we] didn't look like a dynamic organization. We won that fight. That was the beginning of like, people being like, let's move to Twitter. (interview with David Duhalde, 2024)

In 2013, Duhalde's successor as national YDS organizer, Neal Meyer, used his contacts within the youth section to pull together the group that would become the Left Caucus. After a year working as the YDS organizer, Sunkara at *Jacobin* hired Meyer to build up a network of reading groups for the magazine's subscribers. By the end of 2014, *Jacobin* supported around 40 reading groups in the U.S. and Canada, including in places where a socialist discussion group might not be expected to take root, like the Carolinas, Alabama, Iowa, Texas, and Utah (Sunkara 2014:35). The *Jacobin* reading groups were intended to bring together readers in an in-person setting that was semi-structured and face-to-face, but more open than a meeting of a political organization or party.

Sunkara and Meyer hoped that the reading groups would be a stepping stone to DSA. The New York City reading group in Fort Greene, Brooklyn was particularly vibrant, and at its peak could draw as many as eighty people, mostly young, for an evening of socializing and political discussion. One active participant in the New York City reading group was Julia Salazar, who would go on to be NYC-DSA's first "cadre candidate" elected to office (Freedlander 2021:153-54). The Brooklyn reading group was a key nucleus for the reviving NYC-DSA chapter, which had been moribund for several years despite the fact that DSA's national office was located in the city.

One of the cities where a YDS network revived in these years was Philadelphia, clustered around the figure of Joseph Schwartz. Schwartz, a professor of political theory at Temple University, was a longtime DSA leader with roots in NAM and DSOC. Schwartz was the sponsor and mentor of Temple University YDS. One member of Schwartz's circle was Christian Bowe, a student at nearby Drexel University. Bowe was by his own description a "poster" and a member of the so-called "dirtbag left," a community of Twitter users with an ironic and vulgar style, radicalized Millennial successors of the Netroots (Jones 2018). The dirtbag left was much more cynical about Obama-era Democratic liberalism, which was seen as both maddeningly ineffective in combating the Republican right and complicit in American crimes overseas.

In 2015, “Left Twitter” was an early and enthusiastic corner of support for the Sanders campaign. Left Twitter posters became notorious for antagonizing accounts that supported Clinton, as well as journalists from mainstream news outlets who were accused of ignoring or misrepresenting Sanders’s message. For the most engaged and online of Sanders’s young partisans, including thousands of those who were getting organized through Bond and Exley’s barnstorms, Left Twitter was a vital means of connection and political socialization. This was also a receptive audience for the publicists at *Jacobin*, which published a steady stream of analysis and opinion pieces in support of the “political revolution.” *Chapo Trap House*, a comedy and politics podcast launched by a group of left-Twitter friends in March 2016, quickly became a key voice for young anti-establishment Berniecrats (Jones 2018). The sardonic humor, memes, and references of this online community evolved into a shared language that would soon help these leftists find common ground when meeting “IRL” (in real life) in DSA. Meagan Day, later a staff writer for *Jacobin* who would coauthor a book on the Sanders campaign, described the meaning of what Christopher Barnes calls the “socialist public sphere” on Twitter in these years:

It was just funny and fun, and it felt like a way of uniting socialists. It felt like we had a shared language, and we were funnier than our enemies in the Democratic Party. It made me feel like not only could I be a socialist, but that it could also be

fun, and that there were other people that I could laugh with. It really created a sense of community.¹³⁰ (quoted in Barnes 2020:37)

Bowe was a popular and well-networked member of this online community, which was informally tied together with direct-message chats and real-world connections between friends in NYC, Philadelphia, Chicago, and other big cities. More than others in the dirtbag left, Bowe would use his platform to post about DSA and highlight the work that a small number of DSA chapters were doing to support Sanders. Bowe, posting under his pseudonym “Larry Website,” encouraged Sanders’s online supporters to learn more about democratic socialism and get involved with DSA. Bowe also had a close relationship with Sunkara of *Jacobin* and with the hosts of *Chapo Trap House*.¹³¹ In an interview, Bowe explained that he started posting about DSA on his own initiative. In the later stages of the Sanders campaign, Bowe was approached by Duhalde, then serving on the DSA NPC, and recruited to run DSA’s own social media operation. Over summer, DSA’s posts, now written by Bowe and a small committee of others, started attracting more attention. Sanders’s decision to endorse Clinton and then campaign for her after a bitterly-fought primary was predictable but still deeply

¹³⁰ Barnes writes of another DSA member who “recounted for me that the first time he met the other comrades in his local chapter at a DSA social event, he already knew all of their jokes and style of humour because he had encountered it on Twitter” (2020:37).

¹³¹ One of the podcast’s co-hosts, Amber A’Lee Frost, had a background in YDS and served on DSA’s National Political Committee in 2013-2015 (Campbell 2013). Another co-host, Matt Christman, was a founding member of the DSA chapter in Cincinnati, Ohio in 2016 (Schiller 2019).

frustrating for his most active young supporters. DSA had steadily gained members between 2014 and 2016, but recruitment gathered pace that summer.

Rivals

All of these strands—*Jacobin* and its reading groups, the revitalization of YDS and the formation of Left Caucus, Left Twitter and Larry Website—were pulling together to set up DSA as the possible “political home” for the masses of people activated by Sanders. At this moment dynamics within the Sanders campaign—its leadership, its grassroots, and especially its middle-layer “cadre” of organizers—became important. What would become of the army of Sanders volunteers from the primary? Would Sanders build an organization to channel their energies and continue the movement into the future? Some on the left urged Sanders to launch a third-party bid against Clinton, including prominent author and racial justice advocate Michelle Alexander, who endorsed Sanders’s “political revolution” (Alexander 2016). This was never seriously considered by Sanders or those around him, however. Sanders would instead devote his energies to negotiations with the Clinton camp over the Democratic party platform, and then to the general election campaign against Donald Trump.

The Sanders campaign spawned three new organizations and transformed an old one. The first was Brand New Congress (BNC). In spring 2016, after it became clear that

Sanders would lose the nomination to Clinton, some of Sanders's lieutenants departed from the campaign to launch a PAC with a staggeringly ambitious goal. BNC aimed to elect a huge slate of progressive populists to fight for Sanders's agenda in Congress, whatever happened in the presidential election. BNC took a post-partisan approach inspired by Sanders's own message of political independence. The idea was, literally, to create a brand new Congress by recruiting outsider primary candidates in all 435 Congressional districts, in both the Democratic and Republican parties. The small BNC team tapped into the Sanders network to put out a call for prospective candidates, with the idea of bringing these candidates together and running on a common platform.

After the 2016 election, Cenk Uygur, the impresario behind a popular progressive media company, The Young Turks (TYT), agreed to support the project and promote it to his large online audience, on one condition: that BNC give up the idea of running candidates in Republican Party primaries, which he believed was quixotic. At Uygur's prompting, BNC spun-off a new group, Justice Democrats (JD), with the more realistic goal of supporting progressive challenges within Democratic Party congressional primaries. TYT's enthusiastic fans donated \$2.5 million to JD, giving it financial stability and a large support network. Like BNC, JD was a small group of Berniecrat campaign and media professionals without a membership base or grassroots structure. The two organizations would formally split in summer 2017 (Grim 2019a:244).

Importantly, the circumstances of their birth meant that BNC/JD was essentially a consultancy group of political professionals, not a membership-based organization. Though not themselves products of the traditional consultant class, these leaders had been trained in the top-down organizational structure of a presidential campaign. JD would be a “light” vehicle for recruiting candidates and supporting their campaigns, not a participatory grassroots organization.

BNC and JD were thoroughly infused with the spirit of the Sanders campaign, but they were independent of Sanders and his close circle of advisors in Burlington. The "official" post-campaign organization, Our Revolution (OR), was launched shortly after the Democratic National Convention in August. OR was initially imagined as a grassroots organizing group that would support downballot races for candidates who supported Sanders's key policy goals. Sanders sponsored OR at its birth and assigned some of his closest advisors to run the operation. But the group quickly ran into internal conflict over its leadership and fundraising structure. Sanders was barred by Senate ethics rules from coordinating directly with the organization, and generally left its operations to its appointed board. On paper, the organization had impressive resources, with a quarter of a million dues-paying supporters and an email list of five or six million people (Freedlander 2021:97). In some places, like Maryland, Our Revolution chapters would score impressive local political victories and develop democratic membership

structures (Muehlenkamp 2020). OR endorsements shifted donation patterns in 2017-2018 gubernatorial races, showing that Berniecrats could “meaningfully influence Democratic primary politics in contests where Sanders himself is not a candidate” (Abbott 2021).

But unlike Justice Democrats or DSA, OR never struck gold with an insurgent candidate strongly associated with the organization. OR’s traditional nonprofit structure, with a national board originally appointed by the Sanders inner circle, differed notably from that of DSA where national leaders are elected. OR’s local chapters endorsed widely in 2017-2018 and came away with a poor win-loss ratio in primaries, diluting the organization’s brand. Ironically, OR would find its greatest successes on the terrain of institutional Democratic Party politics which Sanders himself had always disdained. The group was a primary vehicle through which progressives exercised influence in local and state Democratic Party committees, and played a role in a 2018 reform to reduce the power of “superdelegates” in the presidential nomination process.

The contrast between OR and DSA’s political projects became clear in 2025. OR’s biggest victory that year came not in a campaign for public office but in the race for Democratic National Committee (DNC) chairman. OR leader Joseph Geevarghese trumpeted the victory of Ken Martin for DNC chair, as well as OR board member Jane

Kleeb, elected president of the Association of State Democratic chairs, as a “stunning upset against the Democratic establishment” (Geevarghese 2025). But just two months after Zohran Mamdani won his primary in part because of his moral clarity on the Gaza genocide, Martin opposed a DNC resolution calling for an arms embargo to Israel—a position with overwhelming support among Democratic voters and a key issue separating that same “establishment” from the party base (Sledge 2025). It also showed the distance separating OR from the key social movement of the mid-2020s, the Palestine solidarity movement.¹³²

Of the three organizations directly spawned by the Sanders campaign, Justice Democrats would prove to be the most impactful.¹³³ More than any other group, JD became associated with the “Squad,” the caucus of young left-wing women of color elected to Congress in 2018. Several prominent JD-endorsed candidates would win in the midterm Democratic wave election of 2018, including Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib. The Squad would become the public face of left-progressivism and democratic socialism in the House, where it played an important role in advancing

¹³² Our Revolution did endorse Mamdani late in the primary and mobilized its large network of supporters in NYC to rank him first on their ballots.

¹³³ Brand New Congress only ever endorsed one (failed) candidate in a Republican primary, in blood-red Arkansas. The group existed as a loose support network of populist candidates for a few years before folding in 2023.

signature policy ideas associated with the left, like the Green New Deal and Medicare for All.

However, in one way JD clearly failed to live up to its original mission. That mission was the same as BNC's: to recruit genuine outsiders to take on the political establishment, not simply support the campaigns of progressives. But Omar and Tlaib were sitting state legislators and Pressley was a city councilor in Boston. None of these three future Squad members were actually recruited to run by JD, and each would have been competitive without the group's endorsement and fundraising. Of JD's twelve *recruits* in the 2018 midterms, just one prevailed in her primary: a former Sanders volunteer named Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.¹³⁴ In part, this was the result of JD staff triaging their operation in the winter of 2017-2018 to focus exclusively on Ocasio-Cortez's campaign in Queens, effectively abandoning their other recruits. But it also reflected the fact that, of the twelve insurgent candidates, only Ocasio-Cortez had *also* been endorsed by DSA, which knocked at least 13,000 doors for her campaign (Carter 2025). Though AOC's closest advisors were from JD, and it was JD staff who would accompany her to Washington, the two staffers on the campaign itself (including

¹³⁴ The story of JD's 2018 efforts—and how it narrowed its focus down to the Ocasio-Cortez campaign—are told in the 2019 documentary *Knock Down the House* (Lears 2019). The documentary neglects DSA's crucial role in the campaign, however.

her campaign manager) were actually NYC-DSA activists (Freedlander 2021; Carter 2025).

In any case, JD was not a chapter- and membership-based group able to embed itself in communities and social movements. It gained in prestige and resources following the stunning AOC victory and has since become an important part of the progressive “counter-establishment” within the Democratic Party, but it remains essentially a campaigning PAC, not a movement organization. To the disappointment of some of its prominent backers like the Young Turks’ Uygur, JD also failed to organize its endorsed officeholders into a disciplined party-like bloc on Capitol Hill (Marans 2023), as NYC-DSA would start doing in the New York state legislature by 2020 (Sterne 2022).

The fourth organization descended, albeit indirectly, from the 2016 Sanders campaign was the revitalized DSA itself. Reflecting on the Sanders campaigns in November 2020, journalist Ross Barkan, a keen observer of the socialist left, remarked that “Bernie’s lasting legacy is DSA.” Sanders was, in Barkan’s words, “the only losing presidential candidate to ever leave behind a mass movement. Few presidents, if any, ever do. Sanders has almost single-handedly bequeathed us the Democratic Socialists of America,” which was at that moment growing rapidly on a drive to reach 100,000 members (Barkan 2020a). As described above, over the course of 2015 and 2016, DSA

had been gradually building a profile online through the efforts of dedicated “posters” like Larry Website. The organization’s first significant appearance “IRL”— “in real life,” i.e. not online—on the national stage occurred in June 2016 in Chicago, a few months after it became clear that Sanders had fallen short in the primaries. That month, a coalition of organizations that had backed his campaign gathered at a “People’s Summit” to debate the future of the movement (Sanders himself was not present). The event, which was organized by the National Nurses United union, was an opportunity for progressive groups to compete for attention, resources, and new members in a moment where it felt like the future of the movement was up for grabs.¹³⁵ Thousands filled a wing of the McCormick Place convention center to attend panels and hear speeches from prominent Sanders surrogates (Alcindor 2016). The coalition of organizations present included a mixture of netroots progressive advocacy groups like Progressive Democrats of America, community organizing groups like People’s Action, plus socialist groups including DSA and *Jacobin*.

Democratic socialists mostly expected to be building a left-wing pole of opposition against a Hillary Clinton presidency, not fighting in the streets against a

¹³⁵ I was present as a young Bernie-supporting climate activist.

Donald Trump administration.¹³⁶ DSA continued to gain a steady stream of new members through the summer and fall, consisting of frustrated young Bernie supporters looking for a stable political home. 1,142 people joined DSA between the Iowa caucuses and election day in November, an average of 4 new members per day (DSA Data Team 2017:2).¹³⁷ DSA appealed particularly to what could be called the “left” of Sanders’s coalition, namely, young people who saw in Sanders’s vision the possibility not only of achieving tangible reforms—Medicare for All, free higher education, a decarbonized economy—but also of advancing towards a systemic alternative to capitalism.¹³⁸ Our Revolution, meanwhile, did not lean into the socialist aspect of the campaign, instead emphasizing the short-term need to fight for “progressive” policies against the Democratic establishment and corporate oligarchy, with deeper structural questions of socialism and capitalism tacitly bracketed. There was a generational division between the two wings, with DSA’s recruitment overwhelmingly skewed towards Millennials under 40, while Our Revolution tended to draw older progressives.

¹³⁶ One exception came in the pages of *Current Affairs*, the second major print magazine of the 2010s democratic socialist revival (launched in 2015). In February 2016, before Trump had even secured the Republican nomination, *Current Affairs* editor Nathan J. Robinson accurately predicted that Trump would win a general election contest against Clinton. The piece circulated widely after November, helping boost the magazine’s profile among those who believed that “Bernie Would Have Won,” as a popular Berniecrat slogan put it.

¹³⁷ Unpublished survey in author’s possession, available upon request.

¹³⁸ For Black Lives Matter activists and young people of color attracted to Sanders, “capitalism” would often be marked with the modifier “racial.” DSA socialists sometimes adopted this usage, but usually opted for a traditional class-based definition of capitalism and socialism.

November and after

It is easy to imagine a counterfactual where Donald Trump was not elected in November 2016. Had Clinton prevailed, it seems likely that DSA would have followed a slower and more stable path of growth in 2017, not the explosive trajectory it followed during the anti-Trump “Resistance.” The success of the Sanders campaign in reintroducing democratic socialism to U.S. political culture, and the collective identity forged by the tens of thousands of young Sanders volunteers, would have together provided fruitful resources for growing DSA. But the political environment of a Clinton administration may have provided fewer opportunities for the insurgent progressive primary challenges that could form the left edge of the “blue wave” midterm of 2018. The Trump administration’s continuous provocations and norm-violations generated an intense liberal-left backlash in culture and politics in 2017-2021, which created opportunities for rapid socialist growth that might have been foreclosed by a Republican midterm wave in 2018.

In our timeline, the moral shock of Trump’s election triggered an immediate mobilization of left-wing Millennials into DSA. Trump’s election marks the rebirth of DSA as something fundamentally different from the pre-2016 DSA or DSOC before it—an era that members quickly began referring to as “old DSA.” In Portland, Oregon, which lacked an established DSA chapter, the first meeting of a local organizing

committee occurred on November 19, 2016, eleven days after the election. 18 people attended. Two weeks later, on December 11, the turnout had more than doubled. Two weeks later, the number of new socialists had doubled again, and soon the chapter would be regularly drawing more than one hundred people at general meetings. Similar scenes played out in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities around the country.

A survey conducted by the DSA national office reported findings on the new members flooding into church basements, libraries, and community centers in the wake of election day (DSA Data Team 2017). The slow and steady trickle of growth before the election shot up dramatically after Trump's victory. Between November 8th and February 24th, 2017, 9,320 people joined DSA, a rate of 86 per day (2017:2). DSA more than doubled in size in 3 months. Slightly over 50% of new members before and after the election were between the ages of 26 and 35 (2017:3). New member growth was concentrated in California, New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and (surprisingly) Texas (2017:5). Most new members in 2016 prior to the general election had heard about DSA through internet searches, while most members since November had heard about DSA through social media.¹³⁹ 17% of respondents cited disillusionment with the Democrats as

¹³⁹ 18% of new members who joined before the election specifically cited the influence of Bowe's Twitter account "LarryWebsite" (2017:7).

their top reason for joining. 19% cited a specific issue concern like health care, income inequality, or racism. 10% cited the need to resist Trump as their primary motivation (2017:6-8).

DSA chapters participated actively in the anti-Trump Resistance movement, though neither DSA National nor (usually) local chapters formed part of the Women's March coalition that drove Resistance activism in the first two years of the Trump administration. DSA shared with other Resistance groups an emphasis on face-to-face meetings and offline organizing, though its structure was more classical and formalized than many liberal groups that sprung up in this period of rapid mobilization. In 2017-2018, DSA stood at the leftmost edge of the broad movement, and was marked by its willingness to engage in more militant forms of disruption than mainstream liberal groups, who favored large-scale marches and rallies. DSA was less visible at these gigantic protests than the well-resourced liberal groups who set up stages and recruited speakers, but they were still present. In a follow-up survey of Resistance protestors conducted after the November 2018 midterms, sociologist Dana Fisher asked respondents to write-in the names of activist organizations they were working with. She found that DSA was tied for the most commonly written-in group, "each mentioned by four people, representing 6 percent of all mentions" (Fisher 2019:105).¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ The other two groups were the Poor People's Campaign and Vote Forward.

DSA's first major mobilization was to airports to shut down travel in protest of Trump's ban on immigration from Muslim countries. DSA was present in anti-far right counterprotests throughout the country in 2017, when "alt-right" groups and neo-Nazis marched in cities like Charlottesville. In summer 2018, when most Resistance groups were pivoting to Democratic Party electoral campaigns, DSA was for a few months at the forefront of immigrant solidarity protests. Socialists in Washington D.C. made headlines with a disruptive protest of Homeland Security secretary Kirstjen Nielsen at a Mexican restaurant (Mervosh 2018). The same month, DSA members in Portland, OR were part of the first "Occupy ICE" protests outside an immigration detention center, a tactic that quickly spread around the country and merged with the viral slogan to "Abolish ICE."

DSA had a national structure with a small professional staff, but its structure permitted rapid expansion. The "membershopping" process was very simple. New joiners could become "card-carrying" socialists by filling out an online form on the DSA website and paying modest dues on a sliding scale. Joiners did not go through a period of interviews with current members and probationary membership, as was the norm in rival groups like Socialist Alternative and the ISO, both of which experienced new member growth during the early Trump administration but on the scale of (at most) low thousands, not tens of thousands. The low barrier to entry in DSA allowed people to sign up on their phones or a tablet at their first meeting. DSA's chapter and national social media boosted photos of overflowing chapter meetings and gatherings, and built

excitement by sharing posts celebrating new milestones—10,000 members, 50 chapters, and so on.

From his position on DSA staff, Duhalde helped connect new members in cities to form organizing committees and launch their chapters. Meanwhile, lateral connections between new members expanded rapidly. A large Twitter DM of DSA chapter leaders, for example, included many figures who would later become leaders of the first post-Left Caucus tendencies, including the two competing slates of NPC candidates at the 2017 national convention (interview with Alex Holland, 2024). By the end of 2017, DSA could claim over 300 chapters and local organizing committees, and 32,000 members. DSA chapters had also run their first cycle of candidates for office that fall, and 15 members won campaigns for city council seats and boards of aldermen in unexpected places like Lakewood, Ohio and Billings, Montana (Heyward 2017).

In his comparative study of DSA chapters, Robinson (2022) emphasizes the decentralized character of the reborn organization. He writes that

“[t]heir 240 chapters are mostly federated and decentralized... [T]he major consequence of DSA’s structure for its activities is that these activities are uncoordinated nationally—save for the setting of broad organizational priorities at the national conventions—and chapters experiment widely in different choices of tactics and even set their own goals. If a chapter wishes to prioritize growing membership, it can. If another wishes to prioritize electing members to the city council, it can. If another wishes to prioritize building local support for national pieces of legislation like Medicare for All, that, too, depends entirely on how the chapter *chooses* to spend its time.” (2022:10, emphasis in original)

DSA chapters swelled with new members. Some were being politicized for the first time, while others had some prior experience in social movements. For example, Michael

Grochowski, a national DSA staff director, cited Black Lives Matter in 2014 as the experience which pushed him towards DSA (Grochowski 2025). But unlike the younger members who came up through YDS in the first half of the 2010s, the 2016 and especially 2017 and 2018 cohorts of DSA members had few if any mentoring relationships with older and more experienced socialists, and they had, at most, hands-off relationships with national staff. In general, what united chapters and DSA members were not initiatives from the national office or National Political Committee, but a common tactical repertoire, set of issue foci, and a sense that both movement work—sometimes referred to as “base building”—and electoral campaigning were legitimate.

The one shared issue that most DSA chapters did work on in these years was a Medicare for All campaign, agreed upon at the 2017 national convention. The campaign revived tactics first honed in the Bernie campaign, including door-to-door canvassing and educational town-halls. The national office of DSA provided some resources and training to chapters to help them get Medicare for All canvasses off the ground. But for most DSA members at the time, Medicare for All was simply “in the air,” circulating as a widely-acknowledged priority that was a legitimate political goal for chapters to pursue. In Portland, the campaign’s working group and first canvasses were set up at the initiative of local members in 2017, before the national campaign had been launched. Chapter members traveled to the Oregon state capitol to lobby legislators to support a

law to expand abortion coverage, and later joined a statewide coalition gathering signatures to protect funding for the state Medicaid program.

As detailed in the first chapter, New York City DSA began experimenting with candidate-based electoral campaigning in 2016 with the Debbie Medina campaign and then 2017 with the Jabari Brisport and Khader El-Yateem campaigns. Each of these campaigns fell short, but they were the training grounds of future cadre candidates like Zohran Mamdani, who volunteered on El-Yateem's campaign. At the same time, NYC-DSA was building up a vibrant internal chapter life involving political education and social activities for members and supporters. The persistent external campaigning and internal activity of chapters like Portland DSA and NYC-DSA allowed membership to take on a meaningful, social dimension that membership in other liberal and left organizations simply lacked (Purucker 2026). By 2018, the *Jacobin* reading groups had mostly dissolved into DSA chapters, their political education function formalized into chapter-based working groups and educational projects, like a "socialist day school" put on by Portland DSA in spring 2018.

An identifiable cultural "scene" existed around DSA chapters in a few cities, paradigmatically in hip Brooklyn neighborhoods like Astoria (van Zuylen Wood 2019). But the perception of DSA as an organization exclusively for young urban professionals with high cultural capital can mislead. The single most impressive example of DSA-supported movement organizing in the first Trump administration took place far from coastal big cities, in West Virginia. There, rank-and-file DSA member teachers in

Charleston were critical in organizing a statewide wildcat strike that set off a major strike wave in February 2018 (Blanc 2019). The teachers' strike movement of 2018-2019, which spread to Arizona, Oklahoma, California, and elsewhere, was electrifying for democratic socialists. Its example pushed DSA to devote relatively more attention to labor-based movement work and to narrowly adopt a resolution supporting a "rank-and-file strategy" at the 2019 national convention. Socialists were still sparse in the rank-and-file—the Charleston teachers were exceptional—but DSA chapters threw themselves into supporting the strikes as community members, developing a repertoire of fundraising, picket line solidarity, and informally-coordinated direct action that would become routine in the Biden era.

2018 was a pivotal year for DSA, with three decisive events that would set the organization's trajectory into the 2020s. The teachers' strike movement was the first. The ongoing anti-Trump Resistance movement, and especially the struggle against Trump's terroristic immigration enforcement policies, was the second, with an intense period of mobilization in the summer. The third was a series of major electoral victories in summer, when Ocasio-Cortez and Julia Salazar both pulled off major upsets against Democratic incumbents in New York City, and DSA member Rashida Tlaib narrowly prevailed in a Democratic primary in Detroit, Michigan (van de Panne 2018). Ocasio-Cortez's victory made international news, and triggered the largest influx of new DSA members since November 2016. Each of the key aspects of DSA's future development— distributed chapter organization, external mass-movement work,

internal political and cultural development, and high-profile electoral campaigns, all reinforced by the buzzing online public sphere of “DSA Twitter”—were in place by the start of 2019.

They would be crystallized in August 2019 at the second post-rebirth national convention, held in Atlanta. At that convention, an anarchist proposal to radically decentralize the organization was defeated, and proposals to adopt a rank-and-file labor strategy and work towards building an independent working-class political party—with tactical flexibility concerning the ballot line—were adopted, while the precursors to DSA’s main caucuses of the 2020s made their first appearances. However, the national DSA organization itself—the small but growing staff, the National Political Committee, and key national committees¹⁴¹—was still years away from playing a very important role, except as the steward of a “big-tent” structure in which members could safely debate political questions while still ensuring a degree of coordination and collective identity. The real engine of DSA’s growth was candidate-based electoral campaigns, as the Ocasio-Cortez membership bump demonstrated. At a larger level, the presence of Bernie Sanders as an assumed 2020 presidential contender, and then his actual campaign in 2019-2020, kept democratic socialism in the headlines and legitimized the idea that socialists could contest for power at the highest levels of politics. It is hard to overstate the sense of confidence and momentum felt by democratic socialists at the start of 2020.

¹⁴¹ The National Electoral Committee (NEC) and the Democratic Socialist Labor Commission (DSLCL) were and remain the most important. The DSLCL was renamed the National Labor Committee (NLC) in 2023.

This was the moment when a hopeful father like Johan could earnestly feel that Portland DSA would help him raise his infant daughter Cypress into a “red-diaper baby.”

Into the new decade

But just weeks after I met Johan and Cypress, a punishing sequence of events would throw that vision of a better future into radical doubt. Sanders’s crushing defeat by Joe Biden on Super Tuesday was followed immediately by the chaotic society-wide shutdown of the early COVID-19 pandemic. In-person campaigning and DSA chapter activities were frozen. Most DSA chapters would shift to virtual meetings conducted via Zoom and stay there through 2021 (the convention that year was held virtually). DSA continued to grow into early 2021, but membership stalled out at 91,000 before declining precipitously in 2022-23. The defeat of Sanders, the banishment of Trump, and the inauguration of Joe Biden signaled a general political-cultural exhaustion, a collective emotion deepened by the miserable isolation of pandemic life. With liberals demobilized and a narrow Democratic majority in Congress, the diminished progressive energies were redirected into institutional politics on Capitol Hill, where movement organizations like Sunrise parlayed influence to try to shape the legislative agenda (Sammon 2021). But the balance of power favored corporate Democrats, who dutifully gutted progressives’ legislative proposals on the Green New Deal and the care economy.

The social costs of blocked reform set the stage, in retrospect, for the shocking political comeback of Trump three years later.

In the first Biden years, DSA stumbled but did not collapse. The organization suffered some of the same infighting that affected many liberal and progressive groups at the time (Edsall 2019). Over-optimistic projections of membership growth led to a budget squeeze and painful cuts in 2024. The cessation of anti-Trump Resistance mobilization drained the pool of agitated liberals who might find their way to DSA. But the organizational repertoire developed in the Trump years proved resilient. DSA chapters continued to run and win electoral campaigns in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, even under the difficult conditions of the pandemic. In Queens, Zohran Mamdani managed to eke out a narrow victory for state assembly, along with all four other NYC-DSA endorsed candidates running that year (Cunningham-Cook 2020). Two years later, Democratic losses in the 2022 midterms obscured solid performances for the left. Newly-elected members of Congress joined the Squad, and 16 of DSA's 30 nationally-endorsed candidates—mostly for city council and state legislative seats—prevailed (Marcetic 2022).

In 2021-2022, a tight labor market, grievances over unsafe pandemic working conditions, and pro-union signals from the Biden administration combined to set off a wave of strikes and new union organizing drives. The labor-left revival foreshadowed by the Chicago teachers struggle of 2013 and the “red state revolt” of 2018 finally seemed to be spilling over into other parts of the economy. More than a year of brutal conditions in

hospitals and “essential” industries like grocery triggered wildcat strikes and disorganized forms of worker resistance. In October 2021, the dam broke, with strikes erupting at Nabisco, Kellogg's, John Deere, and Columbia University. Though a mere blip compared to strike waves of the past, “Striketober” captured the public imagination and gave DSA its first unifying mission since the Sanders campaign (Smith 2021). Strike solidarity reflexes that were first developed in the pre-pandemic years were now put into action on a larger scale. A steady stream of new organizing drives by young workers in the service sector—Starbucks was the key campaign— would organically involve many DSA members and inspire others to organize their own workplaces. As discussed above, undergraduate student workers began to organize dorms and dining halls, with YDSA involvement. As the pandemic receded, socialists eased back into face-to-face organizational life, at least enough to regenerate sufficient social capacities for outward-facing work.

Though DSA’s candidate-based campaigns would continue, the overall focus of socialists during the Biden administration was on movement work. In late 2023, this was made vividly clear when socialists plunged into the Palestine solidarity movement in response to the October 7 attacks and Israel’s genocidal counterattack in Gaza. In the 13 months between October 2023 and the November 2024 presidential election, DSA was marked by a mood of grim determination and, sometimes, desperation. The fact that DSA stood almost alone on the American political scene in supporting Palestinians bound DSA members more tightly together while eliciting intense hatred from elites in

both parties, to say nothing of the corporate media. Here is one moment where DSA's programmatic political commitments clearly were very important. As almost the only multi-issue, mass-member political organization in the U.S. to mobilize immediately for a ceasefire, DSA and its elected officials—at least those who were cadre socialists like Mamdani—positioned themselves on the bleeding edge of an issue that would by 2025 solidly favor them, while making the consensus support for Israel in the halls of power look not just politically foolish but gravely immoral.

The simple fact that DSA was correct on this issue in the eyes of the public would open a major political opportunity for pro-Palestine socialist candidates to exploit in 2025 and beyond, as Mamdani demonstrated. But it would also expose a painful contradiction, as DSA clashed with the two highest-profile democratic socialists in the country: Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, who each equivocated on Israel-Palestine at key moments during the Biden years. The brutality and moral bankruptcy of Biden's Israel policy, the uncritical support of it by most of the institutional Democratic Party, and the depressing failures of Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders in this regard strengthened the hand of left-wing factions within DSA chapters and the NPC in 2025, just a few months before Mamdani would clinch the mayoral election. The loathing felt by many in DSA for Ocasio-Cortez, a possible candidate for the presidency in 2028, will likely be a major issue for the movement in the second half of the 2020s.

APPENDIX A

REVIVING THE MASS ORGANIZATION FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS? THE MEANING OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA¹⁴²

Abstract

What does membership mean in a mass organization today? Work in the sociology of social movements and civic organizations indicates a long-term decline of movement organizations with mass memberships in the United States. Movement organizations have moved from membership to management, as professionalized advocacy organizations with "checkbook" memberships replaced formal, democratic mass organizations. Since 2016, however, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a left-wing political organization, has experienced surprising growth using the mass organization model. In this ethnographic case study of a DSA chapter, I find that recruitment in DSA has been mostly "virtual-individualistic", not occurring through bloc recruitment; that membership is bifurcated between "paper" and "activist cadre" groups; and that while the structure of the organization theoretically permits a third type of "effective but non-intensive" membership, this is not realized in practice. I conclude with some comments on the generalizability of the new mass organization form for social movements today.

Keywords

Social movements, organizations, mass parties, democratic socialist movement, civil society, DSA

¹⁴² This essay is my MA thesis, accepted by the Department of Sociology in 2022. It is the same as a version now published at *Interface: A Journal For and About Social Movements* (Purucker 2026). I have included it here as an appendix because it helps illustrate how my thinking on DSA has evolved over time, and because I have found it helpful to consult while writing my original chapters.

Introduction

What does membership mean in a mass organization today? In the United States and Europe, sociological research on civil society—the social space existing between the state and the economy—indicates that patterns of voluntary organization and group-formation have changed significantly over time. In the United States, voluntary civic associations have moved from "membership to management" (Skocpol 2003). Large organizations which once brought Americans together across local communities, with common ideologies, thick collective identities, and democratic practices, have given way to lean, nationally-centered, and professionalized organizations, which relate to their members more as clients than as constituents. In the realm of politics and social movements, mass parties with large and democratically-empowered memberships were once powerful vehicles for expanding political and social citizenship in liberal democracies (Abbott and Guastella 2019). But mass-membership political parties never took root in the United States, and throughout Europe they have been in steep decline (Mair 2013; van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

However, the obituary for the democratic mass organization may have been written too soon. Since 2016, just such an organization has reemerged in the United States: the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). DSA has the formal structure of a mass-member, federated civic organization or mass party. The organization is built around a membership that pays dues and exercises democratic decision-making powers at both local and national levels. Between 2014 and 2021, DSA's membership grew

explosively from around 6,500 to 95,000, an increase of over 1300% (Schwartz 2017; DSA 2021b). Its local chapters and organizing committees have multiplied from around 20 in 2012 to over 320 today, spanning all 50 states, while organizational decision-making is conducted through representative processes similar to those once employed by federated membership organizations (DSA 2023a; YDSA 2023). DSA is the largest socialist political organization in the U.S. since the Communist Party's implosion in the mid-1950s (Schwartz 2017).¹⁴³

In addition to its organizational innovations, DSA has also made remarkable political inroads for an anticapitalist organization. It now claims over 100 elected officials as members, including five members of Congress (Dreier 2020), with socialist elected officials organized into over a dozen state legislative caucuses, and a "win rate" of 59% (DSA 2022).¹⁴⁴ Though not legally registered as such, DSA expresses certain features of political parties, such as candidate recruitment, fundraising, and competition on Democratic Party ballot lines, and the organization is formally committed to building a "party-like organization" that is "independent of the Democratic and Republican Parties" in the medium-term future (DSA 2023b). Official political education courses for members in DSA emphasize the importance of building a "mass organization," and the organization's rapid growth and confident aspirations have led observers in the

¹⁴³ Reliable membership figures for other U.S. socialist organizations are hard to come by, but one informed commentator estimates that the second-largest socialist organization is the Communist Party USA, thought to have around 8,000 members in 2021 (SocDoneLeft 2023).

¹⁴⁴ A dynamic list collecting information on DSA members holding elected office is available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Democratic_Socialists_of_America_public_officeholders.

mainstream media to describe DSA as representing a "true movement, and of some mass" (Tracy 2019). In addition, DSA seems to be part of a generational cohort of left-populist "movement parties" in Europe and Latin America, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and Morena in Mexico—and, more broadly, a movement "from protest to politics" on the left (Della Porta et al. 2017; Panitch and Gindin 2017; Temocin 2021). Theoretically, studying this case of mass social movement organization (SMO) revival also responds to a call among social movement scholars for a turn back towards the study of formal organizations, after a long period of emphasizing informal networks, institutions, and online activism (Soule 2014; Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021).

This article presents findings from three years of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in a large urban DSA chapter in the period 2018-21. First, I discuss empirical changes in the forms of civic and social movement organization and theories explaining these shifts. Second, I discuss the method and data of this ethnographic case study, which was carried out with the aim of producing "movement-relevant theory" (Bevington and Dixon 2005) for the democratic socialist movement and other social movements. Third, I present my empirical findings on the meaning and practice of membership in DSA. Three key ideas are discussed: DSA's "virtual-individual" pattern of membership recruitment, the division between "paper" and "activist-cadre" members,

and the unrealized structural potential of an intermediate, "effective but non-intensive" model of membership.

DSA, I argue, represents a departure from the modal forms of organization among American left social movements and in civil society more broadly. In its formal embrace of membership, a federated and constitutional structure, representative (not professional) leadership, and a self-funding model, DSA differs from managerial advocacy organizations and networked, horizontal movement organizations. However, my research indicates that, in practice, a layer of activist members tends to dominate chapter life. Until DSA organizers can institutionalize practices to accommodate less-intensive forms of member participation, DSA's aspirations to become a "mass organization" may go unrealized. Indeed, in 2022-2023 DSA has experienced a sharp decline in its membership to a current level of 57,000, making this problem an urgent one for its activist layer (zZz and K 2023). And yet, DSA's historic success in electing socialist politicians and raising the political profile of socialism may still encourage imitators in the larger organizational fields of left social movements and, perhaps, civil society more broadly.

The decline of mass-membership organizations in civic and political life

Why is it sociologically significant that DSA has emerged as a formal organization with a large membership, local-national linkages, and an emphasis on democratic decision-making? In short, because this kind of organization was once very important

for extending the interests of non-elite social groups, but has been in decline for generations. In the mid-twentieth century, groups which once involved millions of Americans in socially-thick and intensive forms of participation began transitioning "from membership to management," in Theda Skocpol's phrase (Skocpol 2003). These *classical mass organizations* were replaced by two different kinds of organization: professionalized, nationalized, and clientelist *advocacy groups*, and loosely-structured, localistic *horizontalist groups* of the radical left. A similar process of erosion and fragmentation has affected *mass parties*: political parties with large memberships, programmatic ideologies, and constituencies that are "externally-mobilized" from outside elite milieus (Abbott and Guastella 2019; Shefter 1994). Though mass parties have not historically been central to American politics, they were vital to achieving extensions in political and social citizenship in European countries. Over recent decades, they too have been in steep decline (Mair 2013; van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

In its structure and strategy, DSA resembles both civic mass-member voluntary organizations and mass parties—or, at least, comes much closer to resembling these forms of mass organization than other contemporary left-wing social movement organizations in the United States. In addition, as I show, intellectuals associated with DSA, and representatives of the organization itself, consciously seek to emulate the historic mass parties. Understanding these two related types of organization and what has happened to them is therefore important for understanding DSA's own significance

and pattern of development. In turn, DSA's successful renovation of the mass organization model could react back upon other social movements and civil society, encouraging other groups to adopt a similar form of organization.

From membership to management: The thinning of mass civic organizations

Prior to the 1960s, American civic life was dominated by a type of organization that involved millions of people in translocal networks of interaction, with frequent face-to-face meetings, distinctive rituals of solidarity, and democratic self-government. These organizations were both vertical and horizontal: their federal structure tied together local branches across an expanding nation, and a common set of cultural practices connected members laterally between cities, states, and regions. Beginning in the struggles for national independence and unity around the Revolutionary War, fraternal and voluntary associations like the Odd Fellows, Masons, and the American Temperance Society proliferated and modeled themselves on the new constitutional federalism of their country. New communication infrastructures supported by the federal state, especially the postal service, enabled "joiners" on the frontier to connect with national organizers. Overall, between 1810 and the 1990s, American organization-builders constructed 58 voluntary associations that enrolled 1% or more of U.S. adults as members (Skocpol 2003:27).¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ This figure excludes political parties and religious denominations. For associations that recruited members based on gender, 1% of the population of American adult men or women is the benchmark.

Skocpol and her colleagues find that, contrary to conventional wisdom that assumes civic organizations emerged from the "bottom-up" in thousands of small towns and cities, civic associations were nearly always founded by a core group of organizational leaders, then seeded "from above" as members diffused outwards with the expanding nation. America was indeed a "nation of joiners," in Arthur Schlesinger Sr.'s phrase, but it was led by a "nation of organizers" (Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000). Most major voluntary associations were founded before local chapters and the development of large memberships. This was so because this "translocal," federal model could simultaneously support "intimate solidarities" among local groups of war veterans, Shriners, and teetotalers and a national, extensive collective identity. Skocpol writes that "multiple tiered national federations were the key institutional supports of American voluntarism," because of their success in combining these intensive and extensive social identities (Skocpol 2003:89-97).

Membership in these organizations was intensive, ritualized, and emotional. Members attended frequent local meetings, accepted positions of responsibility as officers, and developed skills as speakers and organizers, record-keepers and facilitators. Though groups did sometimes offer instrumental benefits to their dues-paying members, like old-age insurance, Skocpol notes that "the appeal of America's most successful membership federations went far beyond individual economic calculation" (2003:84). The appeal of the largest federations was moral and

ideological—though their micro-scale benefits to social capital were also important (Putnam 2020).

Membership also frequently cut across class lines. These were "segmental" power organizations (Mann 2012) that bound together individuals across divisions of occupation, status, and, less often, religion and ethnicity (racially-integrated associations were very rare). But by and large, civic associations were not bourgeois-led organizations. Douglas Rae argues that "a majority of all civic organizations were headed by regular folks for whom high office was not the routine expectation in life" (quoted in Skocpol 2003:107). And though popular associationalism was hardly a guarantee of popular liberalism (Riley 2019), this historical phase of civil society genuinely did nurture the "great free schools" of democracy described by Alexis de Tocqueville (2003). For example, cross-denominational mass associations of Christian reformers were the institutional bases of temperance and abolitionism, the first national social movements in the United States (Young 2002).

This format of organization began declining steeply in the 1960s for multiple reasons, including the declining social acceptability of racial and gender segregation and the mass entry of women into the workforce. The organizations that emerged to replace traditional civic groups were nationally-centered (not translocal) nonprofit associations run by professionals. Groups like Common Cause, the National Organization for Women, and the Children's Defense Fund exploited new institutional levers to influence

public policy in Washington, D.C. Innovations in direct-mail solicitation allowed for the new advocacy organizations to interact with "members" solely as individuals—face-to-face meetings were less necessary for raising funds or making decisions.

Skocpol identifies the broad process as a withdrawal of elites: a rising professional-managerial class endowed with new techniques of strategic action had less need to mobilize ordinary people (Skocpol 2003:178). While some of these new "tertiary associations" retained formal memberships, the meaning of this membership was redefined away from face-to-face participation, democracy, and "thick" collective identity, and towards a desocialized, "thin" model of service provision, with members rendered more like clients. Matthew Painter and Pamela Paxton (2014) report declines between 1994 and 2004 in the percentages of voluntary association members who participate actively, and increases in the proportions of "checkbook members" who donate but never attend meetings.¹⁴⁶

How is this history relevant to understanding DSA? Though DSA enrolls far fewer members than the mass organizations profiled by Skocpol—currently, around 0.02% of

¹⁴⁶ The question of whether associational social capital (i.e. membership in formal organizations like civic, faith, or local community groups) is actually declining in quantitative terms has been contentious in the literature, owing in part to data limitations. The General Social Survey (GSS) stopped asking respondents about voluntary association participation in 2004. Using an alternative survey source, Weiss, Paxton, Velasco, and Ressler (2019) found that total associational social capital appeared to be stable, not declining, during the years 2008-2013. However, their data does not address qualitative changes in the meaning of this associational social capital, i.e. the shift from active to passive membership in civic associations found by Painter and Paxton (2014) for the years 1994-2004. For evidence pointing to declining overall U.S. social capital in the 21st century, see Putnam and Garrett (2021).

the American population, not 1%—its model of organization is unusual in how it departs from the professionalized advocacy model typical since the 1960s. Organizational policies are determined by representative-democratic institutions similar to those of classic voluntary groups with bylaws and constitutions. While there is a staff bureaucracy in the organization, it remains small in proportion to the growth in membership: just 32 full-time staffers in an organization with 95,000 members in 2021 (DSA 2021b). Local DSA chapters have autonomy to develop their own campaigns and strategies within parameters set by the national organization, and there is no professional board of directors supervening over elected leadership.

Antipathy towards the conventions and limitations of the nonprofit "third sector" is, of course, also a characteristic of more radical, "horizontalist" social movement organizations (Fong and Naschek 2021; den Hond, de Bakker, and Smith 2015; INCITE! 2017). However, DSA is also distinct from this latter type of organization. Like both classic voluntary associations and professional advocacy organizations, and unlike horizontal movement groups, DSA manages to retain both extensive coordination and intensive authority without sacrificing membership democracy. At least in the history of American civil society, DSA's closest analogue is probably the federated voluntary organization. However, in terms of ideology and aspiration, DSA is undoubtedly more inspired by a different kind of organization: the mass party.

Weapons of the working class: The mass party

In a recent review, Jared Abbott and Dustin Guastella define the mass party as an "externally-mobilized" political organization which differs in structure, ideology, strategy, and social base from "internally-mobilized" parties. The spatial metaphor is adapted from Martin Shefter and refers to the historic concentration of political power in the hands of old regime and bourgeois insiders in courts, legislatures, and capitols. As excluded outsiders, the working-class movements formed during the Industrial Revolution (as well as movements of national and religious minorities) found it necessary to, in Shefter's words, "bludgeon their way into the political system by mobilizing a mass constituency" (Abbott and Guastella 2019; Shefter 1994).

The nascent mass parties, located predominantly in European countries, lacked the economic resources for patronage or the connections to broker agreements with elites, and so were forced to involve ordinary people much more intensively, and find novel ways of binding them together in a common project. Most obviously, mass parties needed to substitute membership dues for donations from capitalists and agrarian elites, and the mobilizing labor of party members for the institutionalized electoral advantages of elites under conditions of limited suffrage. Beyond their dues obligations, members were socialized into a distinct identity as partisans and organization-builders—an identity which was reinforced by the "encapsulation" of party electorates in relatively homogeneous communities (Mair 2013:77-82). These parties were also compelled to develop party programs to hold candidates accountable and provide a means of assessing the performance of party leaders. The opportunistic drift

of politicians in office was checked by the need to maintain the mobilization machine of party members and preserve the party's identity in the electorate. Rather than being "catchall" parties, then, mass parties of political outsiders became ideological, centralized, and relatively democratic (Kirchheimer 1966).

The mass party was an effective structure for counteracting ruling-class efforts at conciliation and repression. Indeed, these parties, write Abbott and Guastella, were "the single greatest weapons the working class has ever produced" (2019:15). From the 1860s onwards, they played a key role in winning extensions in civil, political and, later, social citizenship, though these gains would not be stably institutionalized until after the Second World War (Eley 2002). The democratizing pressure of mass-movement parties forced significant concessions from elites and gave rise to what Mair calls the "golden age of party democracy" (2013:81). However, this "golden age" has now passed. Mair, along with his colleagues Ingrid van Biezen and Thomas Poguntke, argue that parties have been losing their capacity to effectively organize society and carry out democratic representation through party government. Their data show steep secular declines, beginning in the 1980s but accelerating dramatically in the 1990s, in electoral turnout, the consistency and stability of partisan preferences in the electorate, and, most dramatically, rates of party membership. As a general explanation of these trends, Mair points to the effect of economic globalization reducing the scope for state-directed

economic management, and the declining coherence of social "cleavage structures" over the neoliberal period (2013:55-59; cf. van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

These remarks apply mainly to European party systems. In the United States, a mass party of labor never cohered. Most explanations for this emphasize some combination of the deep ethnic and racial fragmentation of the American labor movement during the Second Industrial Revolution; intense state repression; the two-party bias created by plurality-voting, single-member electoral districts and a strong, nationally-elected presidency; and the strategic efforts of the Democratic Party in the New Deal-era to "articulate" a new constituency by incorporating key sectors of organized labor (Foner 1984; Mann 2012; Domhoff 2013; Eidlin 2016). The "safety valve" effect of the settler-colonial frontier also played a role (Grandin 2019). The effect has been to produce an American party system in which the two major parties are decentralized and internally-mobilized. The Democratic and Republican parties rely on donor funding, not dues, and their supporters are registered party voters, not members with rights and obligations. Both parties are dominated by their officeholders: party leaders are elected by other elected politicians, not rank-and-file supporters (Abbott and Guastella 2019:22-23). Finally, the two establishment parties are embedded more in the state than in civil society—what Katz and Mair call "cartel parties." Voters register as party supporters through government institutions, party primaries and internal officer

elections are regulated by the state, and state-regulated ballot access rules conspire against third parties (Katz and Mair 1995; Ackerman 2016).

How is the theory of the mass party relevant to DSA? First, DSA already bears some resemblance to the ideal-typical mass party sketched by Abbott and Guastella, and debate within the organization seems to be converging on the goal of forming an independent working-class party (Brower Brown and Reade 2023). The organization is externally-mobilized, having been founded in 1982 as a merger of two small left-wing networks of labor socialists and New Left activists, not elite insiders (Aronowitz 2010). Its resources are generated internally: in the first half of 2021, 89.6% of DSA's budget was funded through membership dues (DSA 2021b). Members are also endowed with formal democratic rights and are, to a degree, expected to participate in the organization's internal activities and culture. In comparison to the mainstream parties, DSA's formal structure is centralized and representative-democratic, with local chapter organizations electing delegates to a biennial convention that in turn constructs a national program and elects an executive to implement it.

The organization is ideological, not "catchall," with a universalistic political worldview of democratic socialism. DSA also embraces a mass-mobilization strategy, instead of an "inside" strategy that relies on elected officials or labor leaders to bargain with elites over policy. For instance, in 2019 the organization's national convention passed a resolution endorsing a "class-struggle elections" strategy, which directed DSA

candidates and elected officials to “see mobilizing and fighting alongside working people as one of their primary responsibilities... [and] [c]ommit to using their campaigns and elected offices to help build and unite socialist, union, and other worker organizations and militancy independent of candidates’ campaigns and of the Democratic Party” (DSA 2019). This same resolution also states that “in the longer term,” DSA aims to form an “independent working-class party,” a position reaffirmed at the organization's 2023 convention (DSA 2023b).

In both the voluntary mass organization described by Skocpol and the mass party described by Abbott and Guastella, the ability of members to self-organize, elect a representative leadership, and construct an intensive collective identity is necessary for the overall success of the organization. For the federated voluntary organization, this group solidarity is more an end than a means, while in the mass party it is a necessary step towards external political goals. For both types of SMO, however, the task of cultivating a self-conscious and committed mass membership is fundamental. But after decades of decline for mass movement organizations, what does membership mean today in an organization like DSA? This is the question addressed by the rest of this paper.

Data and methods

This research employs an ethnographic method involving participant observation in the field with a DSA chapter and in-depth interviews with DSA members. My ethnographic

approach consisted of 11 weeks of continuous participant observation fieldwork with the Portland, OR chapter of DSA in the summer of 2018. For three years after the conclusion of primary fieldwork, I continued to intermittently travel to Portland and conduct observations and interviews. My participant observation in Portland DSA during the intensive research period involved attending work meetings where campaigns would be planned and chapter business conducted; externally-oriented political events where DSA members would engage in a demonstration or direct action to accomplish some strategic goal; and social gatherings where members and interested newcomers would deepen personal relationships, as well as debate politics and strategy. Jottings were produced in the field and then elaborated as fieldnotes for later analysis using a grounded theory method (Charmaz 2014).

In total, I conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with chapter members.¹⁴⁷ Interview subjects were selected to help trace Portland DSA's history and structure as a supplement to my direct participant observation. For my interviews, I used a theoretic sampling method (Warren and Karner 2015), and sought out chapter members in leadership and cadre positions within the organization (often described by members as the chapter's "core"). These positions provided a vantage point from which to narrate a wide variety of chapter processes. They included, for example, developing the chapter's merchandise operation, organizing a "socialist day school" with DSA speakers, or

¹⁴⁷ For participant privacy, interviewees are identified by randomized initials.

carrying out a contentious revision of chapter bylaws at the end of the organization's first year.

Interviews with these core organizers helped me analytically reconstruct chapter processes that I may have missed as a direct participant-observer. By the time of my involvement in the summer of 2018, the chapter's division of labor was already highly varied (and growing rapidly), with at least 19 formal or quasi-formal subgroups to carry out different organizational functions, such as communications, fundraising, planning social events, and so on. My participation strategy was to attend as many of these different chapter happenings as possible, with site visits selected randomly by means of the chapter's online public event calendar. This gave me a wide-angle view of life in Portland DSA, but mostly prevented close involvement with any single group or program, which would have allowed me to follow its development over time. I compensated for this weakness with my process-tracing interview strategy, and also by following along with the activities of unfamiliar working groups and projects using the chapter's internal communications platform, Slack.

This research was conceived from the start as an exercise in producing "movement-relevant theory" (Bevington and Dixon 2005)—that is, to develop concepts from the categories and dilemmas articulated by movement participants themselves. The aim is to "[put] the thoughts and concerns of the movement participants at the center of the research agenda and [show] a commitment to producing accurate and

potentially useful information about the issues that are important to these activists" (ibid., 200). I am myself a member of DSA, and my participation in the organization's activities was (and is) a product of sincere commitment to DSA's program and ideas. This commitment, I feel, facilitated closer ethnographic engagement with DSA participants, but it also imposed a critical control on my theory-building: attachment to the success of a social movement should *incentivize* both accuracy in research and the willingness to criticize one's research subject, in the interest of solving real organizational and strategic problems within a movement. In Bevington and Dixon's words, "[t]his engagement not only informs the scholarship but also provides an accountability for theory that improves the quality of theory" (ibid, 190).

Case selection

Why choose Portland DSA? And can findings from this single-chapter case study be generalized to say something about DSA as a whole? I believe that they can. Case selection was determined first by research site accessibility: Portland DSA was the nearest large DSA chapter to my university. While DSA chapters vary widely in size and some do exist in rural areas, I wanted to examine a large urban DSA chapter because DSA has had its greatest political impact in major cities like New York City, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Portland DSA was also one of the largest chapters formed during the period of DSA's explosive growth from 2016-2020. Prior to 2016, active DSA chapters existed in only a handful of large cities: Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago, Washington D.C., and

Philadelphia. In late 2016 and 2017, spurred by the moral shock of Donald Trump's election as president, a wave of new chapters were founded across the country, and by the end of 2017 there were already around 300 local groups (Heyward 2017). In addition to being a large urban chapter, Portland DSA struck me as a clear case of the "new DSA" (Meyer 2019) because it was founded in this new wave, and lacked a consolidated "old guard" of pre-2016 DSA members. At the end of its first year in December 2017, Portland DSA had around 800 members. In 2023, the chapter had around 1,700 members, making it the sixth largest DSA chapter in the country.

How did the sociology of that new chapter compare to that of the organization as a whole? Fortunately, some quantitative data exists to answer this question. Four nationwide membership surveys have been conducted in DSA's history, in 1991, 2013, 2017, and 2021 (DSA 2021a). These surveys asked respondents questions about demographics, engagement with DSA, and their ideological identity and issue priorities. Taken together, the surveys capture the dramatic social and political transformation in the organization that occurred in the second half of the 2010s. A similar survey, billed as a "chapter census," was conducted in Portland DSA in 2019, one year after my period of active fieldwork (Portland DSA 2019).¹⁴⁸ Comparing these surveys indicates that the Portland DSA membership in 2019 was basically similar in its social and political

¹⁴⁸ The 2017 survey had a response rate of 3,240 DSA members, or 16% of the 20,000 DSA members at that time. The 2019 Portland DSA survey received responses from 428 members, or 29% of the ~1,475 chapter members. The 2021 survey, conducted at DSA's membership peak, received 12,971 responses for a response rate of 14% of the 95,000 members at that time. Data from these surveys are available upon request to the author.

formation to the larger national membership in 2017 and 2021. The average Portland DSA member, like the average DSA member, was a white, male, young professional with an annual household income of around \$70,000, whose issue priorities were climate change, health care reform, solidarity with workers, and racial justice.

A plurality (42%) of Portland DSA respondents were between the ages 25-34, while the median age of all DSA respondents in both 2017 and 2021 was 33. Nine in ten Portland DSA respondents were white; in DSA in 2021, 85% of respondents were white. 67% of Portland respondents were male, compared to 75% (2017) and 64% (2021) of DSA respondents.¹⁴⁹ A plurality of Portland DSA respondents (26%) had household income between \$25,000-\$50,000, while a plurality of DSA respondents (35%) in 2021 reported household incomes between \$20,000-\$60,000. The Portland survey did not ask about educational attainment, but in 2021 41% of DSA members had a bachelor's degree, and 35% had a masters or doctoral degree. 21% of DSA respondents in 2021 were union members, while 22% of Portland members were employed in a unionized workplace.

Politically, Portland members reflected the priorities of the national membership, prioritizing (in descending order) ecology, healthcare, labor solidarity, and racial justice. In 2021, all DSA members reported prioritizing the same set of issues in the same order.

¹⁴⁹ The skewed gender ratio in DSA precedes its 2016 "rebirth": 76% of members in 2013 and 70% in 1991 were male. Note that the overall figures obscure significant recent growth in LGBTQIA+ membership, from 18% in 2017 to 32% in 2021. Between 40-55% of DSA members under the age of 30 self-identify as LGBTQIA+.

In terms of engagement, 66% of Portland DSA respondents reported being "active," and 40% of respondents spent three or more hours per week engaged in DSA activities. 66% of DSA respondents in 2021 reported that they "had attended a DSA meeting or engaged in DSA activism," while similar proportions of Portland DSA members (14.9%) and all DSA members (13%) reported never attending DSA meetings (of course, inactive "paper members" were underrepresented in all of these surveys). Taken together, these figures indicate a basic similarity of background, outlook, and engagement between Portland DSA members and the overall population of DSA members in the years 2017-2021, and provide a basis for making some measured generalizations about the organization as a whole.¹⁵⁰

Empirical findings and discussion: The meaning of membership in a DSA chapter

In this section, I present empirical findings on DSA and interpret these data. Here, I concentrate on the meaning of membership. I find that membership in the organization is bifurcated in a *participation fork*. One group, the *paper membership*, includes approximately 75% of chapter members, and is defined by its lack of participation in internal chapter work, its atomization (the lack of connective networks between individual "paper" members), and its invisibility to a second, smaller group of activists. This second group, which I term the *activist-cadre*, meanwhile, carries on most of the

¹⁵⁰ The interviews with DSA members presented in Freeman (2019) paint a broadly similar picture of the social and political base of the organization.

labor of organizational reproduction through a *voluntarist* method of action. I discuss structural, political, and cultural forces in DSA that may contribute to the phenomenon of participation inequality. Then, I discuss a possible solution: a latent structural potential of DSA to sustain an *effective but non-intensive* form of membership, which I argue has been unavailable in advocacy and horizontalist-type movement organizations of the recent past.

The participation fork: Paper and activist-cadre

Membership in DSA comes in two basic varieties: "paper" and "activist-cadre." The great majority of DSA's explosive membership growth has been of the first type. Painter and Paxton (2014) report increases in the share of "checkbook" members in American voluntary associations—members who pay dues or donations, but do not involve themselves directly in face-to-face settings with other members.¹⁵¹ Active DSA members use a similar term for this population: "paper members." Though members report different feelings about the term "paper membership," its basic meaning is widely understood: paper members are individuals who pay dues to the organization, appear on local membership rolls dispatched to DSA chapters by the national office, and receive communications from both the national office and their local chapter affiliate, but who do not appear at DSA events. In particular, paper members do not attend internal

¹⁵¹ Painter and Paxton note that "the increase in checkbook memberships is smaller than the decline in active memberships," implying that tertiary associations have not succeeded in replacing active memberships even in quantitative terms (2014:421).

gatherings where chapter policies are discussed and work is organized. They are, by definition, not present.

The proportions of the activist and paper membership layers in Portland DSA can be determined by looking at rates of participation at general membership meetings and usage statistics for the chapter's internal communications platform, Slack. The monthly general meetings are the decision-making assemblies for Portland DSA, and the "internal" events that draw the largest number of chapter members ("external" political events—a protest, door-canvassing event, etc.—may on occasion draw larger numbers). However, attendance at general meetings has rarely included more than 10% of total membership. Similarly, on Slack, active users on the platform (those who log onto the system at least once a week) only slightly exceed the monthly averages for general meeting attendance, and are again dwarfed by the overall membership figures. The graph below, shared with me by Portland DSA's Membership Working Group, shows the overall pattern between 2017 and 2020 (Fig. 5).¹⁵²

¹⁵² Portland DSA, 2019. "PDX DSA Census report." Available upon request to the author.

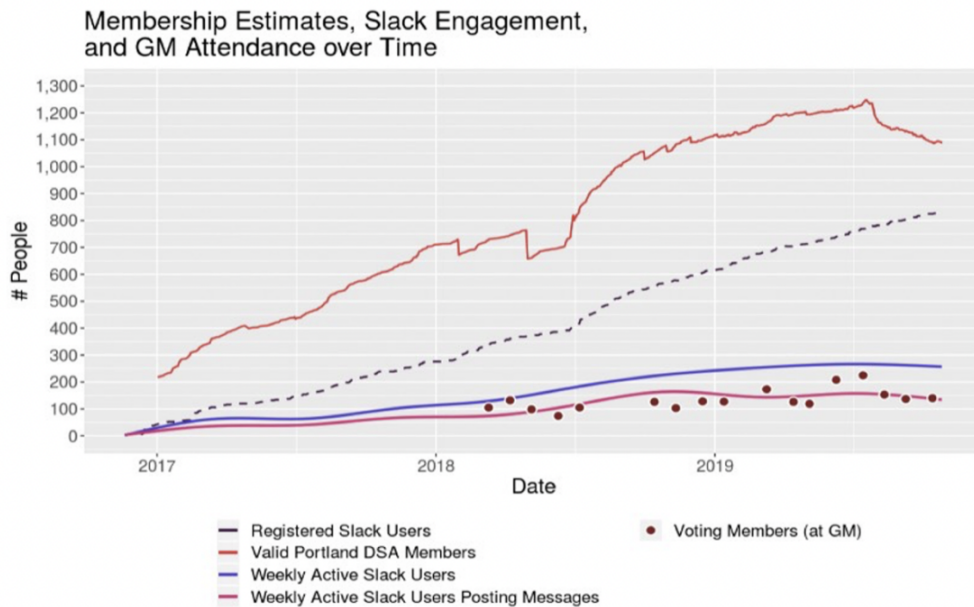


Fig. 1: Membership, Slack usage, and GM attendance

Fig. 5. Portland DSA membership trends, 2017-2020.

My participant-observation experiences support the overall trends shown in this data. External political events, internal meetings for decision-making and strategizing, and social events for building camaraderie are all disproportionately places for a core of activist members. While nearly every meeting would feature some quantity of new recruits—at each monthly general chapter meeting during my period of observation, never less than one-fifth of the 100-150 attendees were new or first-time participants (and sometimes as high as one-half)—overall rates of participation were still always much lower than the on-paper membership. In addition, the high proportion of inactive

members seems related to problems in retaining members from year-to-year. In late 2019, the chapter had an annual member retention rate of around 67%.

This gap in participation is a puzzle. In both its formal structure and aspirations, DSA resembles the mass organizations of the early 20th century, and the politics of socialism has traditionally been associated with very strong intensive identities and high levels of commitment.¹⁵³ But the participation pattern among DSA members is more similar to the disembedded advocacy organizations described by Skocpol and Robert Putnam. What can explain this participation fork, by which some members recruited to the organization follow a path of intensive involvement, and others of diffused, passive membership?

"What are we not providing?": Explaining the participation fork

One highly-involved DSA member, PM, spent three years in the chapter organizing a system to manage membership data and on-board new members. She describes the work of the chapter's membership team as "primarily [revolving] around new people who are sort-of regularly visible people"—those who attend meetings and can, therefore, receive membership services: being credentialed as voters, connected to particular areas of internal chapter work, introduced to social gatherings, and so on. PM's mention of "visibility" points to a key dilemma for volunteer organizers in the chapter: those who aren't visible are far more difficult to reach, and because they are difficult to reach, it is

¹⁵³ See, for example, Gornick (2020).

difficult to know much about this population. PM comments that "because they're inactive, it's really hard to figure out why they're inactive."

A mid-2019 survey of chapter membership attempted to gather data on this population, and was initially branded as a "census" intended to reach every member—around 1,250 people at the time. Unfortunately, the "census" only elicited 423 responses. The paper membership remained opaque, and organizers interested in nurturing more participation remained frustrated. Reflecting on the issue, PM remarks that "it's definitely on us [chapter organizers]. Like, what are we doing wrong? You know, what are we not providing?" Nevertheless, PM's close involvement with the chapter and familiarity with the membership rolls gives her some leverage to make inferences about these invisible socialists. She notes that the term is a "shorthand" that actually refers to three groups, who, she thinks, are each "on paper" for different reasons:

PM: [T]hose are three categories, right? The people who don't want to be involved, but want to support us [1], the people who do want to be involved, but can't figure out how [2], the people who were involved but you know, things have shifted, and either their life has changed, or perhaps DSA has changed, and they don't want to be, or their perception of DSA has changed and they don't want to be involved anymore. Or they're just taking a break. [3]

How should this phenomenon of participation inequality be explained?

Researchers have long observed a relationship between movement mobilization and political opportunities (McAdam 1999). My research indicates that the quantity and

quality of DSA's membership involvement is influenced strongly by external events. Since 2015, DSA's growth has been consistently associated with political events outside of the organization's direct control. In his study of DSA, Nathan J. Robinson (2022:224) notes that "national politics heavily drive local recruitment." In Portland DSA, surges of overall membership growth connected to national political events would yield predictable increases in rates of participation for both external chapter campaigns and internal administrative labor and predictable decreases in participation after the galvanizing moment had passed (Fig. 6). For example, a large spike in membership occurred in summer 2018, when the surprising primary victories of Rashida Tlaib in Michigan and, especially, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York put DSA members into Congress for the first time since the 1990s. This unanticipated surge wasn't limited to Portland: national DSA membership increased from around 30,000 in October 2017 to 40,000, just after Ocasio-Cortez's primary victory on June 26, 2018 (DSA 2017; Resnick 2018). Only two weeks later, national membership had leaped up to 45,000 (DSA 2018).

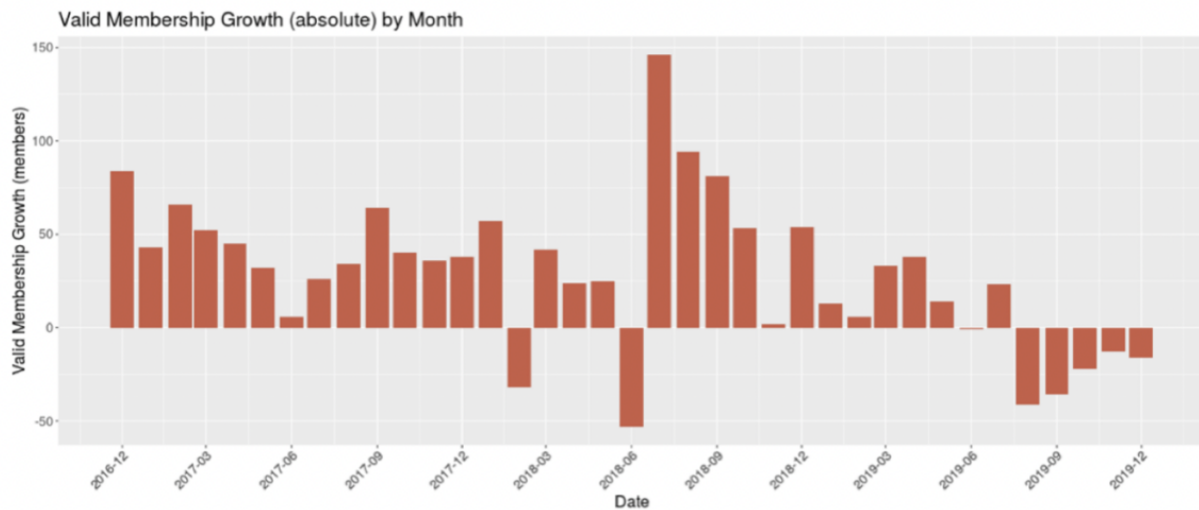


Fig. 6. Portland DSA membership growth rates by month, 2017-2020.

This is a general structural dynamic affecting any movement organization. However, in the case of DSA, some additional, non-structural factors may help explain the paper membership issue. The first is political. Antonio Gramsci wrote of party members criticizing their leaders "'realistically', by dispersing or remaining passive before certain initiatives" (1971:150-51). Viewed this way, mass disengagement may be a kind of uncoordinated vote of disapproval at the actions of organizational leaders. Rather than a technical problem, of too few opportunities to "plug-in" or too few mentors for new recruits, the issue may be that paper members perceive political differences between themselves and activists, but lack collective organization to contest their leadership.

This may have been the case in Portland DSA in winter 2021, when a reform slate of candidates promising changes to the chapter's political direction won a plurality of seats on the chapter's leadership committee in an unusually high-turnout general meeting—perhaps the largest in the organization's history, according to PM. Significantly, this group's strategy involved targeting members in the second and third categories of paper member: those who "do want to be involved, but can't figure out how," and disillusioned individuals who were once involved, but whose "perception of DSA has changed." The incumbent faction in the election, by contrast, seemed to rely on its superior networking within the activist core. By politicizing the issue of participation hierarchy, the opposition group was able to win a (partial) mandate to "build a mass movement" through "widespread participation in campaigns," according to its election platform.

The second relates to the particular form that recruitment takes in DSA. Supporters become DSA members through a process that is virtual, taking place online, not through face-to-face interactions, and individual, taking the form of a decision made by a single person filling out a form. This is different from "bloc recruitment," in which pre-structured networks of people are brought as a collective unit into a social movement organization (Tilly 1978). From its inception, Portland DSA has attracted members in ones and twos. At the first meeting of the organization, on November 19,

2016, 18 people attended, but "everyone at that meeting were strangers, basically, except for like three people," according to one attendee, SC.

The role of networks, especially those formed through face-to-face interactions, is understood by DSA organizers. A recent national training call conducted by the organization emphasized the distinction between "structure-based" and "self-selecting" organizations, and the staff leaders of this call were candid with the fact that DSA is a self-selecting organization that relies on recruits pushing their way in, rather than joining through networks.¹⁵⁴ The absence of pre-structured networks of interaction between members means that the organization itself is the primary site through which membership networks can develop. Face-to-face mobilization ties cannot be formed for members who never set foot in the social space of DSA. Direct mobilization ties also seem more likely to increase new recruits' ambitions. One interviewee who had joined through the "virtual-individual" pathway explained that he had joined DSA simply to feel that the organization had grown: "I just want[ed] to be one more number to add to that list" [of members].

The third factor affecting participation is cultural, and seems specific to a period in which civil society and social movements have been dominated by two competing logics of organization: "advocacy" and "horizontalism." The first is best represented by nationally-centered nonprofit lobbying groups with extensive bases of supporters who

¹⁵⁴ The distinction between "structure-based" and "self-selecting" organization is drawn from McAlevey (2016).

give regular dues but usually possess few means of participating more actively or influencing the policies of the organization. The second is exemplified by loose associations that come together during protest movements and are structured mainly as networks, not formal organizations with clear boundaries and leaderships (Kauffman 2017; Tufekci 2017). Participation in these latter groups is often very intensive, with status and authority allocated on the basis of commitment. For the first type of organization, membership is *clientelistic*, and for the second, it is *voluntaristic*. DSA's novelty lies in the way that it combines in one structure the politics of an antisystemic movement association with the mass base of supporters characteristic of advocacy nonprofits.

But despite the formal conjunction of these elements in DSA, ideas about the meaning of membership seem mostly to remain in the advocacy/spontaneist binary. This is apparent in the responses my informants gave when asked about how the participation issue could be ameliorated. Most often, the answer is to find better ways to turn paper members into activists. PM, after narrating to me the process of "mobilizing" a new member, accepted that the idea of mobilization was to produce a member regularly engaged in the internal meeting labor of activists:

David: And so the people who are, let's say, effectively mobilized, maybe they get a phone call—I guess the idea then is that they then become a regular sort of, like attendee of a meeting, of a particular working group or campaign, and then they're contributing to that work in that way.

PM: I mean, that would be what we hope.

Frequently, the figure of the "organizer" is offered as an alternative to producing activists. Another informant, EV—a fierce critic of what he calls "activist-ism"—suggests that DSA insiders should seek "to get [paper members] activated, like, as *organizers*... that is our duty" (emphasis added). This may not be an effective alternative for paper members, however. The "organizer" role may differ from the activist role in its method of building power—by developing the motivations and capacities of ordinary people, rather than by mobilizing the most committed volunteers (Han 2014)—but it is not necessarily different in the demands it makes on an individual's time, intensity of involvement, specialized knowledge, and so on.

I refer to the "organizers" described by EV as an "activist-cadre." These members are the visible face of DSA. They are individuals who, voluntarily and without the aid of very many preexisting organizational "structures of socialization," participate intensively in the life of the organization. They are "activists" because they devote a large part of their free-time and energy into building DSA and carrying out its activities, and fuse their identities and personal networks into those of the organization. And they are "cadre" because they are, in a way unlike activists in most new social movements, "framed" into the functional scaffolding of a structured organization (in French, *encadrement*). But despite being formally framed into a division of labor, the actions and strategies of these members are mostly "voluntaristic"; for the most part, they are

not determined by organizational inducements or sanctions, though some of these inducements and sanctions do exist. This activist-cadre is larger and expresses a more developed division of labor than that which could be supported by looser, network-type movement associations, but their methods remain characteristic of activism.

One interviewee, JX, describes the activist-cadre method of organization as a kind of "voluntarism." JX was an early chapter joiner, and very early in 2017 he attended a general chapter meeting. There, he was "struck by the fact that there appeared to be nothing for new members to do. So I was like, 'okay [claps for emphasis], I can solve this problem.' So, basically by myself, [I] went and started a canvassing program for single-payer healthcare." It was a relatively successful program, according to JX, but it was driven by the energy of a few volunteers like him, not by any decisions or sanctions coming from the organization:

JX: During that entire process, the leadership never asked me about what I was doing, or the decisions that I was making. I was basically figuring things out on the fly. I only ever had to justify myself to the chapter once, at a general meeting. And my motion to start a campaign passed unanimously, basically.

After leaving the chapter for a year and then returning again, he began to realize that "it seemed like everything else that the chapter had done kind of followed the same model," where volunteers drive a particular project or campaign that is never "explained or justified to the membership how that [campaign] fit[s] into any broader strategy."

My data support JX's claim: chapter projects and campaigns are rarely initiated by organizational leadership and ratified democratically by the membership. Instead, they are usually begun through the self-directed effort of a few intensively-involved members, who develop a project, gather a group of supporters around themselves, and then simply begin doing the work under the banner of Portland DSA. Another member, FS, who was at the time a co-chair of the chapter's Membership Working Group, describes the effect of the "voluntarism" identified by JX on the structure of the organization. In his opinion, voluntarism contributes to a conception of DSA as an "activist hub," a place where members share their autonomously-initiated projects with each other and try to recruit support for them. This produces an eclectic organization—FS calls it "scattered"—with little centralized identity. FS instead favors what he calls an "organizing model" that involves building chapter capacities: "anything that is not in the service of growing the chapter and its influence and resources should be deprioritized."

Effective but non-intensive membership

The voluntarist model of organization plausibly contributes to the participation fork issue. The structural reliance on voluntarism in DSA means that ordinary members without the capacity to commit intensively will feel disempowered. But DSA's configuration as a (proto-) mass movement organization, I believe, makes possible a third type of membership, what might be called "effective but non-intensive"

membership. Effective but non-intensive membership would entail conversion of the dichotomous paper member/activist-cadre participation structure into a smoother, gradational pattern, with a substantially larger layer of intermediate participants between the paper membership and activist-cadre. These moderately-engaged members would be defined more by their *possession of organizational skill* than by their actual level of involvement. Though they may not be consistently present in internal work, these members would have the practical knowledge necessary to monitor the activist-cadre and understand factional disputes. This bloc would be most visible in the organization as rank-and-file volunteers for external campaigns, and as an informed and self-confident electorate in chapter democracy.

There are, I believe, three missing conditions for activating this structural potential in a contemporary mass movement organization: (1) effective and visible political tendencies within the organization; (2) internal media, bulletins, and communications to explain intra-organizational processes and politics; and (3) consistent, structured external political campaigns that provide meaningful but *limited* involvement for rank-and-file members. First, the DSA experience shows the importance for mass organizations of visible, stable political formations rooted inside the structure of the larger organization. DSA has now passed beyond a threshold of size in which political divisions (and organizational processes) are difficult to comprehend for any individual member, even one in the activist-cadre. Observers of intra-DSA politics have noted that this is true for the national organization (Sernatinger 2021), but

it now also seems to be a reality in larger urban chapters (Portland DSA now has around 1,700 members). Mass organizations seeking to involve their rank-and-file members need to ensure that those members can form and participate in defined caucuses, which can clarify the stakes of conflict and articulate clear programs.

Second, and related, effective but non-intensive members can only become "informed citizens" in a mass organization by means of centralized, accessible media to report on happenings in the organization. In DSA, activist-cadre can learn about developments in the organization firsthand from members initiating new organizational or political projects, or they can use their superior networking in the online "socialist public sphere" on Twitter, but these channels are not accessible to less active members (Barnes 2020). News of political developments in DSA can be gleaned from Twitter, but only by following the right accounts—a time-consuming and opaque process. Mass movement organizations of the past frequently had a robust set of internal publications that could meet this need. Some of these media do exist for DSA, but are fragmented across many communication networks (e.g. DSA's official website, its two in-house publications, an internal DSA web-forum, and various caucus and chapter-based publications). Future mass organizations could provide resources for a range of internal media to support an informed membership base.

Third, effective but non-intensive members need regular, structured external political campaigns that they can participate in. The key characteristic of this form of

participation is that it does not involve the mundane (though very important) "infrastructural" labor of attending meetings, preparing lists of contacts, and concentrating resources. In DSA, this kind of work, which is the specialty of the activist-cadre layer, can be discouraging for new members who are most interested in making a concrete difference in the world outside DSA. The best kind of work for involving new members sustainably seems to be tasks like phone-banking, canvassing, and solidarity protests, with clear on-site leadership, instructions, and time-windows. Mass organizations need to offer a range of continuous and low-intensity forms of participation that can involve non-activist members, and help them feel collective self-efficacy *as* members.

The case of DSA shows the importance of ensuring the rights of internal tendencies and caucuses, supporting intra-organizational media and communications infrastructures, and establishing routine, low-intensity forms of participation for members. By institutionalizing these practices, nascent mass movement organizations can nurture a role for "effective but non-intensive" membership, and break free of both the top-down advocacy model and the horizontal network model of social movement organization.

Conclusion: From management to membership?

This paper has applied arguments about changing patterns of civic and political organization to analyze the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America. DSA, I argue, is potentially reinventing the mass organization model for social movements in the United States. It is similar in certain respects to both mass-member voluntary organizations in American civic life and the mass parties of European social democracy. However, participant observation and interviews in a DSA chapter qualify this comparison. Though it incorporates a larger and more active membership than many left-leaning advocacy organizations, and sustains a more even pattern of participation than "horizontalist" movement organizations, the meaning of membership in DSA doesn't match up to the mass organizations of the early 20th century.

Membership in DSA bifurcates in a participation fork between a small core of intensively-involved activist-cadre and a much larger group of paper members. I discussed structural, political, and cultural reasons why this may be the case. Then, I theorized an intermediate type of membership, which is potentially available but not realized in practice: the effective but non-intensive member, who does not involve themselves with infrastructural work but still possesses enough organizational skill to participate in democratic processes and feel emotionally attached to the organization. Finally, I discussed some necessary preconditions for creating this intermediate type of membership, which I argue will itself be a precondition for sustainably reinventing the mass organization model.

This work could be extended in several ways. Future research could try to examine the meaning of DSA membership for paper members themselves. Comparative-historical research could also examine how "self-selecting" movement organizations become "structure-based" over time through processes of bloc recruitment, encapsulation, and political articulation, and how these processes may or may not be applicable to DSA (Mair 2013; Eidlin 2016; McAlevey 2016). Finally, research could explore whether and how DSA's re-formation as a mass organization spreads to other groups in a process of mimetic isomorphism (Powell and DiMaggio 1983). While DSA's larger base of members has given it a mobilization edge that contributes to its political successes, the organization's democratic socialist ideology and identification with the working class may make it difficult or impossible for established advocacy-type organizations to adopt its practices. In particular, DSA's ideological subordination of a professional staff to an empowered membership may be simply unacceptable for organization-builders in the professional class. If this is the case, DSA's partial advance from "management to membership" may remain unique in the landscape of American civic and political organizations.

APPENDIX B: SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL FOR CHAPTER III

List of mainstream sociology journal articles on socialism, 01/01/2013 - 04/01/2025 (by date)

1. Kristal, Tali. 2013. "Slicing the Pie: State Policy, Class Organization, Class Integration, and Labor's Share of Israeli National Income." *Social Problems* 60(1):100-127. doi: 10.1525/sp.2013.60.1.100.
2. Ono, Hiroshi, and Kristen Schultz Lee. 2013. "Welfare States and the Redistribution of Happiness." *Social Forces* 92(2):789-814. doi: 10.1093/sf/sot094.
3. Shriver, Thomas, Alison Adams, and Rachel Einwohner. 2013. "Motherhood and Opportunities for Activism Before and After the Czech Velvet Revolution." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 18(3):267-88. doi: 10.17813/mai.18.3.t272388n60470456.
4. Wright, Erik Olin. 2013. "Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias." *American Sociological Review* 78(1):1-25. doi: 10.1177/0003122412468882.
5. Xu, Xiaohong. 2013. "Belonging Before Believing: Group Ethos and Bloc Recruitment in the Making of Chinese Communism." *American Sociological Review* 78(5):773-96. doi: 10.1177/0003122413500784.
6. Chauvel, Louis, and Martin Schröder. 2014. "Generational Inequalities and Welfare Regimes." *Social Forces* 92(4):1259-83. doi: 10.1093/sf/sot156.
7. Osinsky, Pavel, and Jari Eloranta. 2014. "Why Did the Communists Win or Lose? A Comparative Analysis of the Revolutionary Civil Wars in Russia, Finland, Spain, and China." *Sociological Forum* 29(2):318-41. doi: 10.1111/socf.12086.
8. O'Connor, Francis Patrick, and Leonidas Oikonomakis. 2015. "Preconflict Mobilization Strategies and Urban-Rural Transition: The Cases of the PKK and the FLN/EZLN*." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 20(3):379-99. doi: 10.17813/1086-671X-20-3-379.
9. Twenge, Jean M., Nathan T. Carter, and W. Keith Campbell. 2015. "Time Period, Generational, and Age Differences in Tolerance for Controversial Beliefs and Lifestyles in the United States, 1972–2012." *Social Forces* 94(1):379-99. doi: 10.1093/sf/sovo50.
10. Walder, Andrew G., Andrew Isaacson, and Qinglian Lu. 2015. "After State Socialism: The Political Origins of Transitional Recessions." *American Sociological Review* 80(2):444-468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122414568649/>
11. Eidlin, Barry. 2016. "Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States? Political Articulation and the Canadian Comparison, 1932 to 1948." *American Sociological Review* 81(3):488-516. doi: 10.1177/0003122416643758.
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