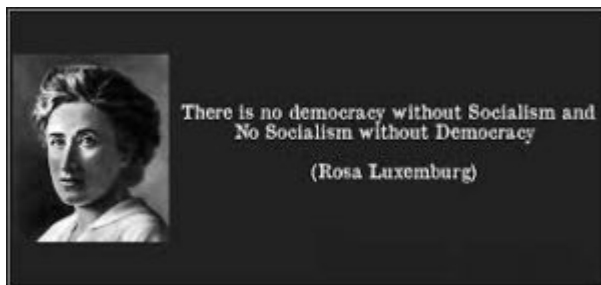
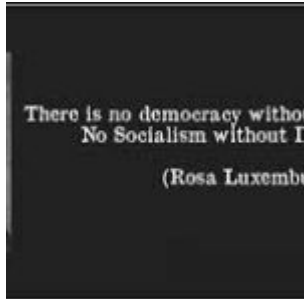


Tail Can't Wag the Dog: The DSA NPC Vote on Swing States and The Questions for Democracy

June 9, 2020



Every week, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)'s National leadership, the National Political Committee (NPC), posts a brief report of the votes they take at their meetings on the DSA Discussion Board. Probably most members don't follow this, either because they don't know about the Discussion Board or have found the Board to be unpleasant and stopped looking, but since the 2019 NPC took office they have posted these regular updates as a measure of transparency, using the Discussion Bulletin to keep the information restricted to DSA members only.

• Should DSA ask members in swing states to consider voting for Biden?
FAILED, 4 for - 13 against - 0 abstain

▼ Vote Results

Abdullah Y: YES
Amelia B (YDSA): NO
Austin G: NO
Blanca E: NO
Dave P: NO
Erika P: NO
Hannah A: YES
Jenbo: NO
Jen M: NO
Kristen C (YDSA): NO
Kristian H: YES
Maikiko J: YES
Marianela D: NO
Megan S: NO
Natalie M: NO
Sean E: NO
Sauce: NO
Tawny T: NO

Roll Call of NPC Vote

The NPC report posted on 5/4/20 showed an alarming question that had come to a vote: "Should DSA ask members in swing states to consider voting for Biden?"

That the NPC brought this question to a vote raises both democratic and political issues, since the 2019 DSA National Convention – the highest decision-making body in DSA—had already decided our position: “the Democratic Socialists of America will not endorse another Democratic Party presidential candidate should Bernie Sanders not prevail.” Democratic, because of how it affects member democracy in DSA; political not because of dissent on a majority opinion, but because of the questionable motivations in pressing the issue.

Method: Process For This Article

Writing about internal DSA politics is always difficult, and there’s a high bar set for how you come by information and represent it. While I’ve never been a bystander in DSA politics, in this situation I’m closer to the events because the source of the conflict is a resolution I submitted to Convention in 2019; clearly I have an interest in defending that position. That said, I tried to get as objective an account of the events as I possibly could.

In writing this article, I contacted the NPC on 5/11/20 and asked for details[i] on the vote that was reported on 5/4/20, asking about the discussion, process, who made the motion, who seconded, etc. Additionally, I invited NPC members to contact me for comment by Thursday, 5/14/20. I was called on the phone later on 5/11/20 by a representative of the NPC who asked me not to publish this article until minutes from the meeting were released on Friday, 5/15/20. No member of the NPC gave comment on the vote or the process, and minutes were not released on the promised time. On Sunday, 5/17/20 I followed up and asked the status, and was told the minutes were approved 5/15/20 and should be released by email to all members on Wednesday, 5/20/20. Minutes were finally sent Thursday evening, 5/21/20.

The minutes themselves are sparse: there are few attributions on comments in the discussion, there is no explanation of process in how Loomio online votes are advanced, nor is there any clarification on the context of the vote (“Should DSA ask members in swing states to consider voting for Biden?”).

For more, I used the only other sources of information available: the DSA discussion board reported posted by Jen M, with comments by Erika P and Jenbo, and public twitter posts by NPC members on this subject (Jenbo and Erika P). With no other comments to draw from, Jenbo and Erika are overrepresented in this article.

As of 6/3/20, minutes have not been available for any meeting since October 2019 (the most recent NPC minutes were for October 12-13, 2019, released on 12/20/2019); my understanding is that staff are charged with posting minutes. For reference, 11 of the 16 sitting NPC members signed the NPC Transparency Pledge ahead of the 2019 Convention, which included commitments:

Minutes for all regular and special NPC and NPC/SC meetings are posted no more than 7 days following the meeting they record; or

A notice is published that the minutes release has been delayed within 7 days following with an estimated time of publication and reason for delay.

Convention and NPC

- NPC July 2020 (date TBD)
- ...
- NPC SC May 22, 2020.
- NPC SC May 8, 2020.
- NPC SC April 24, 2020 (Released 5/21/2020 ())
- NPC SC April 3, 2020.
- NPC SC March 30, 2020.
- NPC SC March 20, 2020.
- NPC SC March 13, 2020. (NPC SC COVID19 Rapid Response Meeting)
- NPC SC March 6, 2020.
- NPC SC February 21, 2020.
- NPC February 1-2, 2020.
- NPC SC January 17, 2020.
- NPC SC January 3, 2020.
- NPC SC December 20, 2019.
- NPC SC December 6, 2019.
- NPC SC November 15, 2019.
- NPC SC November 8, 2019.
- NPC SC October 23 or 30. (Possible dates assumed)
- NPC SC October 12-13 (NYC. (Released 12/20/19. ())
- NPC SC October 1, 2019.
- NPC SC September 16, 2019. Agenda ())
- NPC SC August 28, 2019 (Agenda. Unofficial notes: part 1 ()) and part 2 ())
 - MAA, NEC (), Bernie
- Convention August 2-4, 2019. Atlanta, GA.
 - Convention results provided by National ()) (Forums announcement)
- NPC SC July 22, 2019. (Released 10/25/19.)
- NPC SC July 8, 2019. (Released 11/7/19.)
- NPC SC June 24, 2019. (Released 11/7/19.)
- NPC SC June 10, 2019. (Released 11/7/19.)

List of NPC Meetings With Minutes. Blue have minutes available; black do not.

What Happened with This Vote?

At its biennial National Convention, delegates from DSA chapters elect a national leadership, the NPC, to serve until the next Convention. Sixteen members are elected to the NPC, with two representatives sharing a vote from YDSA, DSA's youth section. The NPC meets quarterly and selects among them a smaller "Steering Committee" (SC) of five members to meet biweekly to make decisions, craft agendas and direct the staff.

In addition to these official meetings, the NPC keeps an online vote through a service called Loomio; decisions made through Loomio aren't tracked with formal rules of order or minutes the way that in person/video conference meetings are.

The story seems to be this: the Steering Committee was preparing to issue statements on the 2020 Election and Joe Biden, as drafted by Kristian H of Socialist Majority, and invited the full NPC to the discussion[ⁱⁱ]. In their discussion, it became clear that there were some disagreements about how to frame the statement:

"There would be a clear material difference between a Biden presidency and Trump presidency, what are we telling people who ask us how we're voting and how our members are voting? We need to be realistic about our ever expanding base, we need to take political leadership, there is a material difference between Obama and Trump (ex. ICE, deportations). Need to be clear about coalition-building. Have also seen chapters retweeting Howie Hawkins. Chapters need to think about what they are doing, is it actually relevant and about power?...key questions: what segments of the working class are we alienating by not relating to this election at all? Are losing opportunities to relate to coalition partners? I think we need an answer for the press. Trump is materially worse for all oppressed people than a Democrat was. Should include in any statement that we ask members in swing states to discuss and consider voting for Biden" **(no attribution)**

Natalie M noted that there were unresolved questions, including, "Should we tell our members in swing states to consider and discuss voting for Joe Biden?" The meeting concluded, but conversation continued over email, culminating in a vote on the Loomio online voting-system, "Should DSA ask members in swing states to consider voting for Biden?"

NPC member Erika P, writing on the discussion board, explained the position of those advancing the argument was that: “[I]t would’ve been language telling members in swing states to consider and debate voting for Biden. The position was that encouraging a subset of members to engage with the question isn’t an endorsement.”

There were some objections to the consideration of the question (unclear how many), with Jenbo writing to the rest of the NPC:

“...the NPC guiding chapters to even consider voting for Joe Biden goes against the spirit of Resolution 15, “In the Event of a Sanders Loss,” passed at the 2019 National Convention. People can argue semantics of “endorsement,” but comrade [name] said it best when she very succinctly wrote during the NPC meeting, “This sounds like an endorsement to me.” It does to me, too, and will to our membership. As such, I am formally objecting to this even going up for a vote.”

The vote was taken, with all the Socialist Majority Caucus members on the NPC (Abdullah, Hannah, Maikiko, and Kristian) voting “YES” and every other member voting “NO”: 4 for, 13 against, 0 abstain. None of the four who voted YES are in “swing states”, but in New York, Kansas, California and Texas respectively.

In the aftermath, members of SMC tried to explain that this wasn’t a “formal motion” and was a harmless point of discussion. The minutes released do not make any distinction, and the result is the same: members of the NPC asked for a decision to be made about encouraging members to vote for Joe Biden.

Democratic Organization

What’s the problem? It got voted down!

There are both political and organizational problems here. Let’s talk about organizational democracy first. DSA is a *democratic* socialist organization. As a historical marker, that’s emphasized to be a corrective to the perception of past undemocratic views of how socialism would function, but also how a socialist organization operates internally. If “democratic” is to mean anything, the organizational norms of DSA need to be taken seriously. In short: the NPC can’t just make decisions on whatever the fuck they want.

Convention and Member Democracy

DSA operates much more like a federation than a centralized group, and chapters are given a lot of leeway to make decisions for themselves, but we still maintain a national organization in common. DSA’s structure places the biennial National Convention as the “highest decision-making body” in the organization, and from there the National Political Committee is elected to execute the objectives the Convention has laid out and provide leadership in between Conventions. The Convention, not the NPC, is the ultimate authority, particularly because it is the most representative gathering of members; in 2019, this was over 1000 delegates representing 55,000 members - far more representative than 16 members of the NPC.

The first and primary issue is that the National Political Committee cannot supersede or relitigate the decisions the Convention makes - it does not and should not have that power. When the Convention makes a decision it is imperative that we respect it as an organization.

In the case of the Democratic candidate endorsement, the Convention made a clear resolution and

yet the NPC considered a question that ran counter to the resolution. Whether they affirmed it or not is beside the point (though, let's be clear, props to the 13 and 2 who voted to uphold our Convention position!) – they shouldn't have held that vote in the first place. If the NPC could wield the power to override the Convention, then what is the political significance of the Convention? The body would cease to have any political weight and would only serve to perform the function of electing the NPC and approving committees.

Consider for a moment if the vote had gone the other way: how would we feel if our Convention resolution were reversed by the NPC? The vote would create an existential crisis for DSA, undermining the democratic process that make us *democratic* socialists. Like the decision or hate it, DSA members should see this as an action that was out of order; **it should be retracted post facto.**

Lastly, the “swing state” vote raises questions about the operation of the NPC. To be clear, I am not a person who believes the NPC is illegitimate or shouldn't exist or something; it must and should. The comrades who serve on the national leadership do us a necessary service. But they also have serious responsibilities to the membership. Here we should ask how this process of online voting for the NPC functions where decisions are made when there is not a process that is clear and transparent. For an organization our size, the national leadership absolutely needs a decision-making method between meetings, but the process and relationship should be explicit and follow rules that govern consistently.

The Politics of Non-Endorsement and Joe Biden

The second part of this is a more directly political question. First, let us be clear: what they were suggesting is a tacit endorsement of Joe Biden; this is particularly clear in citing “*seen chapters retweeting Howie Hawkins*” as evidence of a problem. “You should vote for Joe Biden” is an endorsement, you're saying that this candidate is acceptable and preferable – that runs exactly counter to the spirit of the resolution which anticipated this scenario (“Whereas, DSA should prepare a position in the event Sanders does not win the Democratic nomination for president”). The 2019 Convention decided that we would in fact *not* offer this kind of validation of a neoliberal imperialist candidate, let alone one who is the subject of a major sexual misconduct claim.

What is the purpose of encouraging DSA members in swing states to consider voting for Joe Biden? It is not as though there are enough DSA members in any swing state that their individual votes could be the deciding factor on who wins or loses; we're talking about members in the hundreds or low thousands. No, instead this is a gesture that has political motivations and is a signaling move to other organizations (particularly nonprofits) that DSA can be considered a “safe” organization to work with. Jenbo alludes to this in the email she sent to the rest of the NPC:

As leadership of the organization, we have a duty to our membership, not to coalition partners. As socialists, every move we make must be toward class independence from capitalist politicians. Any support, even the most staunch critical support, of Joe Biden would be undermining the values and hard work of ourselves and our comrades...

Imagining ourselves to be junior partners in a liberal-leftist coalition against Trump is pure fantasy. This shit was rigged against us, it was in 2016, and if we cave we show we're willing to let that happen again and again. Asking chapters to “grapple with the question” of bending to the goals of coalition partners who do not share our revolutionary vision in hopes of attracting them to socialism is not leadership. I refuse to advocate for chapters to compromise their values for the sake of peace and friendship. We should all refuse to compromise the socialist movement.

This is the crux of the *political* issue. Who one person individually votes for, or even chapters with a few hundred members, is inconsequential. Elections in the United States have much more to do with how prominent figures, politicians and organizations broadcast public support, who they campaign for, and who they presume is a legitimate figure. What's more, members don't need to be told to "grapple" with the problem of who to support in swing states - I live in one: we do it all the time, and it is a fraught process where every member is going to make calculations in a highly personal way. Telling people to consider voting for Joe Biden is an endorsement, and the motivation has less to do with our socialist aims and more to do with politicking with "coalition partners".

The Convention resolution said we will abstain from endorsing. It intentionally left how individual members vote and campaign up to them - if one feels like they really have to vote for Joe Biden, at least they can do so knowing it was a transaction and that our socialist organization recognizes that this is the result of a broken system that we collectively reject.

Where does that leave us? Democratic Issues With Democratic Socialism

This ends up being a challenging issue because its at the intersection of process and politics - and people hate process. The difficulty in crafting this story had to do with lack of information: minutes have not been regularly posted for over half a year, information had to be requested and was delayed, NPC members did not give comment, and minutes did not explain what happened, who did it or why. I knew where to go and who to talk to, and still had trouble getting that information - most members will not have the benefit of that knowledge.

These are democratic issues because members need access to information to participate in the organization - this has been the consistent theme of my writing about DSA, starting with Convention. When information is (chronically) unavailable, our ability to be democratic actors in our organization is limited. If we want our leadership to be accountable, we need a clear record of what they're doing - I disagreed with the "NPC Transparency Pledge" when it came out because it looked to be more about posturing than politics, but as the majority of NPC members have signed it I find it ironic that it has not been observed. It concerns me that it appears to be a general silence among the NPC, and that much of the information has been provided by individual members of the NPC taking to discussion boards and social media for us to have some semblance of understanding. We still do not have clarity on some key questions regarding who raised this issue to be voted on, and if, as some have insisted, it was not a motion, what was it?

As I mentioned above the right thing to do would be for the NPC acknowledge this was a problem and retract this vote *post facto* - it already happened, the mechanics of the process was messy, but it should be recognized that it was not appropriate for the NPC to consider the question since they didn't have the power. We don't need to go through the drama of saying anyone should be removed or that they're bad people - these are our comrades, and let's all learn together, but part of moving forward is correcting our mistakes when we're able. Convention has to be preserved. The tail can't wag the dog.

.....

- [i] "Please explain the context of this vote -
 - What happened that this came up?
 - How did it go down?
 - What was the process & procedure?

- What was the discussion?
- Was there any consideration of the 2019 Convention decision on nonendorsement?
- Was this a motion? If it wasn't, why is it a vote that is reported?
- Who introduced the question? Was there a second?"

[ii] Steering Committee Minutes, 4/24/20. "Discussion: Biden & the General Election (All NPC members encouraged to participate in the discussion)"