

The Democratic Socialists

PARTIES OF THE PEOPLE
PT. 6/6

of America

With over 80,000 members, Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) is the US' most influential socialist organisation in generations.

Let's explore how DSA went from a marginal force to **the centre of an emergent US left →**



History

DSA was formed in 1982 out of a merger between the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, a former faction of the American Socialist Party, and the New American Movement, a socialist-feminist organisation.

Politically, DSA styled itself as a “democratic” alternative to pro-Soviet, top-down socialist movements. It constructed a “big tent,” ranging from “left-wing” Zionism to anti-imperialism.

Strategically, DSA focused on “realigning” the Democratic Party as a vehicle for class power, as opposed to other left figures like Bernie Sanders, who ran and won as an Independent for Congress in 1990.



Rejuvenation

The collapse of international socialism cast DSA into the political wilderness for much of the 1990s and 2000s. Two events led to DSA's rejuvenation.

First, the 2011 Occupy movement brought back a budding class politics (e.g. "we are the 99%") in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. Second, Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential run put social-democratic policies, like Medicare for All, into the political mainstream.

After Bernie's bitter primary loss to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's shock presidential victory, a new generation of leftists migrated over to DSA. Between November 2016 and May 2017, DSA's membership increased from 8,500 to 21,000 people.



Big Tent Approach

DSA has been described as more of a “horizontal collective” than a centralised socialist party. It is composed of semi-autonomous chapters (i.e. branches),* caucuses (i.e. factions),** and the National Political Committee (NPC) – the highest decision-making body outside of biannual Conventions.

Its “big tent” approach accommodated the post-Bernie surge of members, whose views ranged from left-liberalism to anarchism and Maoism. These tendencies led to a blossoming of different member-led caucuses, committees, and working groups, showcasing DSA’s open democratic nature.

***Note:** Chapters, or branches, are collectives of DSA members organising in a specific location.

****Note:** Caucuses, or factions, are informal groups of DSA members aligned with a specific ideological tendency, theory of change, or organising priority.



*Alexandria
Ocasio-Cortez*



*Rashida
Tlaib*



*Julia
Salazar*



*Zohran
Mamdani*

Electoral Focus

Due its historical focus on reforming the Democratic Party, elections have been a mainstay of DSA's strategy.

In 2018, a slate of DSA-backed candidates upset establishment Congressional Democrats, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib. That same year, Julia Salazar became DSA's first "home-grown" member to win elected office in the New York State Senate. Most recently, DSA member Zohran Mamdani became mayor-elect of New York City.

However, DSA has struggled to maintain power over its elected members. For example, in 2021, then-congressman Jamaal Bowman voted to increase spending for Israel's Iron Dome, causing a major organisational crisis.



Movement Organising

But DSA is much more than a pressure group targeting the Democratic party.

It is actively organising within the labour movement, **“salting”* unions as part of its rank-and-file strategy.**

Its “innovative” **base-building initiatives**, like the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee and the Emergency Tenant Organizing Committee, are creating fertile ground for more militant class struggle.

And DSA’s campaign spadework has led to **legislative breakthroughs**, like the Build Public Renewables Act, which commits New York state to roll out renewables for its 100% decarbonisation target.

***Note:** Salting is when organisers enter other political formations in order to shape their direction. In the labour movement context, this includes taking jobs in strategic industries and joining the associated trade union.



Productive Tensions

A major tension within DSA is its continued connection with the Democratic Party.

Some caucuses, such as Marxist Unity Group, actively support a break from the Democrats* and **a broader transformation into a full-fledged socialist party**, which would increase DSA's ability to exert national left leadership (e.g. by running its own candidates).

However, **this would require DSA to transition to a more democratic centralist structure**, evolving beyond the loose form that enabled it to massify so quickly.

***Note:** Some DSA members argue that this should happen now (a so-called "clean break"), while others (the majority) argue that a break needs to wait on better conditions (a so-called "dirty break").



DSA provides many lessons for organisers seeking to build an effective mass left party:

This is part 6 of 6 in our series analysing leftwing parties from around the world.

Member Democracy:

Members are empowered through democratic structures.

Tolerating tendencies:

A mass party doesn't require strict ideological coherence.

Electoral game:

Elections are a tactic, not a strategy.

Organisational maturity:

A party must develop if it hopes to advance.