The Party's Over

written by Kim Moody | February 16, 2024



The experiment of socialist and left-progressive electoral action on the Democratic ballot line now faces a fundamental crisis. The momentum created by the 2016 Sanders presidential primary campaign, which helped propel the Squad to political office and inspired the rapid growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), was lost in the aftermath of Sanders' truncated 2020 run and his rapid surrender to Biden. The drift of the Squad and others toward the party's political and operational center and their support for the party's neoliberal leaders has raised serious questions about using the Democratic Party for socialist goals. This was underlined by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's (AOC) and other Squad members' endorsement of Biden even after his move to the right, in early 2023, on key issues such as immigration and oil drilling, as noted by FiveThirtyEight (March 23, 2023). More generally, increased resistance from the party's leadership and institutions has limited the left's ability to expand significantly. This was reflected in the relatively slim gains made by socialists and left progressives in the 2022 House elections. On top of this, the soaring costs of congressional elections and the recent decline in small political donations has further crippled the ability of the electoral left to expand its efforts.

The evidence for this crisis is everywhere in the organizational state of the electoral left. The Justice Democrats (JD), arguably the most effective driver of progressive primary challenges, laid off nine of its twenty staff members in July due to lack of funds. As the *Huffington Post* put it, "its mission more muddled and its coffers depleted." In August, it let go of three more staffers for a total of twelve—more than half its staff. Even before this in April, the JD-allied and now mainly electoralist Sunrise Movement fired 35 of its 100-member staff, while Middle Seat, a political fundraiser and one of AOC's top 2020 and 2022 campaign vendors, dumped about a third of its staff. Even Emily's List saw layoffs. All of this in the run-up to the crucial 2024 election.

The immediate cause of this crisis is funding. For one thing, the cost of winning a House seat has risen on average from $1.3 million in 2016 to $2.5 million, for an open seat, and $2.9 million, to defeat an incumbent, in 2022. Small donations have been lower in this cycle due to disgust with politics and with the Democrats in particular, examined below. As the *New York Times* reported (July 16, 2023), with small donations slow in coming, the Biden campaign is even more heavily dependent on wealthy donors than in 2020. At the same time, many major political donors are shifting contributions directly to party campaign committees and to "dark money" funds for both Senate and House 2024 campaigns. But the paucity of small donations hits left organizations that lack sufficient wealthy donors, PAC money, or foundation support much harder.

One result of this crisis and increased resistance from the party leadership is a further retreat from "primarying" the old guard. This is particularly critical because, assuming the point is to change the Democratic Party or move it to the left, there is no other way to clear out the centrist majority of Democrats in the House and throughout the political system. Retirements and open seat contests are too few to be a path to a sizable presence in the Democratic Party Caucus in the House or for that matter in the Senate or just about any state legislature. An indication of this is that the JD appears to

have abandoned challenging incumbents altogether. JD is currently focusing on supporting incumbent Jamaal Bowman, who is under attack from pro-Israel PACs. Whereas, the organization endorsed eight House candidates challenging centrist incumbents in 2020 and two in 2022, it has not named any such challengers for 2024, according to *Huffington Post* (August 10, 2023).

Similarly, while Our Revolution has endorsed Rep. Barbara Lee (CA) for Dianne Feinstein's open Senate seat as well as a number of candidates mostly for local office, it has not endorsed anyone for the House in 2024, as of late October. In 2022, Our Revolution endorsed 18 House candidates, six of whom opposed a sitting mainstream Democrat. Sanders, who backed 13 House candidates in 2022, four of whom challenged incumbents, has endorsed only one House candidate in 2023. That is Aaron Regunberg, an unsuccessful candidate for Democratic nomination for an open seat representing Rhode Island's first congressional district, which was filled by special election. So far, Sanders has not endorsed anyone for the House in 2024.

AOC also endorsed Regunberg, but her Courage to Win PAC, with over $500,000 cash-on-hand, contributed just $5,000 each to only two House candidates, incumbents Cori Bush and Greg Casar, according to its September 30, 2023, Federal Election Commission report. No other official House endorsements by AOC for the 2023-2024 election cycle could be found as of this writing. The DSA's national electoral commission, which in the past endorsed House and state legislative candidates, has so far only endorsed a small number of local candidates. Clearly, the electoral left is in retreat.

Part of this retreat is due to the relatively poor performance of left challengers in 2022. Despite a large number of open House seats in the 2022 midterms, the net gains for left progressives that year were small. Of the 23 left candidates, defined as those endorsed by either Bernie Sanders, JD, and/or Our Revolution, ten won their primary. Of the eight who challenged incumbents, only one (Jamie McLoed Skinner) won, and she lost the general election. Of the 15 who fought open-seat primary contests, nine succeeded. This was down significantly from 2020, when left progressives won 22 out of 32 open seats, according to FiveThirtyEight (September 27, 2022).

Altogether in 2022, ten left progressives won their primaries and thirteen lost, not that bad a showing. But three sitting left progressives, as defined above, lost to moderates in incumbent-versus-incumbent primary fights in redrawn districts, and three new challengers who won their primaries were defeated in the general election. The net gain for 2022 was just four, none of whom won a primary challenge to a sitting incumbent.[1] This is clearly a bad sign for those hoping to transform the Democratic Party. The prospects for 2024 are, if anything, significantly worse for the left, with the House incumbent survival rate at 94 percent, the increasing pressure to support moderates in swing districts and not rock the boat, and the financial crisis of the electoral left deepening.

State legislative elections are, of course, much cheaper and somewhat more accessible. The incumbent rate for state legislatures was nevertheless over 95 percent in 2022, though only 22 percent of Democratic incumbents faced a challenge that year. Turnover is higher, however, and open seats are more frequent, about 24 percent in 2022. Only about 4 percent are term-limited, about a third of them held by Democrats. A sobering thought, however, is that there are over 7,000 seats to contest in the nation's state legislatures. While the cost of running for a state legislative seat is much lower than that for Congress, on average it has doubled in the last two decades to over $100,000 by 2020, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. No doubt it is higher by now and, of course, higher still in states like New York, California, Washington, and others.

DSAers, who run more often at this level, held 56 state legislative seats by 2023.[2] But whereas in 2022, national DSA endorsed 18 candidates for state office, this year so far, no state-level candidates have been endorsed by DSA's national electoral commission, according to its website. No doubt

some have been backed by local chapters. Our Revolution, which endorsed 80 state legislative candidates in 2022, had not endorsed any this year as of late October, according to its websites. Neither had Bernie Sanders. It appears that the crisis of the electoral left hit down ballot as well.

Politics as Auction: Capital-Driven Crisis of Election Finance

That the electoral left's 2023-2024 election cycle political crisis should take the form of plunging financial sources is, itself, significant. For one thing, it reveals just how dependent current left electoral action on the Democratic ballot line is on top-down, staff-driven outfits like JD, for-profit fundraising firms like Middle Seat, and even outfits like private-equity-owned digital giant NGP-VAN, which is the party's major data processor and is used by all Squad members. For another, it also shows the heavy reliance of left candidates on out-of-state and out-of-district donations rather than on permanent grassroots district organization.

The underlying cause of this funding crisis, however, is the long-term, capital-driven escalation of the cost of elections. It began with the entrance of corporate PACs in the 1970s but has accelerated well beyond that, pushed by wealthy and well-to-do donors.[3] Including money spent by candidates, party committees, and "outside" money, the cost of midterm congressional elections rose from $1.6 billion in 1998, already far above earlier years, to almost $9 billion in 2022.[4] As OpenSecrets' executive director put it, "The ever-increasing spending race between political parties means the price of admission to Congress keeps climbing." Political office has become the object of an auction in which the highest bidder wins 90 percent of the time.

And it is big money that is driving the process. Just 18 percent of all House campaign money in the 2022 cycle came from donations of $200 or less. The Democrats did slightly better, but small donations still accounted for only 19 percent of all the funds they raised. The further decline in small donations and the continued increase in the cost of elections tells you that wealth and capital will play an increasingly larger role in upcoming elections. And Opensecrets.org (August 2, 2023) expects 2024 to be "the most expensive election in history."

Squad members, who don't take corporate money, raise millions for their elections primarily on individual donations from outside their own states and districts. Most of this is raised via hired digital vendors such as ActBlue or Middle Seat. AOC is one of the most extreme. She raised over $12 million in the 2022 election cycle, far more than any other Squad member. Of this, over 80 percent came from out of state. In 2020, the latest year for district-level figures from OpenSecrets.com, less than 1 percent of AOC's funding came from within her district. It should be obvious that, with funds for leftist candidates drying up, this dependence on large numbers of smaller donations from across the country cannot underwrite much of an expansion of leftist primary challengers while also defending their incumbents.

Consider this: The JD raised just $6.5 million, mostly from more than 1,300 individuals, in the 2022 election cycle before facing its financial crisis. Hakeem Jeffries, a militant centrist, leader in the fight against left challengers in the 2022 midterms, and declared anti-socialist who is now the unanimously elected House minority leader,[5] alone pulled in $5.9 million that year. Of this, almost 80 percent came from large donations or PACs and just 5.5 percent from small contributions. This year, he has already raked in $7.8 million. It is pretty obvious that the electoral left of the Democratic Party cannot possibly compete with the party's mainstream majority who are heavily funded by corporations and wealthy individuals.

Consider also that while the electoral left is pulling back on challenging incumbent centrists, the *New York Times* (October 29, 2023) reports that the party establishment's occasional allies, the deep pockets American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Democratic Majority for

Israel (DMI) are gearing-up to challenge some or all of the nine incumbent Democrats who, on October 25 in the midst of Israel's intense and indiscriminate bombing of Gaza, voted against further military aid to Israel. Unconditional support for Israel has long been a core policy of the Democratic Party, and opposition to candidates critical of Israel's apartheid policy toward the Palestinians is not new.

In the 2022 midterms, AIPAC spent $13 million and DMI, $9 million, much of it "outside" money, to defeat left challengers not considered friendly enough to Israel. According to Opensecrets.org (November 17, 2022), AIPAC spent $2 million in "outside" money to defeat Summer Lee, a critic of Israel's apartheid policy, in the 2022 midterm primary and another $3.2 million in the general election, together more than twice what Lee raised that cycle. In this case, they failed to prevent her victory. (The most money only wins 90 percent of the time.) Lee, who is one of the nine Democrats voting against military aid to Israel this October, already faces a challenger and is certain to be a target of AIPAC spending in 2024. Ilhan Omar and Jamall Bowman, who also opposed the additional military hardware for Israel, have attracted primary challengers as well. The issues may change, but the escalation of the political auction continues.

At a more basic level, one might ask, why are socialists playing money-driven marketplace-style politics in the first place? A look at how AOC spent the millions she raised mostly from outside her district reveals that in the 2022 cycle, 60 percent went to staff salaries, fundraising, and administration, and another 24 percent to media purchases, which compose the bulk of election campaigning. The rest, presumably, went to basic election campaign work like getting out the vote and to beefing up her sizable cash-on-hand. Permanent grassroots organization doesn't figure in. The actual practice of DSA and left electoralism depends not on mass organization or actual class struggle, as is sometimes claimed, but on electing individuals to office to do "good" on behalf of the working class through primaries that attract the more affluent voters,[6] all in hopes that the base will follow. Their election methods are scarcely different from those of mainstream Democrats, reliant on professional fundraising firms and campaign experts. They are more than a little dependent on high-vis personalities like Bernie and AOC. It is top-down and, from a socialist perspective, upside-down.

Socialist electoral politics need to be organized on an entirely different mass, grassroots basis with an entirely different strategy outside the real-time institutional confines of the Democratic Party and its ballot line, which the state provides but the party determines the candidate-entry rules. Independent working-class political organizations with a permanent, mass, grassroots organization in neighborhoods and workplaces could easily replace money with direct, democratic voter organization and mobilization—not to be confused with today's typical and temporary "get out the (computer-targeted) vote" efforts.

A (Well Deserved) Crisis of Confidence in Politics, Politicians, and the Major Parties

But if funding is the proximate problem, this crisis is also a result of a fairly recent increase in distrust of politics, politicians, and the major parties that has itself led to the slump in small donations. Our Revolution, for example, found in a recent survey of its "members" that "41% told us they are feeling *depressed, angry,* or *unmotivated* by the 2024 election" (emphasis in original). With Bernie, the Squad, the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), and most progressives lined up behind Biden, there is no space for a Democratic Party left opposition.

This disillusionment goes well beyond the political left. As a recent survey from the Pew Research Center reveals, most Americans' typically skeptical view of politics has actually gotten much worse precisely in the period of rising socialist electoralism through the Democratic Party, 2018-2023.[7] Some of the worst of this is focused on Congress. For example, the proportion of Democrats and Democrat leaners who think members of Congress "care about the people they represent" fell from

51 percent in 2018 to 40 percent this year. Those Democrats and leaners who thought members of Congress promoted policies "in the public interest" dropped from 48 percent to 37 percent over that period. In addition, politicians, including Democrats, are judged "out of touch" with their constituents.

Among Democrats and leaners, 74 percent thought members of Congress did a very or somewhat *bad* job of listening to their constituents. A full 81 percent of these Democrats said that "most elected officials don't care what 'people like them' think." Presumably many were thinking about their own Democratic representatives. Eighty-four percent of all those "highly engaged with politics" gave the same answer. In terms of influence, among those who answered, 70 percent thought people in their districts had too little influence, while 80 percent said "people who donated a lot of money to their political campaigns" had too much influence. This negative view, however, wasn't just about the individual politicians.

One of the most revealing findings of the Pew Survey was the sharp drop in those with a favorable view of the Democratic Party as a whole. Whereas more than 60 percent had a positive view of that party in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this fell to the mid-40s from 2008 until 2018, no doubt a result of the recession and of disappointment with the Obama administration. Then from 2018 through July 2023, approval of the Democratic Party dropped to 37 percent while those with an unfavorable view of this party rose to 60 percent. When asked, almost three-quarters of Democrats and leaners respond that the sentence "I often wish there were more political parties to choose from in this country" describes their view extremely (44 percent) or somewhat (30 percent) well. Among independents, far more of those who lean Democrat express this view than among Republican leaners. Democrats just aren't very happy with their party.

As the Pew survey points out, the declining positive views of the Democrats in particular are "now at their most negative point in the last three decades." And this precisely during the period of rising socialist electoralism in that party. I'm not arguing that Bernie Sanders, AOC, the Squad, or DSA are to blame for this dismal picture of how most people view politics and the Democratic Party in particular. But, as their increasing failure to oppose the party leadership, indeed their consistent endorsement of party leaders including Biden, their high level of "unity" votes on Biden's legislative agenda,[8] and, hence their stronger public identification with the party suggest, neither did they prevent or even moderate it, despite their individual popularity or personal views. There is no indication in the Pew survey that people see a counter trend to this deteriorating view of politicians and the Democratic Party.

Perhaps the most immediate impact of this growing political malaise for the left has been the fate of the DSA itself. With the collapse of the Sanders dynamic and the increase in sometimes bitter internal fights over the organization's inability to keep its Democratic "electeds" on track, notably over Israel/Palestine and Biden's strike ban in rail negotiations, the group has experienced a steep and continuous loss of membership. According to its June Budget Report, DSA saw its "constitutional" membership (which includes lapsed dues-payers) fall from its high point of 94,000 in mid-2021 to 78,000 by May 2023. Actual "members-in-good-standing," a more realistic measure, fell from 78,000 to 57,000 over that period—the loss of a quarter of its real membership precisely as the favorable attitudes toward the Democratic Party slumped to new lows and the controversy over the behavior of the "electeds" took center stage for a time. While it is too soon to assess, the current fallout from the Israel-Gaza war is already threatening to fragment DSA further.

In spite of the preexisting crisis, in what appeared to be a consensus at its July convention, DSA reaffirmed its commitment to "tactically contesting partisan elections on the Democratic ballot line" as a priority. In recognition of the problem of holding DSAers in political office to the organization's politics, this was amended by the proposal to "Act Like a Party," that is, to attempt to organize the

work of DSAers in office and provide support. A proposal to have some type of accountability or discipline over "electeds," however, failed. The "dirty break," which never attracted any interest from DSA's "electeds," crumbled to dust even before the convention and has virtually disappeared from the discussion. On the other hand, there has been a revived interest in the "party surrogate," a mass organization with its own identity that would parallel the party itself and, in the case of Congress and most state legislatures, would compete with the Democratic Caucus for the loyalty of its office holders. Given the initial institutional and financial imbalance of power between the two and the fact that legislative impact depends on the party caucus not the party-surrogate, it is not hard to estimate which organization has the advantage in this contest for loyalty.

The term "party surrogate" appears to have been first introduced by Jared Abbott and Dustin Guastella in 2019, though the idea of such an organization was proposed in some detail without the term by Seth Ackerman in August 2016.[9] The dates are significant—right in the wake of Sanders' most successful challenge and the subsequent election in 2018 of the four members of the Squad. If such an ambitious electoral project was to have any chance of organizational growth it was certainly during the first few years of momentum coming out of the 2015-2016 Sanders campaign, the election of the Squad in 2018, and the initial growth of DSA. Those DSAers elected to office in 2018 and 2020, without whose support such a project would not be credible precisely because it is a Democratic Party-centered electoral project, however, have never shown any interest in this type of grassroots organization. Instead, they settled for the CPC and a cluster of NGO-style 501(c)4s, staff-driven campaign outfits like JD and Our Revolution, and digital fundraisers such as for-fee ActBlue or for-profit Middle Seat. And now, the momentum is lost, the crisis has set in, and the potential "party-surrogate" supporters among today's left office holders in Congress are tightly in alliance with the party's leadership.

How to Get Out of This Mess

The crisis of electoral politics (and of much more) cannot be resolved or transcended by more "tactical" electoralism in an increasingly resistant and unpopular Democratic Party. "Just try harder" seldom works in the midst of a crisis, particularly when that activity is part of the problem. As has been the case throughout U.S. history, notably in the 1850-1860s (slavery), 1890s (agrarian and labor populism), 1930s (labor), 1950-1960s (civil rights, oppressed liberation, rank-and-file upsurge), it has taken mass disruptive social upheaval to loosen the dead hand of the ruling classes on politics and reduce the barriers to any social and political progress. The crying need is a durable and comprehensive working-class movement with unions, organizations of the oppressed, and grassroots independent political expressions from community and workplace groups to take the first steps toward a new party of the working class. All of this has to come first and foremost from the roots of class power in the production of goods and services. In this seemingly overwhelming task, socialists now have a couple of things going in our favor.

One is the well documented upswing in union and worker action. This is not yet the upsurge needed to break the impasse, but it is motion in the right direction. Furthermore, unlike electoral politics, the vast majority in the United States view this favorably. Support for unions has been rising since 2017, when it jumped to 61 percent, from 56 percent in 2016, then reaching 67 percent in 2023. Gallup reported that it had hit 71 percent in 2022 and then fell to 67 percent, but I believe this is due to a statistical fluke. The jump to 71 percent in 2022 was due entirely to a sudden and suspect leap of nine percentage points in Republican approval of unions, from 47 percent in 2021 to 56 percent in 2022. It then fell back down to a more typical Republican level of 47 percent in 2023, bringing the overall average to 67 precent in that year. This made it appear as though there had been a significant drop in support for unions in 2023. There is no reason to believe that was the case.

For one thing, the drop Gallup reported in 2023 was definitely *not* due to a reaction against strikes. The same Gallup poll headlined one section, "Americans Favor Workers in Labor Disputes," and shows that in 2023, big majorities support the auto workers against the companies (75 percent), striking movie and TV writers by 72 percent, and actors by 67 percent against their employers. A Reuters/Ipsos poll taken in September during the Detroit (formerly "Big") Three-UAW auto workers' strike showed that 58 percent supported the strikers. A September 21-25 joint Global Strategies Group/GBAO poll found 76 percent supported the UAW over the auto companies, while an October 4-9 CNN survey said 76 percent sided with the strikers and just 23 percent with the company.

For another, an August 2023 AFL-CIO poll of registered voters with "oversamples of voters under 30, AAPI voters, and union members," a rather different sample than the randomly selected Gallup poll, showed 71 percent approved of unions, 88 percent among those under 30, and 91 percent among Democrats. On top of that, 75 percent support workers going on strike, 93 percent for Democrats and 90 percent for under-30s. Even allowing for bias in the sample, this reveals strong support for unions *and* strikes in key constituencies. By all the indicators in the Gallup, Reuters/Ipsos, GSG/GBAO, AFL-CIO, and CNN polls, increasing numbers of U.S. residents think unions are a good way to improve one's life, even if it takes a strike to do so, and typically only a quarter or less support capital against workers. As we saw, this contrasts sharply with what a majority thinks of politics, politicians, and the Democratic Party in particular. This includes Biden, whose approval hit 37 percent in September, while that of his handling of the economy fell to 30 percent, according to the *Washington Post-ABC* poll.

The contrast as well as the timing are striking! No doubt Biden or his advisers noticed this, which is one reason why the president showed up at a UAW picket line in Michigan in September. If the Democrats need those well-to-do suburban votes to win a majority in the House, Biden needs the still substantial union and blue-collar vote in midwestern swing states to take the Electoral College. Actually, Biden is not new to the political uses of the picket line at election time. During the 2019 GM strike, *Bloomberg* (September 23, 2019) reported that as the presidential primary took off in September, candidate Biden joined striking UAW members at a Kansas City GM plant. On almost the same day, Elizabeth Warren also walked a UAW picket line at GM's Detroit-Hamtramck plant.

As former Clinton aide Paul Bledsoe recently told *Politico* concerning the 2024 elections, "From now until election day, he's got to err on the side of the worker and the consumer. That's just the politics of our time." And, after that? Well, Biden consults about the future of the auto industry regularly with GM CEO Mary Barra, who has visited the White House eight times since Biden took office, according to *Politico* (September 19, 2023). One day for the workers, eight for the boss. That, too, is the politics of our time.

Of course, public opinion or presidential appearances by themselves do not win strikes or bring success to organizing drives. That requires organization and direct class struggle. While socialists cannot create an upsurge, they have often played a leading role in the development and even direction of class struggle in the United States and around the world. Even in our time, socialists have helped lead mass actions, from the 2018 teachers' upsurge through the rank-and-file organizations of teachers, Teamsters, autoworkers, and others, as well as the efforts to organize Amazon, and more. These are movements in which working-class people participate collectively and directly and feel their power—something most clearly don't feel in today's electoral politics.

The acceleration of class conflict now in motion along with its rising popularity is an invitation and a challenge to today's socialist movement in the United States to get on board and make a difference. This is how we inspire people to act, break the cynicism and fatalism caused by the reality of mainstream electoral politics, and help people change themselves in order to change the world "from below"—and maybe even create a new type of (small "d") democratic working-class politics in

the United States.

Notes

1. Moody, “Stuck in the Mud, Sinking to the Right: 2022 Midterm Elections,” *Against the Current* (223, March/April 2023), 25.

2. Even the rate at which DSA members have been elected to city councils, by far the cheapest and easiest to win, has slowed. Of the 95 currently holding these offices, excluding mayors, 29 took office in 2022 and just nine in 2023. *Wikipedia*, “List of Democratic Socialists of America public officeholders,” last edited Oct. 23, 2023.

3. Kim Moody, “The ‘Class Ceiling’: Political Money and the Primary Election,” *Spectre* (Issue 6, Fall 2022), 38-45.

4. Unless otherwise specified, all elections finance figures are from OpenSecrets.org and most endorsement or election results are from Ballotpedia or candidates’ websites.

5. Moody, “Stuck in the Mud,” 26.

6. Moody, “The ‘Class Ceiling,’” 37-38.

7. Pew Research Center, *Americans’ Dismal Views of the Nation’s Politics* (Sept. 19, 2023).

8. Squad members each voted in favor of Biden’s agenda over 90 percent of the time. FiveThirtyEight, “Does Your Member of Congress Vote With or Against Biden?” Jan. 3, 2023; Ronald Brownstein, “The House reached a stunning new milestone this year,” *CNN Politics,* June 21, 2022.

9. Jared Abbott and Dustin Guastella, “A Socialist Party in Our Time?” *Catalyst* (3, No. 2, Summer 2019), 7-63; Seth Ackerman, “A Blueprint for a New Party,” *Jacobin,* Aug. 11, 2016.