

Perspectives on the DSA Convention

July 10, 2021



Editorial note: *We will be publishing further commentary and other perspectives on the Democratic Socialists of America on our website, both before and after the organization's online national convention at the beginning of August.*

The 2021 Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) Convention, scheduled to take place online from August 1 to 8, will be the third convention since the organization's rebirth and massive growth in 2016. (Revealingly, between 2013 and 2017 the median age of DSA membership dropped from 68 to 33.)¹ After a year that has seen the COVID-19 pandemic, a presidential election, and a national uprising against racism, what's at stake at this convention? I'll give a little history and context, and then lay out my perspective on several important dynamics.

The Ghost of Conventions Past

A first convention in 2017 had the enthusiasm of a group of people finding each other—delegates at that time refashioned parts of the organization that were unsuitable to the emerging new socialists, voting to leave the Socialist International, ending the positions of honorary chairs, and embracing Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) tactics in support of Palestinian liberation.

In 2019, two issues framed the convention: the centralization-versus-decentralization conflict around the distribution of DSA resources and role of the national organization, and DSA's relationship to elections. For the former, the result was status quo. Most of the organizational changes that made it to the convention were either voted down or shelved – the bulk of bylaw changes to the structure of DSA were placed at the end of the convention agenda and were not heard for lack of time. (Thirteen proposals for bylaw/constitution changes were “referred” and never taken up.) The most polarizing issue was over distribution of funds in a proposal that would give a flat stipend to every chapter regardless of size (“Pass the Hat”), which split the delegates but ultimately failed.

Electurally, the new experiences with socialist electoral campaigns, particularly the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the so-called Squad to the U.S. House of Representatives, left a lot of questions about how DSA should position itself toward electoral campaigns, and its vision for political parties. The convention passed two resolutions that gave political direction: R15, stating that the DSA would not endorse any Democrat other than Bernie Sanders in the 2020 election; and

R31, “Class Struggle Elections,” framing how socialists should relate to elections in the here and now while affirming the intention to build an independent workers’ party. Importantly, R31 abstained from setting hard limits or introducing binding criteria at either the chapter or national organizational level.

A Different Political Conjuncture

Things are different today than they were at the last two conventions. The organization is nearly five times at large as it was in 2017. DSA has “matured,” with an established operation and a “DSA way of doing things” that’s identifiable in its own right.

The backdrop for the last two DSA conventions was resistance to Donald Trump and the anticipation of a second Sanders campaign. The “big tent” in DSA could coexist in light of broad agreements on the importance of the Trump moment and the Sanders campaign. The particulars of those agreements have been in constant negotiation, but at the end of the day, socialists in DSA could belong to the same organization because there was a kind of external regulation that helped it come together. In 2021, that is gone: Trump is no longer president. Sanders lost. In the Biden era, what is DSA?

Politically, that is *the* question of the 2021 DSA Convention. Until now, DSA has operated in a context where Republicans dominated the federal government and activists took a largely defensive posture, rejecting the political agenda coming down from the top. In a peculiar way, that was a favorable set of circumstances for the formation of a young socialist organization because the lure of reform and “power” was largely absent. Now, with Joe Biden in office—rejecting any move to defund police, dangling a few carrots, and with the general support of the new left electeds like Ocasio-Cortez—all of these questions about the Democratic Party and the capitalist state are very much alive.

There is now enough history to start evaluating the performance of politicians in DSA’s orbit, the method of campaigning used by DSA chapters, and progress made on developing independent institutions. It’s just that there isn’t a consensus on how DSA members think that’s shaken out. This plays out in a few arenas: what standards DSA uses to endorse candidates, who has to abide by them (only those candidates who want a national endorsement, or local ones too?), and what our general perspective is toward the Democratic Party.

On this last question, there’s been a shift in DSA’s theoretical leanings—or at least, those of its leadership and functionaries.² The “dirty break”³ seemed to hit its high-water mark at the beginning of 2020, and many of its advocates are now walking back their positions,⁴ or even embracing lesser-evilism.⁵ The revisions have led to an indefinite deferral of the question of the break, if not outright hostility.⁶ The Bread and Roses caucus, which was the major proponent of the dirty break, now largely seems to agree with its previous opponents in the Collective Power Network caucus about what practical activity looks like—namely, in the Democratic Party for the foreseeable future. It’s a significant political shift, largely tied to the new conjuncture.

The question of purpose isn’t limited to electoral politics and the Democrats. In the summer of 2020, the largest sustained protest movement in U.S. history arose following the police murder of George Floyd. Millions of people participated in multiracial protests in nearly every city in the country, as well as many small towns. How does this influence DSA’s political and strategic priorities? Many delegates have been quick to distinguish themselves as pro-Black Lives Matter in response to the prevalence of a kind of “class first” reductionism, but there are relatively few resolutions that raise the question. It’s likely that at least one of the three resolutions advanced (reparations, prison abolition, multiracial organizing) will pass, though it’s less clear how that will shape a *strategic* view

about what to prioritize and a theory of change.

A last question concerns the politics of anti-imperialism in DSA. DSA's politics historically followed social democratic leanings of founding member Michael Harrington: namely, anti-communist opposition to state socialist projects. New DSA members rejected such a conservative approach, but there's been a tense battle over direction in DSA's International Committee. The IC was rehabilitated beginning in 2019, with members added by application and appointment. Two questions are being brought to the 2021 convention: (1) that of the structure and democratic functioning of the IC; and (2) that of DSA's internationalist orientation, generally "campist" or "anti-campist", referring to alignment with perceived geopolitical "camps".⁷ This pertains to DSA's view and *organizational relationships* with Latin American "Pink Tide" governments, along with Cuba and Venezuela, and whether or not the organization views China as socialist or as leading an "anti-imperialist" block. Six proposed resolutions address these issues, twice as many as there are resolutions about Black Lives Matter. This would suggest that there's more at stake here than meets the eye.

Caucuses

There's no way to talk about DSA's internal politics without discussing caucuses. Caucuses existed in an infant form in 2017, with the Praxis and Momentum slates, but really established themselves in 2019 in advance of that year's convention: Bread and Roses (B&R), Collective Power Network (CPN), Socialist Majority Caucus (SMC), and Libertarian Socialist Caucus (LSC). Caucuses generally comprise dozens or hundreds of members, and don't come close to representing a plurality of the organization. And yet, caucuses dominate politics in DSA.⁸ How do we make sense of them?

On their own terms, caucuses are said to be political organizations within DSA, uniting members with similar politics and, according to them, raising the level of debate and education in the entire organization. In 2021, this conception appears an idealized one, given that we find the big three caucuses (B&R, CPN, SMC) agreeing with each other on major organizational and strategic questions and proposing multiple joint resolutions to the convention.

Over the last five years, DSA has grown faster than its supporting infrastructure. For members joining the organization who wanted to navigate DSA locally and especially nationally, caucuses stepped in as mediating organizations. Caucuses have access to information and connections in the organization that can expedite initiatives and guide others who share their sensibilities. This in itself isn't a bad thing. But it poses a problem when this access becomes exclusive and leveraged over those who are not members of caucuses. In the case of the big three, all of them had significant connections to leverage: CPN and SMC were both founded by former DSA national staff members. B&R leaders had a history as DSA members prior to the big bump in 2016, with many of them organized in what was then the Left Caucus. Because DSA doesn't have strong internal mechanisms to help members navigate the organization, this information becomes a prized commodity and gives serious power to the caucuses relative to rank-and-file members.

Caucuses exist to shape the organization and generally aspire to take leadership positions. The big three caucuses have political differences that can be significant, but they all share this orientation and frequently serve together on national leadership bodies. There exists a tension between putting out political positions (which not everyone will agree with) and maintaining power in the organization. Most caucuses seem to have resolved this in favor of the latter—often it's hard to tell what the caucuses think because they don't come right out and say it. Caucus publications are sporadic and often don't address substantive issues. Most major DSA chapters are dominated by one caucus,⁹ though sometimes a second one is present. Often, they write the rules to keep themselves in power.

Caucuses aren't going away, and they'll continue to play an outsized role in determining the politics of DSA. They have tended to operate primarily as permanent leadership vehicles rather than political bodies, primarily leveraging their connections and hoarding information rather than acting to clarify political positions and introduce serious debate—most of the decisions in DSA are made by leadership bodies, and whatever debates happen there don't reach the membership.

Organizational Democracy

This raises questions of organizational democracy. DSA's structure has not been reformed since its growth in 2016, with the original Harringtonite model left intact. The 2019 convention passed more resolutions than DSA could act on, and all the decisions about what happens next go to the National Political Committee. What goes on in the NPC is incredibly opaque, and it's often led to cynicism among members about the relevance of national DSA in light of two prior conventions where proposals that were voted up have had no movement. An indication of this may be that only half as many resolutions have been submitted in 2021 (38) compared to 2019 (85), and only a third as many bylaw/constitution changes. DSA produces little in the way of reports or evaluations, and where they do appear there aren't mechanisms for members to determine new policy nationally. From the perspective of most members, the national and local may as well be on different planets.

The 2021 convention will have to take up the question of how members can participate in the national organization and the question of enforcing decisions that are made democratically. Most members have learned that what happens at the national level is not determined by them and largely won't affect them, so they've divested. The only way to reverse that sentiment is to give them ownership of what happens. There are proposals for establishing intermediary bodies between the local and national levels, for creating a binding national referendum process, for standardizing election procedures, and for considering the role of staff by electing the national director (a position now held by Maria Svart). There are only eight proposed bylaw changes this year, so it's unlikely that they'll be shelved again. We'll see which, if any, changes are made.

Notes

1. Anna Heyward, "Since Trump's Victory, Democratic Socialists of America Has Become a Budding Political Force," *The Nation*, December 21, 2017.
2. Yilmaz, "Futures of DSA," *Tempest*, March 20, 2001.
3. Joe Evica and Andrew Sernatinger, "Taking the Dirty Break Seriously," *Tempest*, September 10, 2020.
4. Neal Meyer, "Why We'll Need Our Own Ballot Line, Eventually," *The Call*, February 16, 2021. Chris Maisano, "A Left That Matters," *Socialist Forum*, Winter 2021.
5. Andy Sernatinger, "Biden Pledge Spits at DSA's Democracy," *Tempest*, October 11, 2020.
6. Brad C., "Breaking Bad: How Obsession with an Independent Workers' Party Hurts the Socialist Electoral Project," *The Organizer*, February 9, 2021.
7. Jason Schulman and Dan La Botz, "Against Campism, for International Working-Class Solidarity," *Socialist Forum*, Winter 2020.
8. Andrew Sernatinger, "DSA 2019 Convention Breakdown," *New Politics*, July 6, 2019.
9. Andrew Sernatinger, "Inside Baseball: What the 2019 Convention Vote Data Tells Us about the

DSA Membership," *Medium*, October 14, 2019.