Becoming Party Activists: Grassroots Progressive Activism And The Democratic Party

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Abstract
This dissertation examines the relationship between grassroots progressive activists and the Democratic Party. Building on Hirschman's (1970) framework of exit, voice, and loyalty, this dissertation combines literature on political parties, new media and politics, citizenship, and social movements to examine how progressive activists become activated in Democratic Party politics, how they negotiate their relationship with the Party, as well as the strategies and tactics they employ towards their political goals. To that end, I examined three pathways through which activists were attempting to influence the Democratic Party: as delegates to the 2016 and 2020 Democratic National Conventions, by involving themselves in and engaging in actions via the formal Party structure of the California Democratic Party, and by engaging in activism via local progressive groups. I explore these activist practices through a combination of direct observation, semi-structured interviews, social media analysis, and textual analysis.

This dissertation explains how both the personal identity of activists as well as the collective identity of their activist groups influence how they understand the Democratic Party, what they think it can be, and how they conceive of their role in and around it. It also refines and extends Hirschman's theory to both add the notion of “entry” and to show the hybridity of his concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty. I present numerous examples of activists entering Democratic Party politics in order to exercise their voices. Using the 2016 and 2020 Sanders delegations to the Democratic National Conventions, I argued that a self-reinforcing relationship exists between activists’ personal identities, the level of control exerted by a campaign, and the potential for the development of collective identity. In the context of internal party elections at the state level. I present the ideal opportunities, as well as the limitations of certain strategies and tactics for networked mobilization. In the context of local groups, I introduce two typologies—Party-First and Party-Second groups—for classifying and examining progressive activist groups based on the differences in both how they define progressivism and also the selection of and discourses surrounding the tactics they employ for political action. Beyond these theoretical contributions, this dissertation also provides a comprehensive understanding of what party activism looks like beyond participation in either candidate campaigns or delegations to national party conventions.

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ABSTRACT

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John Remensperger

Michael X. Delli Carpini

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Introduction

On the final night of the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, I watched as the over 4,000 delegates made their way into the convention hall and onto the convention floor. Hundreds of delegates who were there to represent Senator Bernie Sanders, who had narrowly lost the nomination battle to Hillary Clinton several months earlier, entered the floor wearing matching yellow-green DayGlo t-shirts. The front of the shirts read “Enough is Enough,” in reference to a phrase Sanders regularly spoke on the campaign trail. When the lights went down, the shirts appeared to glow in the dark, and became fodder for journalists covering the convention, distracting from the choreographed program that had been crafted by the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign. This action was only one of many that I observed throughout the convention, as Sanders activists attempted to disrupt the convention in protest. The California Sanders delegation was particularly rowdy, modifying Hillary signs to read “LIAR,” leading chants in protest of individual speakers, and organizing a walkout from the floor after Clinton’s official nomination. In the years that followed Clinton’s subsequent loss, there has been a constant stream of stories in the popular press about conflict between factions of centrists and progressives and the ins-and-outs of battles over issues such as leadership positions, primary challenges, and proposed reforms to the nomination process.

Six months later, hundreds of progressive activists in California, some motivated by their experience with the Sanders campaign and others by the shocking ascendance of Donald Trump to the White House, ran to be local assembly delegates to the California
Democratic Party (CDP). They mobilized their networks to flood the Democratic Party’s local caucus meetings and took the majority of the available seats, turning out 300% more voters than participated in the previous election in 2015. This ideological shift in assembly delegates allowed six months later for the first serious challenge in an election for CDP chair since the 1980s.

For many of these new activists, their decision to enter Democratic Party politics was the result of a discussion that emerged both nationwide, in their own activist communities, and on social media following Sanders’ loss to Hillary Clinton. The conversation centered around whether progressive activists should #DemExit—leave the Democratic Party and try to build a new party that better represented their interests—or #DemEnter—focus their activism on the Democratic Party to bring the Party’s priorities to the left and more in line with their own (Vincent, 2017). This decision parallels Hirschman’s (1970) dichotomy of “exit” (p. 4)—leave the organization, and “voice—publicly expressing to leaders their dissatisfaction”—outlined in his seminal work describing the ways in which an organization’s members can exert their preferences onto the organization itself. Hirschman (1980) applied his theory to U.S. political parties, critiquing long-standing political science models (Downs, 1957; cf. Hotelling, 1929/1990) that depict disaffected U.S. party members as powerless in the two-party system because they have nowhere to go. He argued that they can also exert power via voice, and moreover “voice will be wielded with special energy and dedication by those who have nowhere to exit to” (Hirschman, 1980, p. 445).
Beyond the CDP delegate elections, progressive activists have taken other steps to engage in activism aimed at changing the Democratic Party. Chapters of new groups like Indivisible emerged with varied progressive goals related to the Democratic Party, joining the vast network of Democratic Clubs and left-leaning advocacy organizations that have been part of the California political landscape since the 1950s (J. Q. Wilson, 1962). Those clubs themselves saw an influx of new activists from across the ideological spectrum that constitutes the present-day Democratic Party. Our Revolution chapters formed in major cities with the explicit goal of organizing primary elections against Democrats they refer to as “corporate,” “centrist,” and “establishment” (Freedlander, 2019). Many of these groups use social media to leverage their network of progressives for message dissemination and online fundraising.

One might look at these activities and events as simply the regular ebb and flow of political opportunity structures and progressive activism in the Democratic Party. Indeed, in the recent past activists have used voice to oppose the Party’s nomination of Senator Hubert Humphrey [over Senator Eugene McCarthy] in 1968 (Rising, 1997), to support Senator Edward Kennedy’s 1980 bid to oust President Jimmy Carter as the presumptive Party nominee (A. Abramowitz, McGlennon, & Rapoport, 1983), and to push Party leaders to eventually oppose the Iraq War under George W. Bush in the 2000s (Heaney & Rojas, 2015). Progressive activists also contributed in the early 2000s to the rise of the Netroots, the blog-based online progressives who sought to “build a movement

1 Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) explain how the conflicts between movements and countermovements, the tactics they use, and the venues in which they interact, change in response to shifting political opportunities.
aimed at achieving lasting power in the Democratic Party by uniting grassroots progressives in common cause via the internet” (Kerbel, 2016, p. 6). Progressive activists have at other times chosen to exit, such as when many supported Green Party nominee Ralph Nader over Democrat Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election (Judis & Teixeira, 2004).

I argue that these past examples not only lack the combination of sustained, public conflict between many progressive activists and the Democratic Party establishment that are taking place today, but also lack the complex repertoire of strategies and tactics that new and long-standing Party activists are using in their attempts to bring about Party change. The 2016 election saw voters’ opinions about their own party reach record lows (A. I. Abramowitz & Webster, 2018), and the years since have seen progressive activists trying to change the Democratic Party from the inside by leveraging the affordances provided by the new information environment, and social media in particular. Specifically, they are augmenting traditional, in-person and online organizing with new types of “personalized political action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 773) that previously were more common in social movements (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). These efforts are being carried out towards not only protest actions, but also towards traditional citizenship goals such as holding public leaders accountable and educating activists and their communities. Changes in journalistic practice in the new information environment, such as the increasing use by journalists of social media trends as the starting points for crafting narratives (McGregor, 2019), have also allowed activists to amplify their voices in mainstream media coverage.
Further, I argue that the dichotomy of exit and voice limits how we understand these current intraparty conflicts in the Democratic Party. Indeed, for Hirschman (1970), the decision to use exit or voice is moderated by loyalty, or “special attachment to [the party]” (p. 77) which simultaneously reduces the likelihood of exit and encourages the use of voice. And yet, much of the recent increased use of voice, which has come from progressive activists who have entered party politics for the first time, lacks a sense of loyalty to the Democratic Party, and has the goal of bringing significant change to the Party itself. This dissertation thus expands on Hirschman’s model, explaining how both the personal identity of activists as well as the collective identity of their activist groups influence how they understand the Democratic Party, what they think it can be, and how they conceive of their role in and around it.

This dissertation also aims to shine a light on recent activities, events, and practices that are in conflict with scholarly literature on activists and U.S. political parties. For example, the influx of activists into local and state Party establishments marks a change from long-standing scholarly literature on the rise of candidate-centered politics and organizational decline of political parties (W. Crotty, 1980/1984; cf. Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). It also aims to challenge most recent scholarly accounts of party activists that either only acknowledge them solely for their role as the volunteer backbone of the Party’s electoral campaigns or present them as problematic extremists who contribute to polarization by daring to carry elaborate political opinions and preferences and act on them outside of the context of election cycles (Polsby, Wildavsky, Schier, & Hopkins, 1964/2016).
This research also shows that, while organizations continue to play an important role in progressive politics, there are also progressive networks engaged in party activism that rely less on organizational ties and more on elements of “crowd-enabled” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) processes than the “netroots” activist communities that emerged around Howard Dean’s presidential campaign and the anti-war movement in the mid-2000s. It also reveals a different orientation among these groups to the Democratic Party. Indeed, compared to the diverse combination of new Democratic Clubs and extraparty organizations that have arisen in the orbit of the California Democratic Party in recent years, the dozens of Democracy for America chapters that emerged in California in 2004 were all chartered as official Democratic Clubs, operating as ancillary Party associations in a range of local areas. Despite party conventions being written off by pundits and scholars as “scripted infomercials” (Karabell, 1998, p. 3) at worst and sites for activists to engage in mediated, “active spectatorship” (Kreiss, Meadows, & Remensperger, 2015, p. 3) at best, the 2016 Democratic National Convention was the site of numerous protests by left-leaning Democrats who had supported Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Primary (Stein, 2016a). The convention also saw on-site activism pushing for rule changes aimed at reducing the role of Party elites in the primary process (Strauss, 2016). Similarly, decades of scholarship on U.S. political campaigns has pointed to the prevalence of “controlled interactivity” in digital campaign platforms that restricts the ability of supporters to use it in flexible, democratic ways. This dissertation reveals how the absence of the formal Sanders campaign in California throughout 2016 led supporters to
use more flexible systems for enabling group interaction, decision-making, and by
extension, building collective identity.

Recent scholarship that conceives of parties as networks (M. Cohen, Karol, Noel, & Zaller, 2008) has begun to recognize party activists as players in coalitions of intense policy demanders within party networks but has done little to empirically explicate their role outside of cursory examinations of how they might influence presidential nominations. In terms of understanding activist motivations for continued participation in party politics, little has been done to build on long-standing studies focused on their desire for “purposive incentives” (Eldersveld, 1983; J. Q. Wilson, 1962). Similarly, studies of citizenship have focused extensively on the general decline of interest in participating in political parties in recent decades (Bennett, 2007) or on steps that may be taken to increase participation in parties through civic education (e.g. Levinson, 2010). Yet, there has been limited rich, empirical research to reveal the early experiences of new party activists after they have decided to get involved with a political party. Overall, the literature lacks a comprehensive understanding of what local party activism looks like outside of participation in either candidate campaigns or delegations to national party conventions. This is the gap my dissertation aims to fill.

In this introductory chapter, I first provide a brief overview of the theoretical and empirical literature around U.S political parties and their relationship to party activists in order to provide a baseline understanding of how scholars have discussed parties in a two-party democracy as well as the normative and empirical role of activists in those conceptions.
It then situates the recent anti-elite activism within a longer historical trajectory of critical moments in which public and activist expectations of participation in parties have increased and formal structures for such participation have been enacted.

Using Hirschman’s concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty as a framework, I then synthesize the empirical literature on party activism and the U.S. Democratic Party to unpack the decision to engage in activism from inside the Party.

Following from this background on party literature, I then argue that several fundamental changes have taken place in American politics that have contributed to current activist efforts aimed at the Democratic Party and make this a distinct moment requiring new research and scholarly reflection. First, changes in the U.S. media system and the rise of digital media have made it possible for non-mainstream groups to organize, fundraise and counter party statements made in legacy media. Second, changing notions of citizenship have significantly impacted how activists conceive of themselves in reference to parties and to institutions, and how they understand their own membership, affiliation, and activism within parties. I review the literature on both of these factors, highlighting the potential for new research in these areas and how it can contribute to political communication research. I then outline the specific questions I plan to explore via this dissertation, explain my interpretive research design, and then describe my case study as well as the qualitative methods I will employ to carry it out. In conclusion, I lay out some potential contributions of this dissertation to scholarly understanding of the interplay between media, activists, and political parties.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

The history of political parties over the last century can be characterized by a move toward increased participation by activists. Understanding the history of progressive party activism and the Democratic Party requires understanding changes that have taken place related to U.S. parties since the beginning of the 19th century. This first section interweaves this history with an overview of the theoretical and empirical literature around U.S political parties and their relationship to party activists. It aims to provide historical context, as well as a baseline understanding of how scholars have discussed parties in a two-party democracy as well as the normative and empirical role of activists in those conceptions.

Early History of Party Activism

Scholarly debates about the ideal role for political parties in democracy are themselves rooted in the varied conceptions of the normative role of individual citizens in the process of democratic governance. Michels (1915) observed that political parties tend towards oligarchy as they grow large and self-sustaining enough to require bureaucracies for efficient administration. He referred to these tendencies as “technical and practical necessit[ies]” (p.35) that outweigh the theoretical requirement that parties maintain a strong commitment to internal democracy, which can be seen as a formalized avenue for activist voice. Many of the normative discussions and debates about the role of activists and members in political parties center on whether or not these oligarchic tendencies are to be accepted as a necessary part of effective organization or as practices that should be guarded or fought against.
In the mid-20th century, political scientists in the U.S. were for the most part enamored with a number of theories of democracy and parties that fell under various headings and titles including The Competitive Model of Democracy, Elite Theory, and the Responsible Party Theory. These models and theories, while certainly different, presented political parties as crafted by groups of strategic leaders, including politicians aiming to provide distinct choices to everyday voters.\textsuperscript{2} While these scholars had differing opinions as to whether these elites should be elected (e.g. Duverger, 1959) or strong, organizational leaders (e.g. Schattschneider, 1942), they had in common that they either omitted or actively dismissed any role for grassroots activists. Schattschneider (1942), most associated with the Responsible Party Theory, argued against a role for grassroots activists, stating emphatically that “democracy is not to be found within the parties but between the parties” (p. 60).

That said, at the time many of them were writing there were few actually existing party activists of the type of volunteer or “amateur” (J. Q. Wilson, 1962) activist that we understand today. At the turn of 20th century, the major parties were basically organized as hierarchical systems of often corrupt power players beginning at the lowest level with local precinct party leaders and continuing up to state level bosses, interconnected with powerful business interests as well as local, state, and national politicians who were at best only accountable to one another (Hofstadter, 1963). Party activists typical of that era provided labor to Party leaders in exchange for employment, appointments, or other

\textsuperscript{2} For a discussion of various perspectives and conflicts related to defining political parties, see (White, 2006).
“spoils” upon the successful election of candidates. This exclusive system left little room for grassroots activists. Beginning in the Progressive era, this overt patronage system began to be dismantled, albeit slowly, from the U.S. party system. Many states also began to adopt direct primaries for certain elected offices, reducing the hegemony of the parties in determining the candidates voters could choose from. However, the decline of the Progressive movement in the late 1910s and early 1920s stagnated the push for reforms to party nomination processes aimed at reducing the hegemony of the parties in determining the candidates voters could choose from.

In the Democratic Party, its base of patronage-seeking activists was largely replaced with members of the labor movement, after President Franklin Roosevelt, in collaboration with labor leaders, incorporated the tenets of many labor parties into both the New Deal and the Democratic Party. This effectively solidified a decades-long alliance in which labor filled the activist void, left after the dismantling of the patronage system, by carrying out much of the Democratic Party’s grassroots organizing for elections. This alignment between the Party and labor also effectively negated the possibility of a leftist third party emerging around the labor movement in the United States. While the structural incentives in the United States were already tipped in favor of a two-party system, this alliance made it even harder.

The intraparty dynamics of this alliance were also observed by sociologist V.O. Key., who pointed to the labor leaders being “received more cordially by Democratic committees” (1942/1964). His writing about political parties during this period provided descriptive and theoretical insight into their structure and activities. He outlined a three-
part model for categorizing the functions of political parties: the party in government (partisan elected officials), the party in the electorate (partisan voters), and the party as organization (organizations, processes, leaders, and activists at the local, state, and national level). In the context of party as organization, he pointed out the potential for intraparty democracy at the local and state level could encourage one-party rule, with democracy taking place within rather than across parties. He also provided one on the first, although brief, accounts of the modern party activist group:

In a few states new-style organizations have developed based more on common policy outlook and less on a common ambition for patronage. These organizations seem to have a way of growing up outside the formal party organization, whose form and manner of operation are closely regulated by law. They also have in common an attempt to regain for the organized activists a determining voice in nominations, a reaction from experience with the direct primary, whose results often seem most erratic.

Wilson (1962) explored such groups in his study of the Democratic Clubs that emerged by the hundreds in the 1950s and 1960s in New York, Chicago, and California. He observed these clubs to be “purposive organizations” (p. 165) populated by activists driven by a “felt need to participate.” He further wrote with disdain about those who he referred to as “amateur democrats” (p. 2) arguing that intraparty democracy would create leadership and nominations contests in which individuals “outbid one another in an effort to prove their ideological purity,” resulting in candidates that are unable to compete in general elections. Larimore-Hall (2014), in the context of the California clubs, argued that their emergence revealed that partisan activists are motivated to engage in party politics even in the absence of any formal participatory structure, and indeed will create their own structures in “an act of partisan entrepreneurship” (p. 71).
Despite this increased grassroots activism, the party system in the U.S. had taken few steps in the first half of the century to open up their decision-making process to democratic decision-making. For example, at the presidential level, even with the adoption of the direct primary, a substantial percentage of party insiders—regulars, elected officials, local and state committee members—were needed for a candidate to win the party’s nomination. Because these insiders still controlled the nominations process, primaries during this period largely served as a means for candidates to prove their potential viability in a general election to those party insiders who still controlled the majority of delegate votes. This was the case in 1960, when John F. Kennedy used the primaries to assuage the concerns of Democratic Party leaders worried that his Catholicism would be a deal-breaker in southern states (Jamieson, 1996). This period of stability in nominations ended abruptly with the raucous 1968 Democratic Convention and the nomination of Hubert Humphrey (J. H. Aldrich, 1980).

The 1968 national convention, which will be discussed at length in the next section, resulted in reforms that created the presidential nominating process that, absent some minor changes between contests, exists in the Democratic Party to this day. Indeed, the 2016 reforms that now prevent superdelegates, Party leaders and elected officials, from voting for the presidential nominee on the first ballot, are the most substantial reforms to the system since its inception in 1972. This change also produced the most prolific period of scholarly work about party activists to date, as scholars engaged in often contentious debate over the advantages and disadvantages of this new role for party activists.
Hirschman’s Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, and some theoretical extensions

Hirschman’s (1970) dichotomy of exit and voice have been used to explore the ways in which dissatisfied members of organizations choose to act on their discontent. They can exit—leave the organization—or use voice—expressing their dissatisfaction to management, directly, indirectly, or via general protest. Several factors influence a member’s decision to exit or use voice. Members who have a sense of loyalty to the organization may be less likely to exit. Those who see nowhere to exit to—such as partisans in a two-party system—may also eschew the exit option, whereas those who see potential organizations to exit to—such as partisans in multiparty systems with proportional representation—may be more comfortable with exit.

Exit, Voice, and Parties

For voters and parties, variations in the structure of party systems can change the appeal of exit or voice as a means to achieve institutional change. In multi-party systems with proportional representation, voters can theoretically support any party knowing that, even if that party only achieves, for example, 15% of the vote share, that roughly 15% will be represented by that party in the legislative body\(^3\) and have the opportunity to form governing coalitions with other parties in exchange for guarantees that at least some of their issues will be prioritized by the government. Applying these dynamics to party

\(^3\) While proportional representation ideally works out to a 1:1 ratio of vote percentage to representation, in practice the apportionment of seats is much more complicated because a jurisdiction must select a finite number of representatives and it is not possible to elect a partial representative. Methods of apportioning seats have varied outcomes. For example, some benefit larger parties, while others benefit medium-sized parties at the expense of both large and small parties (Schuster, Pukelsheim, Drton, & Draper, 2003).
activists operating with specific political goals in such a multiparty system, it stands to
reason that they can easily choose to exit their party for strategic purposes and apply their
efforts to another party that can better help them achieve those goals. Due to the choices
available to activists in a multi-party system, loyalty likely plays a role in discouraging
activists from exiting parties.

By contrast, two-party systems, while simpler for voters, present those voters with
a choice between two “highly complex packages” (J. H. Aldrich, 1980, p. 6) that may
have many positions that are misaligned with their own views. And yet, to exit a major
party for a third party in the U.S. means a voter is giving up the right to vote for the
package they most prefer. As such, it has long been accepted within political science that
the way in which U.S. elections are carried out disincentivizes exit from the major parties
to smaller parties (Downs, 1957; Hotelling, 1929/1990). Duverger (1959) discussed the
psychological effect of feeling like one’s vote is wasted after defecting to a third party
that has virtually no chance of winning an electoral contest. Hirschman (1970) agreed
that, while in theory, partisans should be able to “exit” (p.4), thus expressing
discontentment with the party while also lending their support to a third party more in
line with their interests, doing so reduces an individual’s power, particularly if done in
the middle of an election cycle.

This dilemma logically applies to activists as well. As such, it may be the
systemic constraints of the two-party system, rather than loyalty, that keeps them from
exiting the major parties, as one party is likely more aligned with the political goals they
hope to achieve than the other. To that end, Hirschman (1970) argues that the ability to
exit is not the only way to wield power and that partisans in the U.S. have the ability to turn to voice as a strategy for wielding political power within parties.

**Conceptual Additions to Exit, Voice, and Loyalty**

Hirschman has published several articles reflecting on or updating his model of exit, voice and loyalty. In the context of the management of organizations, he articulated the concept of “institutionalized voice,” in which avenues for voice can be formally integrated into organizational processes as an arrangement. He argues that such practices do not necessarily suppress voice through hierarchy, but instead “institutionalize and routinize it” (Hirschman, 1980) Other scholars have attempted to expand on Hirschman’s concepts in a variety of disciplines and contexts. Management scholars have explained how disaffected employees can forego both exit and voice and instead engage in “neglect” (Farrell, 1983, p. 598) via acts like showing up late, missing entire shifts, and producing careless work.

O’Donnell (1986), writing about repressive governments, theorized a difference between “vertical voice,” which is directed at authorities or officials via methods like petitions, verbal communication, or protest, and “horizontal voice”, which takes place between peers. He argues that horizontal voice is a potential predecessor to the formation of a collective identity by admitting that: “we share some basic (if often fuzzy) ideas about what it is that makes us a ‘we,’” but also that we share some ideal and/or material interests, the pursuit of which supposedly will guide our collective action.” In a later work, Hirschman (1992) discussed this distinction between horizontal and vertical voice, arguing that the former is necessary to bring about the latter because it helps build
collective ties between members around shared concerns. This above conception of “we” has parallels in the field of social movements and the study of collective identity, which will be explored later in this literature review.

Attempting to apply these additional concepts to the relationship between activists and parties, it is clear that neglect does not provide an immediate contribution. Indeed, activists, if they have not exited, are by definition engaged in some kind of activity aimed at bringing about change. However, the concept of horizontal voice, and the role it plays in bringing about vertical voice, has direct parallels to the way in which the new information environment facilitates activist communication via social media, allowing for the growth of like-minded political communities that can be mobilized towards party change. Similarly, the concept of institutionalized voice has applicability to formal party processes, such as proposing changes to bylaws and submitting resolutions. As such, both of these concepts will be explored in detail throughout this dissertation.

Additionally, this dissertation will see the ongoing introduction of an additional concept, the self-explanatory but important concept of “entry.” Hirschman’s original model of exit, voice, and loyalty is about the choices existing members can make when they are dissatisfied with their organization. But this dissertation will show that the two-party dominance over U.S. politics leads even those outside the party to at times be incentivized by favorable political opportunities to enter the party and use its mechanisms to change it from the inside. The next section briefly summarizes the presumed relationship between party leaders, rank and file members, and activists in the 1940s through the early 1960s. I then turn to an overview of activist voices within the
Democratic Party beginning with the 1968 election, one of the clearest attempts by newly entering Party activists, both operating in and attempting to change the existing party system, to exercise voice on a large scale.

**Party Leaders, Rank and File Members, and Activists in the 1940s through the Early 1960s**

Studies conducted in the 1950s and early 1960s found minimal ideological differences between democratic activists and rank-and-file Party voters (Nexon, 1971) and even saw Democratic Party leaders to be slightly more progressive than their Party activists (McClosky, Hoffmann, & O’Hara, 1960). However, the absence of ideological Party activists from studies that focused on campaign volunteers and convention delegates does not mean that no ideological grassroots activism was taking place, they simply were not represented in the populations of these studies, which were limited to campaign volunteers and convention delegates. I argue that the over-reliance on these groups to study party activists is a problem that continues into today’s studies of new media and politics. Indeed, Wilson’s (1962) influential study of “amateur democrats” (p. 2), many of whom were catalyzed into politics by Adlai Stevenson’s failed presidential run in 1952, covered the same time period.

Wilson found that in large cities during the late 1940s and early 1950s, activists groups called “democratic clubs” were formed by (mostly middle-class) people he characterized by an idealistic, deliberate, and wonkish approach to politics and policy-making as well as a “felt obligation to participate” (p. 4) that was distinct from the pragmatic, interest-driven approach of “professional politicians.” Many of these groups were committed to the same tenets of internal democracy that would later characterize
many of the movements of the 1960s—such as the New Left and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee—that maintained a commitment to participatory democracy (Katsiaficas, 1987). The strategies and activities of these activists varied depending on the local party structure and political context (J. Q. Wilson, 1962), but their commitment to internal discursive processes followed by specific actions provides an example of how horizontal voice presages vertical voice in activist organizations.

In New York and Chicago, cities with strong Democratic Party machines, these activists worked within the Party’s systems to capture district level positions in the Party with the goal of changing the system directly, and used voice to rally against Party “bossism,” (p. 50) corruption, and patronage, and to influence Party decisions about the nomination of candidates for office. In Los Angeles, which lacked a strong Party structure, the clubs recruited and organized leftist candidates for local offices and congressional races. As it was illegal in California for the Party’s district and county central committees to endorse candidates in advance of primaries, these unofficial democratic clubs had the unique opportunity to utilize voice in an arena where the official voice of the Party was noticeably absent. This presented voters with a more outspoken liberal perspective than they likely would have garnered from the actual Party. These amateur democrats also saw it as their role to act as “the conscience of the Party” (p. 298), acting as a public interest counterweight to the narrow goals of special interests and working to ensure that like-minded candidates did not buck their ideology after winning elections.
That said, not all of these democratic clubs were successful in achieving broad political change. In New York, for example, the ability of activists to enter the formal Democratic Party structure and seek lasting reforms may have had long-standing repercussions for the Party machine. But in California, the success of Democratic clubs was more limited and incremental. They never successfully supplanted an incumbent with a club-endorsed candidate, though they were perhaps able to push them on particular issues. Their candidates had limited success in Republican districts, but many demographic and political factors at play in California at that time make it difficult to ascribe the success of these candidates to club activity. The clubs had little to no impact on presidential politics and were for the most part unrepresented at the national conventions (Nexon, 1971, p. 724). This would change in 1968.

**Activist Voice and the Democratic Party During and After 1968**

Beginning in 1968, Party regulars would see the rise of progressive activists entering the Party in an attempt to use voice to push the Democratic Party toward their more ideological ends. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century and into today, numerous organizations, movements, and citizen networks have attempted via various methods to transform the Democratic Party. There have also been specific moments where electoral campaigns have energized activists to use voice in their attempts to achieve Party change.

**Amateur Democrats**

The wave of scholarship that emerged after the 1968 Democratic Convention noted the existence of a dichotomy in the Democratic Party between more pragmatic activists—“Party regulars” (W. J. Crotty, 1983)—and the ideologically extreme Party activists—
“purists” (Polsby & Wildavsky, 1964/1976). The studies of the latter, and even the name “purists” given to describe the activists, imply that party rules were the only thing holding convention delegates back from endorsing unelectable candidates that matched their out-of-touch liberal ideology.

**Activist Organizations**

Beginning in the early 1970s, national formal organizations formed aimed at achieving leftist goals via the Democratic Party. Michael Harrington, a member of the Socialist Party, led a faction within the Party of members who supported the development of what he called the “left wing of the possible” within the Democratic Party (Aronowitz, 1995), a position that has been critiqued as a devil’s bargain by much of the ideological left. This view saw Harrington’s strategy as giving up on socialism and revolution in exchange for the maintenance of the welfare state and the potential for other incremental gains. That said, Harrington’s book, *The Other America*, arguably helped put poverty on the national agenda in advance of Johnson’s decision to pursue The Great Society (Aaron, 1978). His faction eventually left the Socialist Party to help form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee—now today’s Democratic Socialists of America—which still continues to work toward incremental change via local issue organizing, as well as the endorsing of progressive candidates including from both inside and outside the Democratic Party.

More recently, the early 2000s saw the rise of numerous groups and organizations aimed at increasing the voice of progressives in the Democratic Party. The “Netroots,” the loosely-connected network of “bourgeois elite” (Kerbel, 2016, p. 51) groups of online
progressives emerged and gained notoriety around their support for, and collaboration with, Vermont Governor Howard Dean’s anti-war campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2004. These activist networks, and their use of horizontal voice to build a community motivated to change the Democratic Party, were in many ways an organizational precursor to the social media-based networks of activists that have supported Sanders and other insurgent progressives beginning with the 2016 elections (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). Indeed, these early Netroots, which are discussed at length later in this dissertation, sought to “build a movement aimed at achieving lasting power in the Democratic Party by uniting grassroots progressives in common cause via the internet” (Kerbel, 2016, p. 6). After both Dean and fellow progressive Dennis Kucinich failed to win the nomination, the infrastructures of both campaigns were rolled into two national organizations, Democracy for America (formerly Dean for America) and the Progressive Democrats for America (Karpf, 2012; Selfa, 2008/2012). Both organizations aimed to develop and channel progressive grassroots energy into the Democratic Party and, though their heyday has likely passed, still exist today. Democracy for America (DFA) has a national organization, but also encourages the establishment of autonomous grassroots local chapters, which run trainings, and recruit and endorse local candidates (Karpf, 2012). Progressive Democrats for America (PDA) also claims chapters around the country, but has a more formalized structure for linking grassroots caucuses with Congressional institutions, such as the Congressional Progressive Caucus (Progressive Democrats of America, n.d.).
These organizations, along with Netroots activists and the peace and justice movement that emerged around the Iraq War, combined long-standing activist repertoires of physical protest with the affordances for voice provided by the new information environment, contributing to the Democratic takeover of both the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate in the 2006 midterm elections (Heaney & Rojas, 2015; Kerbel, 2016). They worked to elect Democratic candidates, including moderates, accepting the pragmatic idea that an incremental takeover of Congress by the Party would be an improvement over the status quo, in which Republicans controlled the presidency and both houses of Congress. The Party leadership simultaneously aligned itself with the movement in its messaging. The post-election experience of these organizations and the anti-war movement depicts one of the major frustrations of progressive groups working inside the Party. After the 2006 midterm elections, progressives who had worked to help return the party to power found hesitance from Party leaders to wind down the war in advance of the 2008 elections (Heaney & Rojas, 2015). The anti-war movement fizzled, as many of its supporters saw the Party’s gains in the midterms, followed by Obama winning the presidency in 2008, as a sign that they were now represented in the government. The U.S. presence in Iraq, and other areas of the Middle East disrupted by the war, continues to this day. Lance Selfa, a leftist critic of the Democratic Party, argues that the PDA, and other inside groups, serve Party elites by providing an avenue for the voices of leftists who would otherwise exit, and had exited in 2000, to the Green Party. Other leftist activists argue that these insider strategies can only achieve “limited tangible objectives” (Boggs, 1983, p. 347).
Candidate-Driven Change Movements

Whether or not to support Democratic candidates is also a subject of much debate on the left. Supporting a candidate is indeed a type of voice, and sometimes a particular candidate provides a means for activists to have their voice heard through formal channels when otherwise they would be limited to outsider strategies, such as organized protest. 1968 provides a case in point. Had the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, which turned many Democratic voters against the war, happened three months later, incumbent president Lyndon Johnson would likely have won the nomination, and the voice of the anti-war movement would have likely remained outside the Party. Instead, the events of the 1960s led activists to seek major reforms to the Democratic Party’s nominations processes. Three campaigns depict how electoral campaigns can catalyze outside actors to enter the Democratic Party—McCarthy’s anti-war campaign in 1968, George McGovern’s in 1972, and Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition in 1984.

In 1968, Eugene McCarthy declared himself a candidate for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination, opposing incumbent president Lyndon Johnson on an anti-war platform. Thousands of student activists chose to enter the Party and go “Clean for Gene,” cutting their hair, shaving their beards and going to work to support his campaign. In effect, he served as a vessel through which activists who were both frustrated with the political system and against the Vietnam war could enter the Party, channel their activism, and express clearly their dissatisfaction through the Party’s own channels (Rising, 1997). At the convention, anti-war and reform-oriented McCarthy delegates, along with many who had supported George McGovern and the late Robert F. Kennedy used vertical voice—public protests, chants, songs, as well as procedural
maneuvers, to express their dissatisfaction with the nomination of Hubert Humphrey, and to push the Party regulars who controlled the convention to adopt the resolutions, discussed earlier in this chapter, that led to the McGovern-Fraser commission, which increased public participation in the Party’s presidential nomination process. The media also played an adversarial role with the Party, as it was the lens through which the public viewed the division and dysfunction that took place both inside and outside the convention. The attempt by parties to avoid such public crises led to the subsequent era of “scripted” (Karabell, 1998, p. 3) political conventions and a more symbiotic relationship between the media and parties surrounding those events.

Four years later, many members of the New Left, including Tom Hayden, entered the Democratic Party and worked to help secure the Party nomination for anti-war liberal George McGovern. The combination of new entrants into Party activities and the new rules for delegate selection caused some to infer that the Party was now being driven by an extreme base whose ideological concerns outweighed party loyalty and the fielding of candidates who could win elections (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 1976; Polsby & Wildavsky, 1964/1976). They held up the nomination of George McGovern, and his lopsided loss to Richard Nixon as evidence of these concerns. Scholars have subsequently examined McGovern’s supporters and found these concerns to be overblown. His delegates were concerned about electability and also flexible on McGovern’s shifting issue positions as he entered the general election campaign (W. J. Stone & Abramowitz, 1983). Similarly, when Senator Edward Kennedy challenged incumbent President Jimmy Carter in 1980 and setup a convention battle between the parties liberal and centrist wings, delegates that
ideologically aligned with Kennedy eventually fell in line for Carter, citing his electability and lead in the delegate count. These works challenged early concerns by pundits and scholars (e.g. Polsby & Wildavsky, 1964/1976) about “purists” controlling the Party and reveal the high level in both parties of party loyalty amongst party activists as “one of the last bastions of partisanship” [Abramowitz1983, p. 1014] at odds with both the declining party ID in the electorate and the continued rise of single-issue interest groups.

In 1984, Jesse Jackson sought the Democratic nomination and used the primaries to build what he called a “Rainbow Coalition” that included minorities, gays and lesbians, students, peace activists, and environmentalists who wanted a strong populist response to the neoliberal policies of Ronald Reagan (Barker & Walters, 1989). Because Mondale, the establishment favorite, had the support of traditional political groups, including the African American political elite and the AFL-CIO, Jackson brought, from places like African American churches, new people into Democratic Party politics who had not previously engaged. Due to the decentralized structure of his organization, he also had to depend solely on volunteer efforts from local activists who often set their own agenda for the campaign. Many of the grassroots supporters who formed the Rainbow Coalition were less interested in Jackson as a candidate than in the way in which he was pushing the nominations conversation to the left by introducing new issues into mainstream political discourse (Askenaz, 1986, May). For many, the Rainbow Coalition was not just a campaign, but a model for what they wanted the Democratic Party to be—inclusive, and committed to economic, racial justice, and social justice. After his loss, a
new national organization committed to social democracy and diversity, the National Rainbow Coalition, a potential “confederation of progressive activists” (Rogers, 1990) with locations in 29 states was formed. While some chapters effectively lay dormant until Jackson’s next run, others allowed local activists to develop local political programs and leaders. Katsiaficas (1987) argues that Jackson’s position as the sole figurehead of the Rainbow Coalition limited its potential longevity as a movement to change the Democratic Party and society writ large. While the coalition that Jackson brought into the Party remained, his vision of a justice-focused, Rainbow Coalition was ultimately passed over as the Party shifted further to the center in the 1990s.

**Looking forward: Lessons from Activist Voices and the Democratic Party During and After 1968**

This section has depicted many examples of how progressive activists have used voice to pursue change from within the Democratic Party. It also makes clear many of the challenges activists have historically faced when trying to use voice to enact such changes, especially systemic change, such as the regular nomination by the Party of leftist candidates, or a durable ideological shift away from the center. Critics of these insider strategies argue that the Party’s embeddedness in systems of power—e.g. the political bureaucracy, business, and trade union leadership—prevents permanent change from taking place as a result of activism from within the Party (Selfa, 2008/2012). And yet, activists continue to organize attempts to achieve such changes.

The events experienced by the activists that are the focus of this dissertation draw parallels with many of the historical examples discussed in this section. In many ways, the progressive, anti-establishment, and discursive nature of the amateur democratic clubs
of the 1950s parallels the local progressive groups discussed in Chapter 4, as many are increasingly using horizontal and vertical voice to try to achieve progressive change via the contemporary Democratic Party. Similarly, there are certainly tactical similarities between the raucous anti-war delegates at the 1968 convention and the 2016 Sanders delegates discussed in Chapter 2.

But beyond these formative experiences that drew many of them to enter the Party, there are also comparisons in their subsequent actions. Many activists from the New Left, who had eschewed mainstream politics, entered the Democratic Party via the McGovern and Jackson campaigns but were unable to bring about a sustained leftward trajectory for the Party. Progressive activists who were dissatisfied with Jimmy Carter supported Senator Edward Kennedy’s challenge, but once it was clearly unviable, they threw their support behind Carter. The coalition that included the progressive Netroots and the anti-war movement in the early 2000s worked to elect both progressive and centrist Democrats with the goal of taking back the House and Senate as an incremental step on the way to their larger goal of changing the Democratic Party. And yet, after the 2016 primary, many Sanders supporters did not fall in line and support Hillary Clinton. It is the aim of this dissertation to not only contribute narratives events to the scholarly history of progressive activism, but to unpack some of the strategic choices that cynics might see as ideological contradictions or evidence of co-optation and to highlight those moments where activists choose to be confrontational with the Democratic Party. The subsequent sections outline how changes in the makeup of the U.S. media ecosystem, including the rise of the new information environment, combined with changes in how
people conceive of themselves as citizens and in relation to parties, has uniquely impacted the ability of activists to challenge parties.

**Old Media, New Media, and Changing Party Power**

In the imaginary of U.S. political culture, there has long been the ideal of the “lonely pamphleteer,” or “soapbox orator,” speaking publicly against powerful institutions by contributing to public debate. And yet, using voice to effect change on long-standing institutions, such as political parties, requires reaching a larger audience than is possible for the isolated individual. Historically, activists have engaged in organized collective action to garner media attention (Sobieraj, 2011), increase public awareness of issues (Shirky, 2011), and apply pressure to intransigent institutions. Early writings about digital media and democracy argued that networked technologies would reduce the need for such organizations—that “the lonely pamphleteer can, with relative ease, share his or her viewpoints with the world” (e.g. Rivas-Rodriguez, 1998, p. 125). Subsequent empirical studies found such views to be overoptimistic (cf. Hindman, 2008) and, that in fact, an average activist would potentially reach more people passing out pamphlets alone on the street than by blogging. Despite this pessimistic view of individual activists, numerous theories and empirical studies show how digital technologies have provided new opportunities for groups of activists to amplify their voice via organized collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In the context of the 2016 election, scholars have documented how activists are using digital technologies, particularly social media, to put pressure on U.S. political parties in ways previously observed by those who study social movements (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). To understand how such change might
be taking place, it is necessary to understand how parties have maintained power even in
the face of the reforms that ostensibly opened nominations up to the public, and to
examine ways in which aspects of digital technologies may allow activists to challenge
that power. One of the main ways in which parties have historically maintained power is
by leveraging their relationships with mainstream journalism organizations and other
media elites to influence the media agenda and craft dominant narratives.

**Media, Party Elites, and the Invisible Primary**

In the party primaries, several scholars highlight the role of media in influencing the
outcomes of these contests. Much of this work focuses on presidential nominations and
argues that, the reforms enacted in the early 1970s reduced the power of party elites in
nominations and resulted in contests that were “candidate-centered” (Wattenberg, 1991,
p. 1), with individual campaigns competing with one another and relying on building
their own organizational capacity rather than relying on that of the parties. Although
those reforms ostensibly placed the bulk of nomination decisions in the hands of primary
voters, many argue that they actual made the media the elite “power center” (e.g. W. J.
Crotty, 1985, p. 129) of the nominations process (Hagen & Mayer, 2000), and that
nominations are largely decided in the media in the months before the first primary votes
are cast.

Arthur T. Hadley (1976) referred to this dynamic as the “invisible primary”
(p. xiii), in which the nomination battle has unofficially begun but exists outside the
context of the formal rules that define primary elections. He argues that, with few
exceptions, the candidate who wins the invisible primary has a clear path to the
nomination that is theirs to lose. Other scholars refer to this pre-primary period as the “early days” (Kessel, 1980/1992), the “surfacing stage” (Trent & Friedenberg, 1991), or the “exhibition season” (Barilleaux & Adkins, 1993; Cook, 1989). Hadley (1976) explains that winning is a function of candidate performance on six “tracks” (p. 14)—psychological, staff, strategy, money, media, and constituency—in which candidates compete in advance of the primaries. The “media track” (p. 17) is conceptualized as the place where candidates compete to both be accepted by journalists as serious, viable candidates and to garner non-negative press coverage, but a close reading of Hadley’s work finds mediated elements to the other five tracks as well.

Eventually, some scholars began to bring the concept of party back into the literature, reconceptualizing them not as the federated, elite-driven organizations of the pre-reform period, but as networks of elected officials, party leaders, activists, fundraisers, interest group leaders, and candidate campaigns (C. Cohen, Karol, Noel, & Zaller, 2001). In their aptly titled book, The Party Decides, Cohen, Karol, Noel, and Zaller push back on the candidate-centered theories of nominations, arguing that the absence of both strong, organizational party structures as well as the “smoke filled rooms” (p. 13) of party insiders common at pre-reform conventions has not precluded these party networks from exerting power over various tracks in the invisible primary, particularly the money and media tracks. Nominations processes are thus conceptualized as long-running, public, mediated conversations amongst party insiders as to which candidates can both hold the party’s various interests together and also compete to win the general election. These candidates are conferred with the financial and organizational
resources necessary to compete for the nomination and provided with positive media coverage and momentum in the form of public, elite endorsements and media statements touting their viability in the eventual general election.

Elite endorsements made by party leaders and covered by the media have been shown to influence the choices of lower-level activists as well as voters (C. Cohen et al., 2001; M. Cohen et al., 2008; Steger, 2000, 2007), especially in scenarios with candidates that are ideologically similar, such as the 2008 Democratic primary between Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton (Jamieson & Hardy, 2009). They also provide candidates with positive media coverage, encourage subsequent endorsements from other elites, increase a candidate’s standing in public polls, and increase a candidate’s fundraising capacity (M. Cohen et al., 2008). The power of party endorsements extends beyond presidential primaries, and influences state-level (Bardwell, 2002), congressional (Dominguez, 2011), and local primaries (Nowlan & Moutray, 1984). In many cases, state and local parties will endorse a specific primary candidate, discouraging potential challengers and resulting in uncontested primaries (Bardwell, 2002). Following the invisible primary, voters go to the polls but are presented with a “stacked deck” (Steger, 2000, p. 728) of predetermined candidates or even individual candidates for nomination.

Despite activist employing tactics such as organizing for collective action, attempting to engage in agenda building, and garnering media influence via protest, it is clear that the interplay between legacy media and political parties provides the latter with significant advantages for influencing both debates around issues and nominations. However, research into the changes to media systems and practices brought about by
digital technologies reveal new ways in which outside groups can influence media narratives and challenge powerful institutions. Recent presidential primaries have also begun to deviate from the outcomes one would expect if party networks truly controlled the invisible primary. Scholarly work on the digital media practices of journalists, political elites, campaigns, and activists can offer some insight into these changing nominations processes.

**Digital Media and Party Activism**

Since the early days of the internet, scholars have observed ways in which digital media has impacted the relationship between citizens and political institutions. As early as 2000, scholars were discussing ways in which online action “transgresses and/or inverts established social and political mores, norms and hierarchies” (Foot & Schneider, 2002). By 2003, political blogs were providing new avenues for progressive activists to use voice to critique mainstream politics and garner information about like-minded candidates (Kerbel, 2016). As the adoption of digital media became more widespread, campaigns and activists continued to develop tactics for mobilization and information dissemination alongside the traditional hierarchical structures and gatekeeping practices of the mainstream media (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2019). In electoral politics, the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns famously balanced both a strong traditional media campaign with disciplined online systems that balanced interactivity and control (Chadwick, 2017; Kreiss, 2016).

By 2016, the interplay between traditional and digital media logics during the presidential primaries contributed to the unexpected rise of insurgent candidates Donald
Trump in the Republican Party and Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Party. While only Trump went on to win the nomination, Sanders succeeded in forcing an unexpectedly contentious primary with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, capturing 46% of the Democratic Party’s elected delegates (RealClearPolitics, 2016). Neither Trump nor Sanders were favored by those party elites who scholars had long argued decide the outcome of each party’s invisible primary and create the “stacked deck[s]” (Steger, 2000, p. 728) of party-approved candidates going into the early primaries (M. Cohen, Karol, Noel, & Zaller, 2016). However, much of the theory on the invisible primary was developed during a “media regime” (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011, p. 16)—“a historically specific, relatively stable set of institutions, norms, processes, and actors that shape the expectations and practices of media producers and consumers”—characterized by substantial control over political discourse by political and media elites. As this regime has broken down due to political, economic, cultural and technological factors, Chadwick (2017) has argued that a “hybrid media system” (p. 4) has emerged, created by the interplay between the logics of new media and those of traditional journalistic organizations, allowing opportunities for other challengers (Kriesi, 2004, p. 196), including activists, to gain access to and influence media.

The new dynamics of this hybrid media system have been observed in the context of social movements, as networked technologies have contributed to the practices of activists around the global justice movement (Bennett, 2003; Lievrouw, 2011), the Arab Spring Tufekci & Wilson (2012), and Occupy (Wolfson, 2014). In Europe, multi-party systems have seen the rise of anti-establishment “digital parties” (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 3),
such as Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy, that build their strategies around digital platforms and offer a variety of digital tools for citizen participation that ostensibly (cf. Mikola, 2017) influence these organizations’ political activities. In the UK and the U.S., where two major parties dominate, the last two decades have seen movements, including Momentum, the Tea Party, and the Netroots, employ digital tools to help mobilize activists to use voice to push those parties toward their preferred ideological ends (Agarwal et al., 2014; Chadwick, 2013/2017; Kerbel, 2016). Cases like these all have unique political, economic, and social factors that impact the adoption, implementation, and potential efficacy of digital media for activism. Examining them together reveals specific affordances—ways in which a technology encourages and enables users to perform certain activities (Gibson, 1977; Norman, 1999)—that technologies can potentially provide to amplify the voices of citizens, activists, and political organizations.

Using examples from empirical studies of digital technology use by citizen activists, parties, candidates, and social movements, this section first outlines how the rise of digital media has provided numerous affordances that allow activists to use voice to influence the media agenda and counter dominant narratives in new ways. It then explains how these affordances also allow activists to expand their repertoires—“the whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals” (Tilly, 1977) for interaction, engagement, and mobilization, while also noting ways in which established parties have simultaneously adopted digital media strategies to their own ends. It then outlines how these affordances can both allow
insurgent candidates and the activists who support them to combat the influence of the party elite over the invisible primary, and support activists working towards bringing long-standing change to major parties from the inside. It concludes with a discussion of ways in which the affordances of digital media, and social media in particular, have contributed to a muddying of the boundaries between exit and voice, and allowed activists the hybridized choice of “qualified exit.”

**Influencing media and countering dominant narratives**

In discussing the hybrid media system, Chadwick (2017) notes that, while elites in traditional media continue to hold powerful positions in the media environment, the interplay between bloggers, citizen activists, politicians, and other actors has created “complex assemblages” (p. 63) in which these diverse actors exchange information and interact with one another. Chadwick refers to these multi-actor environments as “political information cycles” (p. 63). He explains how the integration of Facebook and Twitter into the practice of journalism allows outsiders greater influence on the media by activists who utilize these platforms. “Ad hoc discursive communities” (p. 77) of citizens can form around live events, such as political debates, and protests. Such communities can critique mainstream coverage of events, as early Black Lives Matter activists did to reports that emerged about the shooting of an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. Similarly, right-wing bloggers played a major role in amplifying and disseminating the conservative critiques of CBS Evening News Anchor Dan Rather’s 2004 critical report about George W. Bush’s entry into and performance in the Texas Air National Guard (Cornfield, Carson, Kalis, & Simon, 2005). The scandal that surrounded
the veracity of this report led to Rather’s demotion and eventual ouster from CBS News. Though many studies have shown that most news still emerges from legacy outlets (Graber & Dunaway, 1980/2017), activists have had success at using digital media to distribute non-mainstream stories to influence media coverage of contentious events (e.g. C. W. Anderson, 2010). In each of these examples, actors were able to extend the life of these news events to achieve their political goals.

The digital media practices of citizens and activists can also influence the media in less direct ways. Recent studies of journalistic practices reveal that many reporters have come to use social media as a real-time gauge for public opinion surrounding political events, such as debates, and can potentially select those online narratives that support their pre-existing take on the story (McGregor, 2019). Information released by organizations such as Wikileaks can spread quickly through digital networks with significant political consequences. Cables sent by U.S. diplomats disparaging Tunisian autocrat Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali energized activists in late 2010 during the revolution that led to his overthrow (Zayani, 2015). Social media allowed citizens to rapidly spread the emails that Russia hacked and stole from the Democratic National Committee’s servers in 2016, creating a crisis for Hillary Clinton’s campaign in advance of the 2016 Democratic National Convention. The leak introduced negative coverage about Clinton into the media agenda that blunted the negative effect on Trump of the just-released Access Hollywood Tape that showed him admitting to sexual assault (Jamieson, 2018). It is clear from these examples that the new information environment has significantly changed the selection of and method through which information is disseminated to the
public, and how the public interacts with and consumes information. For individual
activists and political organizations, it has also provided ways to reach and mobilize
constituencies in new ways.

*Interaction, engagement, and mobilization*

Several scholars have discussed ways in which activists have harnessed new media to
increase participation in movement activities. These writings have focused primarily on
large-scale protest events or on digital activism taking place in new media environments.
Much of the early research in this area discussed the “Battle of Seattle,” in which activists
in the global justice movement used new media to organize massive protests at the annual
World Trade Organization meeting in 1999 (Bennett, 2003; Bimber, 2003; Kahn &
Kellner, 2004; Lievrouw, 2011). These activists engaged in “mediated mobilization”
(Lievrouw, 2011, p. 25) in which individuals use horizontal voice via technologies like
social media, websites, and email listservs to build and maintain online networks based
on shared goals and values, eventually mobilizing these networks to collectively use
vertical voice to coordinate simultaneous demonstrations and to influence traditional
media. Other social movement scholars have focused on issues of resources in the
emergence of “multi-issue, internet-mediated organizations” (Carty, 2011), like
MoveOn.org, that use digital media to mobilize supporters around multiple issues over
long periods of time with a small staff and low overhead. Karpf (2012) argued that new
media have allowed movement organizations to operate with limited staff and overhead,
reducing the costs of collective action and resulting in new types of political expression.
In terms of mobilization tactics, Carty (2011) highlighted MoveOn’s successful online
fundraising appeals, two-way communication with members via online forums, and increasing awareness of public issues as emblematic of this new type of organization.

Similar tactics were employed by the Netroots and Howard Dean’s presidential campaign during the 2004 Democratic presidential primary. Though the Netroots have lasted much longer than Dean’s unsuccessful campaign, it is difficult to separate the digital practices of the Netroots in 2004 from that of the Dean campaign, largely because he relinquished so much control of messaging and organizing to these online activists (Teachout & Streeter, 2007). The campaign used digital tools to collect email addresses of individual supporters and subsequently target them with messaging, fundraising appeals, and instructions on how to sign up online to host or attend a local event with other Dean supporters (Kreiss, 2012). The Netroots overwhelmingly championed his candidacy and made their own appeals to their audiences on Dean’s behalf, amplifying his messaging and rallying support for fundraising in advance of the federal fundraising deadlines that precede media reporting on fundraising totals. This digital collaboration allowed the campaign to raise substantial funds during the pre-primary period without high-dollar donations from the Democratic Party elite (J. Aldrich, 2009) and organize hundreds of local activities (Kreiss, 2012).

As digital technologies have become more complex and their adoption more widespread, the ways in which they can be utilized for engagement have become more advanced. Digital media has changed how activists can respond to political opportunities. The so-called “Arab Spring” in late 2010 and early 2011 saw citizens use social media technology as part of their mobilization tactics against repressive governments in the
Contrasting long-standing theories of collective action and their concern about free riders (cf. Olson, 1965/1965), Bennett and Segerberg (2013) discuss two types of “connective action” (p.5)—“the forms of digitally networked action that result from large-scale personalized and digitally mediated political engagement.” In connective action, digital media not only “connects actors across time and space” (p. 15) and allows them to engage with and commit to political action, but also allows them to share personal stories and other content aimed at mobilizing their networks also to participate. Such actions can be grouped into two categories: “organizationally-enabled collective action” (p. 13), organized by networks of organizations coordinating behind the scenes, and “crowd-driven collective action” (p. 13), which lacks central or lead actors. An examination of both categories makes clear how they allow for increased horizontal, and subsequently vertical, voice.

In organizationally-enabled collective action, organizational actors link with one another around common themes, and use their skills to create spaces for horizontal voice, such as official twitter streams, where they can highlight topics and frames, time actions, and simultaneously activate networked supporters to use vertical voice both at protest sites and online around the world. Movements like the indignados in Spain and Occupy in the U.S. have leveraged their membership to create user-generated content for “crowd-sourced social justice blogs” (Gerbaudo, 2017b). Similarly, electoral campaigns have shown a trend toward “microsites” (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015). The Obama campaign combined microsites with the interactive features of online forums to crowdsource the
process of fact-checking to its supporters by creating the websites KeeptheGOPhonest.com, Attackwatch.com, and Keepinghisword.com, which allowed supporters to both supplement the work of the campaign’s fact checkers and also feel a sense of involvement with the campaign. Compared to the relinquishing of control that Dean gave to the Netroots, the trend in political campaigns, including Obama’s has been toward “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley, 2014, p. 2) in which campaign volunteers feel they have choices (i.e. what to share, what to talk about on social media, etc.) but they are limited to those choices the campaign wants them to have.

By contrast, the concept of crowd-enabled connective action is in many ways a movements version of the idea of “organizing without organizations” (Shirky, 2008). In this typology, individuals from a variety of networks join digitally together and engage in horizontal voice around a specific (sometimes broad) event, concern, or issue. As more people join, their own personal networks are leveraged and brought into the fold, rapidly expanding the overall network. These networks can rise up quickly, cover large distances, and respond rapidly. In terms of organization and decision-making, the diversity of priorities and backgrounds of the larger network often impedes the ability to coalesce into a unified vertical voice with single specific actions or to sustain themselves after the moments of contention during which they were formed. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) use the case of Occupy to examine crowd-enabled connective action, citing its broad digital reach, rapid growth via network effects in many locales worldwide, grounding in public space, and difficulty translating its initial actions into sustained advocacy.
Despite such difficulties and challenges, the affordances, and by extension potential opportunities, that digital media provide for activists are clear. But digital media are obviously not solely a tool for activists. The same powerful institutions that activists use digital media to challenge also develop their own digital practices that can limit the voice of activists. For example, Egypt, one of the countries that famously utilized social media to organize during the Arab Spring, has recently seen the government block websites, arrest bloggers, and engage in other acts of digitally-mediated repression (Deibert, 2015). Other institutions, including parties, also have the opportunity to leverage digital media toward their preferred political ends.

**Digital Media and Party Power**

It is important to note that while digital media provide numerous affordances for activists looking to put pressure on U.S. political parties, digital media also provides parties with affordances that can limit challenges from activists. Processes of “normalization” (Margolis & Resnick, 2000) can lead to the same inequalities that have long existed in offline politics being replicated in online spaces. Indeed, political elites still maintain strong relationships with the legacy news organizations (Wolfe, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2013) that most often generate the content that appears in social media and on digital news websites (Hindman, 2008). Further, though journalists may be interested in broad Twitter trends as a barometer for public opinion (McGregor, 2019), at the individual level it is often elites on Twitter that influence the agendas of journalists (Parmelee, 2014).

The platforms through which citizens participate also matter. During the early days of digital campaigning, Howard (2006) argued that the rise of digital campaigning
gave rise to a new elite class of political technocrats whose decisions about the architecture of platforms for online engagement had negative consequences for democracy. He argued that, despite the democratic potential of digital campaigning, these systems reduced online participation to those acts preferred by campaigns, restricted certain types of political engagement and effectively creating “managed citizens” (p. 170). A similar, though less polemic argument is made by Baldwin-Phillipi (2015) who points to the increased movement of online campaigning to social media as limiting the participatory possibilities of users. Contrasting the blogs, websites, and microsites that were popular in the 2004 and 2008 campaigns with social media, she cites “the material constraints of social media exert[ing] a more limiting effect on the type of content that can be circulated” (p. 132). Because these sites are owned by third parties, organizations and campaigns are often limited to the logics imposed upon them by the corporate owners of these platforms (Gillespie, 2010). Parties and campaigns face similar limitations in the various systems they use for fundraising, volunteer management, and campaign data.

The ability to collect and analyze campaign data is one of the main affordances provided to parties by digital media. In the mid-2000s, Party chair and former presidential candidate Howard Dean leveraged the digital media prowess of his 2004 campaign staff to create a national voter database for the Democratic Party, providing the Party’s candidates with databases and tools to target voters for volunteer recruitment, fundraising, and voter turnout efforts (Kreiss, 2012). These systems were deployed during the 2006 midterm elections as part of Dean’s “50 state strategy” and leveraged by
Obama during both the 2008 primary and general election. Compared to the Republican Party which has historically had a more federated system of state voter databases, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) maintains the relationship with a single national database vendor, but the state parties create rules about which candidates can access the Party’s data. As such, the Party has the potential to control, and potentially limit access to, databases that would allow insurgent campaigns to better compete with establishment candidates. As more Democratic incumbents have faced primary challenges from the left in recent years, media reports have revealed that some states prohibit database access by candidates challenging incumbent Democrats (e.g., Lapowsky, 2017). In practice, this means that challengers begin campaigns with limited or no knowledge about the political leanings over individual voters.

In addition to the Party-sponsored database systems, separate ecosystems of third-party digital strategy firms have emerged around both major parties (Kreiss, 2016), offering campaigns hundreds of data and analytics products and services that can help inform and carry out their campaign strategies. While small-dollar fundraising might allow the campaigns of primary challengers to afford these various services, many of these firms are tied up in the larger network of the Democratic Party. There is evidence that the Party is leveraging the scale of their campaign organization to limit access to these firms by Democrats challenging incumbents. In March 2019, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the arm of the Democratic Party that works to support Democrats in close races, released a statement that it would “not conduct business with, nor recommend to any of its targeted campaigns, any consultant
that works with an opponent of a sitting Member of the House Democratic Caucus” (Lacy, 2019). Effectively, this forces digital firms to choose between soliciting clients from the entire network of Party-approved campaigns and supporting challenger candidates.

**Digital Media, the Invisible Primary, and Party Activism**

While digital media have afforded advantages that benefit both activists and parties, there are specific ways in which digital media have the potential to disrupt certain mechanisms—campaign financing and media strategy—through which parties have historically influenced the invisible primary. These media also allow activists to leverage networks of citizens activists toward their political goals.

As discussed above, influencing the outcome of the invisible primary requires party elites to engage in a months-long, publicly mediated conversation, during which they coalesce around specific candidates and publicly make clear their endorsements, creating narratives that have historically been salient with the public and with party activists. In the hybrid media system, digital media can allow bloggers, citizen activists, non-mainstream candidates, and other “challengers” (Kriesi, 2004, p. 196) to use voice to both engage in the mediation and critique of the rallies and Sunday talk shows in which these endorsements are announced and to build separate agendas for niche online audiences (Pfetsch, Miltner, & Maier, 2015). These counter narratives can make it difficult for a dominant narrative to emerge around specific candidates.

Party elite also provide advantages to specific candidates by providing them with access to networks of party donors. Digital tools for fundraising from small-dollar donors
can help a non-elite candidate raise substantial funds during the pre-primary period without high-dollar donations from party elite (J. Aldrich, 2009). Because the media use fundraising totals as a metric for ranking candidates, successful online fundraising can provide insurgent candidates with positive coverage in the horse-race media reports that are so prevalent in U.S. campaign reporting. Indeed, during the 2004 Democratic Primary, Howard Dean entered the Iowa Caucus as the front runner in national polls (McSweeney, 2007) in large part due to his success in leveraging online, small dollar fundraising. Successful small-dollar fundraising can also provide insurgent candidates with the potential resources to purchase advertising and assemble staff beyond early states like Iowa and New Hampshire, which was historically difficult without the support of party donors. Though Obama in 2008 was by no means an insurgent candidate ideologically—his views were very similar to Clinton’s (Jamieson & Hardy, 2009)—his ability to replenish his campaign coffers by repeatedly soliciting small donations from his email list shows how a less established candidates can compete in an extended primary against an opponent whose wealthy donors had already given the maximum contribution allowable under the law (Wilcox, 2008).

Outside of electoral campaigns, research on digital activism aimed at pushing the Democratic Party to the left has largely focused on the Netroots, and the multi-issue, internet mediated activists organizations like MoveOn, Democracy for America and the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, all of which have their roots in the early 2000s. Almost two decades later, many of the Netroots sites, such as the Daily Kos and Talking Points Memo still exist as sites for news and commentary in the progressive
community. Dozens of internet-based organizations have emerged, and the few with large memberships, such as MoveOn, have garnered large enough memberships to build their own systems for engaging in “analytic activism” (Karpf, 2016, p. 3), allowing them to not only disseminate activist messaging, but also to analyze member data in order to improve strategy and increase mobilization potential.

However, these updates to the literature focus largely on how digitally-enabled activist organizations are increasing their digital capabilities and using them for progressive activism. What has not been explored is the degree to which crowd-enable connective action, facilitated by the new information environment and independent of these formal organizations, is potentially allowing loose networks of activists to coalesce around their shared political interest in enacting ideological change within the Democratic Party. These changes in how party activism is carried out push the limits of Hirschman’s dichotomy of exit and loyalty. Indeed, the fluidity of social media networks allows disaffected party activists with depleted loyalty to their party, to physically exit the party and remain digitally engaged in horizontal voice with the broad network of activists working to change the party from the inside.

While digital media has contributed to these blurred lines between exit and voice, and to changing activists’ practices, other political, social, and cultural factors also play a role in determining when and how citizens choose to engage politically. I argue that changes in how individuals conceive of themselves as citizens and in reference to political institutions has contributed to the current surge in party activism.
Citizenship

The way in which “citizenship” is practiced in the United States is complicated and has changed significantly since the nation’s founding in the late 18th century (Schudson, 1998). Many scholarly works, particularly those following Putnam (2000/2014), have looked to understand the arguably declining levels of traditional civic participation—including membership in political parties—in the U.S. As early as 1984, studies of partisanship and voting behavior revealed the weakening of long-standing electoral alignments, as well as increased fragmentation and volatility in political parties (Dalton, 1984). Attempts to explain the decline of party identification cited the increasingly personal, candidate-driven campaigns reducing the efficacy for voters of partisan cues, and by extension party loyalty (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). Beyond parties, studies revealed increased indifference to mainstream politics (Mair, 2006), while surveys of the electorate increasingly revealed a disconnect between the government and the concerns of citizens, especially those from the millennial generation (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014).

To understand more than the decline of traditional types of citizenship, many scholars argued for broadening our conception of civic or political participation to include alternative forms of political action beyond voting, campaigning, and involvement in traditional civil society. In generation-based studies about conceptions of citizenship, there is now a prevalent dichotomy of the dutiful citizen (DC), whose voting-centric and traditionally obligatory civic life is based in civil society organizations and political parties, and the actualizing citizen (AC), who is motivated to follow their own pursuits, is less engaged in traditional politics, and prefers “loosely networked activism to
address issues that reflect personal values” (Bennett, 2007, p. 14). This type of citizen is often drawn to the types of “connective action” discussed in the previous section. Other scholars explain that that while such dutiful means of participation—including joining political parties—have declined, this is due to individuals engaging in “political choice” (Thorson, 2015) from a wide range of activities, including types of “engaged citizenship,” (Dalton, 2008) which involves norms of self-expression, including direct action and volunteering.

Relatedly, citizens engaging in politics in the new information environment now increasingly prefer to engage in “personalized political action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 773) which lends itself more to issue-based activism than institutionalized party politics. Accordingly, the U.S. has continued to see citizens, especially the young and the educated, move from dutiful citizenship to other forms of engagement. This is especially true for millennials, whose trust in institutions has declined as they have seen financial crises impact their employment prospects and struggle with high levels of student debt. These factors are not without consequence. As Bennett and Segerberg (2011) explain:

> with such “socioeconomic conditions that are complex, disperse, and transnational…there is a growing separation of individuals in late modern society from traditional bases of solidarity such as parties, churches, and other mass organizations (p. 771).

Others argue that the rise of Sanders and Trump cannot be explained by a simple disconnect between citizens and parties, but rather by a broader global change in ideology. Gerbaudo (2017a), argues that the global movements of the early 2010s, such as Occupy and the Arab Spring, have led to the rise of “citizenism” (p. 3)—that “pits the self-organized citizenry against economic and political oligarchies.” These “indignant
citizens” feel that the existing power structures limit their citizenship, defined as the “possibility of individuals to be active members in their political community with an equal say on all important decisions” (p. 7). He explains how, during the Occupy Wall Street protests in 2011, new participants engaged on social media to gain the self-confidence and skills to participate in street protests. Indeed, “changing conceptions of citizenship and engagement are coded into” digital technologies, social media platforms and applications that…citizens are using throughout their everyday lives for both political and non-political purposes (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011, p. 838).

And yet, until 2016, personalized political action has largely been limited to engagement with campaigns via the “controlled interactivity” that steers users to personalize their actions in ways predetermined by the campaign. The interplay between the factors discussed in this proposal—the history of increasing expectations and opportunities for participation in parties, the affordances of digital media for challenging media narratives, and changing conceptions of citizenship—likely all contribute to the Democratic Party being seen by activists as a site for contentious politics. This dissertation looks to explore the ongoing impact of this change, as activists have continued to put pressure on the Party via presidential primary contests, local and state-level intraparty activism, and broader grassroots organizing.

**Collective Identity**

Collective identity as a concept has seen a resurgence in recent years as scholars have begun to re-examine its applicability to networked movements taking place in digital space where organizational boundaries, or presence at all, is less of a requirement. Jasper
and Polletta (2001) define collective identity as “the individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (p. 285). “It is a perception of a shared status or relation which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity” (p. 285). While some scholars disagree with aspects of that definition, most can agree that it tends to include a shared sense of “we-ness,” similar to the “we” invoked by O’Donnell (1986) earlier in this chapter in the context of his explication of horizontal voice. This sense of ’we-ness” is typically developed via the combination of shared experiences carried out in the context of group participation, including, but not limited to collective decision-making, electing of leaders, determining priorities for action, and participating in rituals.

Scholars recognize there is some difficulty at times distinguishing between personal and collective identities, especially in the context of identity politics, given the significant overlap between how people conceive of the group as part of their own identity. In short, an activist’s collective identity as part of a social movement cannot be entirely disconnected from their own personal identity (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Other scholars show how organizations serve as venues in which activists can develop their identities in a fluid and ongoing process of construction and reconstruction (Evans & Boyte 1986; Morris 1984). Traditionally, this process takes place under the guidance of organizers and leaders who are dedicated to maintaining and growing the organization. (Jasper, 1997). Further, maintaining a collective identity also serves to sustain ongoing participation in groups by new and returning members. By extension, the decline of
collective identity can often be linked to the decline of a group or movement as a whole (Jasper & Poletta, 2009). Dissonance between a group or movement’s actions and the collective identity of its members often spells the end of that group, as “the collective identity stops lining up with the movement” (p. 292). and activists “stop believing that the movement ’represents” them (p. 292). Political scientists Clark and Wilson (1961), in their discussion of values, also make clear the need for an organization to match the personal values of members, as a necessary condition for participation. This dissertation will rely on these concepts from the literature on social movement studies to inform and expand on discussions of horizontal voice.
Chapter 2: Research Questions, Data and Method

The direction this research took was guided by three central questions about the relationship between progressive activists and the Democratic Party:

- **How do progressive activists negotiate both what it means to be a progressive and their relationship with the Democratic Party?** When do they draw lines and when do they dig in their heels? When are these lines discursive and when do they have to do with action? What do they see the Party as and how do they see themselves in reference to it? This first question focused on both new and long-standing activists.

- **Through what processes do progressive activists get involved in Democratic Party politics?** What motivates them to begin to do politics within the Democratic Party? What change do they aim to make and what challenges do new activists face as they increase their level of activism? What role does technology play in facilitating the involvement of new activists? Exploring these questions required me to conceptualize the idea of “entry” as an addition to Hirschman’s exit, voice, and loyalty, given the diffuse nature of party membership in the United States.

- **What does voice look like in the context of progressive party activism?** What are the strategic goals of progressive activists and how does this manifest in action? How does the use of voice by progressives vary across groups? Does technology enable new types of party activism? Answering
these questions required empirical research carried out across a broad
geography and a wide range of progressive groups. It also required an eye
toward the implications of recent technological changes in media and
communication and the impact they may have had on party activism. The
next section outlines my research design, including my reasons and
processes for strategically constructing a networked field site for understand
progressive party activists and the Democratic Party.

**Research Design**

The research design for this dissertation grew out of two initial research projects, the first
of which took place at the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, where I
was then living and working on my Ph.D. coursework. Four years earlier, as a master’s
degree student in North Carolina, I had attended and co-wrote an academic paper about
media outlets, delegates, and technologically-mediated activist practices at the prior
Democratic National Convention that was held in Charlotte in September of 2012. Given
that the 2016 convention was for a second time in my newly adopted home state, I
arranged to attend the event with the initial goal of writing a comparative follow-up
paper.

Throughout the first day of that convention, I observed as the activists who made
up the California Bernie Sanders delegation were at the center of ongoing protests, inside
and outside the convention, that were aimed largely at the Democratic National
Committee, Hillary Clinton, and her supporters. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this behavior
was completely unlike anything I had seen at the 2012 convention, which had effectively
served as a four-day campaign rally for the renomination of President Barack Obama. But it was also at odds with any convention I remembered seeing on television in recent memory. In 2008, Hillary Clinton’s speech in support of then-Senator Obama had successfully quelled her discontented delegates who were calling themselves PUMAs (Party Unity My Ass). As a committed Howard Dean supporter in the 2004 primary, I had followed closely the nominations battle and did not recall threats of revolt against the Democratic Party by the supporters of Dean nor those of Dennis Kucinich, the other self-identified progressive in the race.

After that first day at the 2016 convention, I decided to center my research on the protest activity of the California Sanders delegates, as well as their related interactions, both in-person and via social media, with other delegates, Party leaders, members of the media, and the public. This research is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. During interviews I conducted after the convention, many former delegates told me their activism was continuing beyond the 2016 Sanders campaign. They told me about an online debate among activists over whether to #DemEnter—enter the Democratic Party and try to take it over—or #DemExit—leave the Party in protest over its support for Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders during the 2016 primary. Some were getting involved in a combination of activist groups, including local Democratic Party clubs, as well as chapters of Our Revolution and Democratic Socialists of America. A few had run to be assembly district-level delegates to the California Democratic Party.

Months later, in June of 2017, I again had the opportunity to observe many of those former delegates at a subsequent Party convention. The California Democratic
Party was holding its annual three-day statewide convention in Sacramento four days prior to the International Communication Association academic conference in San Diego. I arranged to fly to California early and conduct field work at that convention. It was immediately clear that this event, though certainly less publicly visible than the national convention, was just as uncharacteristically contentious. People in “Bernie” (Sanders) gear were seemingly everywhere and were interrupting the majority of speakers. Tom Perez, the newly elected chair of the Democratic National Committee, was booed as he took the stage. These activists were also extremely engaged in the race for state Party chair between Kimberly Ellis, who they clearly supported, and Eric Bauman. I go into detail about both this race and that convention in Chapter 4. It was also clear, and unsurprising to anyone with a background in California politics, that there was a substantial contingent of progressive Party activists at the convention who had been working within the party since long before these new Party activists who had been activated by the Sanders campaign and the election of Donald Trump. After conducting observational field work during, and interviews after this event, I began to consider how I could expand my study of progressive activism, technology, and the Democratic Party for this dissertation.

As I consulted the literature and developed the research questions outlined in the previous section, I worked to determine how to bound such a study of progressive activism and the Democratic Party. While California progressive activists had been the impetus for developing these questions, was the state also the right place to answer them? I concluded that it was. Below, I outline how California serves as an ideal setting for
examining progressive activism, address some of the challenges inherent in conducting research across such a large and diverse setting, and outline how I mitigated these challenges.

**Why California?**

There are numerous advantages to choosing California as a setting for studying progressive activism. First and foremost, California is large, diverse, and influential. As a single state, California has both the largest economy and is also the most populous. If it were a nation, it would be the fifth largest economy in the world (Fuller, 2018). Its major population centers, distinct communities, and diverse industries all have varied political interests that converge on the Democratic Party as a primary site of contention. California is also influential at the federal policy level. Since the mid-20th century, issues from across the ideological spectrum have taken hold in California, including gay marriage, environmental regulation, and conservative tax breaks, have become priorities for federal lawmakers (Kamieniecki & Ferrall, 1991; O’Sullivan, Sexton, & Sheffrin, 1995).

California also has a long history of activists engaging in activities that can be categorized as both exit and voice. The state has a long history of progressive third parties, such as the Peace and Freedom Party, which was formed by New Left activists in 1968 (Elden & Schweitzer, 1971) and still organizes around progressive issues and candidates in the state. The Green Party has also seen some recent success in the state at the local level (Holt, 2007). But the state is also no stranger to progressive activists trying to bring about change from within the Democratic Party, as first depicted in Wilson’s (1962) work on the grassroots-driven Democratic Clubs that came about in the 1950s.
Various other Democratic Party-focused movements have also emerged at specific socio-political moments, such as the Campaign for Economic Democracy, a grassroots initiative led by former New Left leader Tom Hayden (Boggs, 1983) during the Reagan administration, as well many in-state “netroots” organizations, including the chapters of Democracy for America that formed during the movement in the early mid-2000s to oppose the Iraq War (Democracy for America, n.d.). Familiarizing myself with this documented history of Democratic Party activism allowed me, through comparison, to more confidently see the historical parallels with the past, as well as the unique aspects of this specific moment of Party activism.

Studying progressive activism and the Democratic Party is inherently about conflict among Democrats themselves, as well as between Democrats and those just outside the margins of the Party. While California has seen disagreement between progressives and centrists for decades, recent trends in political demographics and party affiliation have increased the potential for intraparty conflict. While the Public Policy Institute of California recently found the average Californian to lean Democratic, the opposite was true as recently as 2012, when they found the average Californian to lean slightly conservative (McGhee & Krimm, 2012). Voter registration trends continually show the Democratic Party increasing its share of registered voters, as a result of both registering new voters and of Republican voters changing their registration to the Democratic Party or to “No Party Preference.” “No Party Preference” voters lean Democratic by 10-15 percentage points, and when they do join a party, they choose the Democratic Party by a 3:1 margin. These these statistics depict a high likelihood that
Democrats will continue to win statewide races and maintain their 75% majority in the state assembly. This influx of moderate independents and former Republicans make clear that, in California, the Democratic Party’s so-called “Big Tent” covers voters who have an increasingly diverse range of political ideologies, experiences, and worldviews. As Democrats have little need to tack to the center and compete with Republicans on their issues, competing ideas in California increasingly play out within the Democratic Party.

Beyond shifts in party identification, recent changes in the state’s electoral rules and scheduling significantly increased the opportunities for observing activists engaged in progressive party activism. First, California’s unique “top-two” process that the state uses for non-presidential primary elections encourages sustained contention between the Party’s moderate and progressive activists. Since 2012, the system, colloquially referred to as the “jungle primary” (Shapiro, 2018), has allowed all primary voters, regardless of party, to vote for the candidate of their choice, and the two candidates with the most votes, regardless of party, advance to the general election. As a result, in heavily Democratic districts or statewide races, the same two Democrats may face each other in both the primary and the general election, as was the case in the state’s 2018 Senate Race between incumbent Senator Dianne Feinstein and challenger Kevin de Leon (Luna, 2018), who was supported by many progressive groups. The state also played a larger role in the Party’s presidential nominating processes in 2020 than it had in recent election cycles. The state’s primary election, which awards more delegates than any other state, was held on March 3, three months earlier than it was in 2016, when it was held on June 7. This change meant that the state saw a barrage of political activity from state and local
Democratic Party institutions, activist organizations, interest groups, and candidate campaigns, as well as an influx of political resources from outside the state.

Most importantly, the State has numerous avenues through which activists can seek to influence Democratic Party politics, each of which has the potential to serve as a site for research. As discussed in Chapter 1, the state has since the 1950’s had a large network consisting of local Democratic Clubs, whose “amateur democrats” were a major focus of James Wilson’s (J. Q. Wilson, 1962) work of the same name. This tradition continues to this day, as The California Democratic Council website touts 562 individual, Party-chartered clubs operating within the state, although research for this dissertation occasionally found some to be defunct or barely maintaining a skeleton crew. All of these clubs are at minimum organized around a specific place (e.g. Santa Monica Democrats), with the bulk of them relying solely on location as their official way of determining their universe for potential members and local issues. Others, organize around both location and specific constituency groups that usually aligns with the state Party’s caucuses (e.g. San Diego Labor Democratic Club, Modesto Progressive Democrats, or the Harvey Milk LGBTQ Democratic Club of San Francisco). Extraparty groups, such as Democracy for America, Progressive Democrats of America, Our Revolution, and Indivisible also engage in activism aimed at bringing about a more progressive Democratic Party. The Party’s open and accessible district-level elections, the result of participatory reforms at the state Party level in the 1970s and 1980s, allow activists from across this ecosystem of groups to find success competing for and winning delegate positions to the State Democratic Party. The ideologically heterogeneous delegations produced by these
processes bring with them the potential for intraparty conflict around endorsements and other Party business (Larimore-Hall, 2014). As a result, progressive Party activism is often present, and can be observed and documented at annual Party conventions, nomination events, executive board meetings, and other events.

With these numerous justifications outlined above, I set out to study the Democratic Party. To tackle a site as large as California in a way that would not be empirically thin, I turned to the concept of “Field Site as Network” as a model for informing my research design.

**Field Site as Network**

Many of the above reasons for studying progressive Party activism in California were also simultaneously challenges to doing so. The size of the state, both geographically and in terms of population, posed logistical challenges, particularly for qualitative work. At the local level, there are hundreds of Democratic Clubs and extra-party progressive groups operating throughout the state. In designing this research, I considered narrowing the study to look at the ecosystem of progressive Democratic clubs and extra-party progressive groups in one or two locales. But it was immediately clear that doing this would have meant giving up much of what had been so compelling about the 2016 national convention and 2017 state convention. How could I truly explore how digital media was allowing activists from across the state to organize and engage with other activists across groups as well as locales. I was interested in loose networks of activists from around the state.
Relatedly, one of the contributions of this dissertation comes from opting not to use candidate campaigns as the lens through which to study Democratic Party activists. While numerous studies (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; e.g. Kreiss, 2014; Nielsen, 2012) have contributed valuable insights about Party activists working on the campaigns of specific candidates, those studies inherently exclude activists who are engaged in continued Party activism but, for whatever reason, choose not to support the campaign under study. In the digital era, there is no easily bounded coalition of Party-focused leftist activists to mirror the California club movement that Wilson (1962) explored in his seminal work on amateur democrats. As digital technologies have connected individuals and groups across wide geographies, scholars have constructed new methods to study those social phenomena that have emerged and are not easily bracketed by organizational or physical boundaries.

This research design borrows from one such construction, developed originally in ethnography, the idea of “field site as network” (Burrell, 2009, p. 190) which involves beginning the research from “entry points” (p. 190) rather than specific sites. By following people, objects, and stories across multiple types of networks, the researcher iteratively and over time “maps out the social relations of research participants and their connections to material and digital objects and physical sites” (p. 191). Constructing a field site as a network can be helpful in scenarios where the geography is both “too complexly heterogenous…and simultaneously too geographically limited as a unit of analysis” (p. 189). As a location for study, California, and its progressive activist
network, is obviously quite large and diverse, but it is geographically limiting in that interactions take place online with activists both inside and outside of California.

Accordingly, this study began by exploring progressive activists in California through three entry points: 1) The 2016 California Bernie Sanders Delegation to the Democratic National Convention 2) The Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party; 3) Our Revolution—the political action organization that grew out of the 2016 Sanders campaign.

The 2016 California Bernie Sanders Delegation to the Democratic National Convention which at 200-people comprised almost half of the state’s pledged delegates. Throughout the four days of the convention, the Sanders delegates, most of whom had minimal experience in Democratic Party politics, were regularly highlighted as the leaders of dissent and protest amongst the various Sanders delegations (Malone, 2016). After the convention, many continued their activism, and some ran successfully to become assembly delegates to the California State Democratic Party. This entry point was utilized in a pilot study and informed the selection of the other entry points.

The Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party—which refers to itself as the “raucous caucus” is a formal caucus of progressive delegates within the California Democratic Party. Its delegation, of over 700 activist members from around the state, was a driving force in opposing the (eventually successful) nomination of a long-standing centrist Party member at the 2017 state Party convention. Their statement of principles describes themselves as believing in:

the promotion of principle before politics and policy before unquestioning fealty to any individual or organization...[and seeking] to build a
movement within the Democratic Party so that we may one day see a
government controlled by citizens, not oligarchic interests.

Following the 2016 election, the caucus commissioned a report entitled *Autopsy: The Democratic Party in Crisis* that rated the party and gave recommendations in 7 categories: 1) Corporate Power and the Party; 2) Race and the Party; 3) Young People and the Party; Voter Participation and the Party; Social Movements and the Party; War and the Party; and Democracy and the Party. They distributed the report via nationwide party networks as well as media channels, and also published a progress report one year later. This entry point was chosen to provide to both an understanding of activism from within the Party organization, and to understand how leftists are trying to gain power in the state Party organization.

**Our Revolution—the federated political action organization that spun out of the 2016 Sanders campaign** is a grassroots activist organization that aims to educate and involve new voters and activists in politics, as well as develop, encourage, and support progressive candidates for local, regional, and statewide offices. Its political priorities include, but are not limited to, income inequality, single-payer healthcare, money in politics, the minimum wage, strengthening social security, and prescription drug prices. It includes 20 “featured” groups in California as well as numerous smaller local groups. This entry point provided insight into how a combination of new and seasoned progressives work towards the organization’s stated goal of “transforming the Party.”

Each of these entry points provided different ways to explore the perspectives, activities, and experiences of progressive activists in California. My ability to access these three entry points came from both the pilot study I conducted about the California
Bernie Sanders Delegation to the Democratic National Convention and my subsequent field work at the 2017 and 2019 California Democratic Party (CDP) Conventions. At each of these events, I gathered contact information from activists and took field notes about the acts of protest and resistance I had witnessed in order to inform future interviews. The producers of several of the web-based progressive news shows also attended the 2019 CDP Convention and I was able to exchange contact information with several of them. These connections allowed me to interview local Party leaders from several cities throughout the state. While carrying out my pilot study, I was also able to expand my interview pool by identifying and reaching out to potential subjects on social media and by asking my subjects after their interviews if they could put me in touch with additional subjects. I did this again during the interviews that emerged from the above entry points. Additionally, some of the subjects from the pilot study are also members of or know people affiliated with the other entry points.

**Limitations**

The approach that I am took via these three entry points help me capture the current progressive wave in California, but it was not without its limitations. One of the downsides is that, while these groups are not solely made up of middle class, white, educated progressives, they are dominated by them. As such, studying California progressives did not pick up on more diverse progressive efforts that may be going on elsewhere in other state parties. By centering activists and their broad networks, this research builds on previous research on party activists, with an eye toward the broader network of activists, unbound by specific electoral campaign organizations.
Methods

Direct Observation

This dissertation incorporates observational research I conducted in and around Democratic Party events and meetings between August 2016 and August 2020, the bulk of the fieldwork took place between October 2019 and January 2021.

The major events included: the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia; the 2017 and 2019 California Democratic Party Annual Conventions in Sacramento and San Diego, respectively; the 2019 California Democratic Party pre-primary nominating convention in Long Beach, the 2020 California Progressive Alliance annual meeting in Berkeley, and the 2020 Democratic National Convention (attended virtually due to Covid-19). Each of these large events consisted of large, general sessions events with well-known speakers, as well as smaller sessions such as caucus meetings, trainings, social events, and meet-and-greets. When appropriate, I recorded many of these speeches and presentations for subsequent analysis. In most cases, I acted as an outside observer during these events, focusing on discussion between participants about past or upcoming activist practices and goals, or on on-site activism, such as protests outside the convention halls or during speeches. More specifically, I aimed to identify moments of coordination between activists with the goal of following up with those activists to discuss those moments in subsequent interviews. I also paid attention to when and how activists utilized digital media to enable or supplement those communicate acts. Activists at these events typically kept packed schedules. As a result, I approached activists primarily between sessions for quick questions or to exchange contact information for future conversations.
While these days-long, well-attended, statewide events were rich in observational data and served as an ideal recruiting ground for interviewees, more frequent smaller events also provided important ethnographic data. These events included campaign events, meetings of local Democratic Clubs, rallies for progressive candidates, protests, and social events, all of which allowed me to observe activists carrying out or discussing specific communicative acts and strategies. I also attended monthly meetings of chartered Democratic Clubs and extraparty groups throughout the state. Due to Covid-19, events held after March 12, 2020 were attended via Zoom or other online meeting software. These events allowed me to observe the planning and evaluation of specific instances of progressive activism, providing insights into activists’ motivations, goals, and definitions of success.

These instances of direct observations provided me with a collection of empirical observations for subsequent analysis. As discussed later in this section, observation at all of these events also allowed me to recruit interviewees, tailor and guide interviews, and identify digital spaces for further collection of social media data and documents. It also provided context for data collected via these methods.

Interviews

Since 2016, I have conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with activists engaged in progressive party activism via candidate campaigns and ballot measures, as well as through a combination of online groups, Democratic Clubs and extraparty organizations. Some were concentrating their efforts on pursuing change via the state Party while others were focused on national, state, as well as local and county level organizations. Subjects
were identified in several ways. I reached out to several subjects after observing them engaging in activism either in-person or online. I also utilized the progressive adems2017.vote (accessible via archive.org) and adems2019.vote websites to garner lists of CDP delegate candidates from the 80 assembly districts throughout the state.\footnote{These websites are discussed at length in Chapter 3.} Given that these lists were organized geographically and also included short political biographies of each delegate candidate, using them allowed me to ensure that my sample included activists from varied regions, political backgrounds, and group identities. Others were identified via snowball sampling, as some interviewees steered me to others who had more firsthand knowledge of certain activities that emerged in our semi-structured conversations or of communicative acts that I had observed online or at in-person events.

All interviewees were first asked general questions about their activist backgrounds, including the initial catalysts for their party activism. These general questions also focused on their relationship with legacy and digital media, and their relationship with the Democratic Party. Asking these questions up front allowed me to refer back to these experiences and relationships as the interviews progressed to discussion of specific activist practices. The central focus of these interviews was to understand the collective planning and execution of individual communicative acts employed by these activists to achieve their political goals. I also worked to understand the challenges, motivations, contestation, as well as issues of identification and belonging, that surrounded those acts. I guided these interviews to allow participants to not only explain these acts (what they do) but also to link them to their political
backgrounds, as well as their relationships with, and expectations of the Democratic Party.

This pool of 43 interviewees included 23 men and 19 women. As discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation and outlined by Larimore-Hall in his 2014 dissertation [@-LarimoreHall2014], Democratic Party activists in California often engage in activism via membership in numerous groups and towards a range of issue priorities. Further, their motivations for participation in specific groups and events varies significantly from person to person. As such, the creation of simplified categories or “buckets” of interviewees for discussion here felt reductive. Instead, I provide next some basic statistics outlining the breadth of the full pool of interviewees. 32 interviewees were members of, or regularly attended, local Democratic Club meetings. 11 of them held, or had previously held, leadership roles in those clubs. 18 were members of multi-issue progressive Party groups such as Our Revolution or Progressive Democrats of America. Five held leadership roles in those groups. The pool of interviewees contained activists representing a range of levels of experience in activism. Despite the prominence of new activists in recently formed extraparty groups such as Our Revolution and long-standing activists in Democratic Clubs, this trend was certainly not mutually exclusive. In building the pool of interviewees, I made a concerted effort to maintain diversity in activist experiences as I selected interviewees from across progressive activist groups.

The subjects were promised confidentiality. In addition to their statements lacking identifiable attribution, they also could ask that statements be “off the record.” This distinction allowed them to provide me with context for their statements while also
maintaining their confidentiality in regard to comments that would personally identify them as interview subjects.

**Social Media Data**

For this project, I collected social media texts—posts (or tweets), videos, links, etc.—from Facebook and Twitter. Understanding this data collection process requires understanding first how I collected these data and what data specifically I collected.

These data were collected using a combination of APIs (open, but limited access to databases provided by digital platforms), data scrapers, and manual collection. The Twitter API was most useful for collecting future Twitter data (e.g. posts made by an activist after I identify their Twitter handle). To access the Twitter API, I utilized the Digital Methods Initiative Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolset (DMI-TCAT), a software set developed by engineers at the Digital Methods Initiative at the University of Amsterdam. This tool was especially useful for cataloguing the tweets of convention delegates to the virtual 2020 Democratic National Convention. That said, in recent years many platforms have made their APIs more limited and less useful to researchers (Freelon, 2018). To that end, I used multiple digital tools to compile the past posts of activists and activist groups, directly from the viewable pages of Facebook and Twitter rather than from the platforms’ databases. Both of these methods placed the individual social media texts into Microsoft Excel files for subsequent analysis. Recent

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5 I began this project using the python based tool Twint, available at https://github.com/twintproject/twint. In October 2020, Twitter disabled its non-java script version, making this tool unusable for my purposes. At this point, I switched to snscrape, available at https://github.com/JustAnotherArchivist/sns scrape, which has robust functionality for Twitter and limited functionality for Facebook.
methodological critiques noted an over-reliance on big social media platforms (Twitter in particular) due to their ease of access. While these critiques have merit, in the case of this project, most activists I interviewed cited Facebook and Twitter as their primary online venues for activism, justifying their prioritization in data collection.

While these tools were incredibly helpful, they also had limitations. I also collected social media data manually. This process took two forms, 1) browsing the public pages of individual activists, activist groups, and manually saving data in the form of PDFs and screenshots, and 2) observing the activity of online communities and writing descriptive field notes based on those observations. I employed the latter method most often in smaller communities, cataloguing activists planning activities, disagreements, and other interactions.

While the above processes describe how I collected social media data, the process for deciding which data to collect was more complex. With an iterative research design such as a field site as network, the process of collecting relevant social media data was also iterative and took place in parallel to the construction of the field site. As discussed in the research design section, I began the construction of my field site as network through specific entry points. For example, two of my entry points were: 1) Sanders’ delegates to the 2016 Democratic National Convention’, and 2) members of the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party. As such, I began my social media data collection in much the same way, by searching online for the Twitter handles and Facebook usernames of the activists whose names I found on lists of convention delegates and lists of members of the progressive caucus. Both of these lists were
available online, though hidden in the depths of the California Democratic Party website. I followed the same process for members of local progressive groups. As my project continued and my field site expanded, I expanded my lists of activists accordingly.

As four years of social media data by individual activists and their organizations quickly became unwieldy, I created a corpus of data and regularly cross referenced it using specific search terms or hashtags. For example, the hashtag #imwithkimberlye was used by activists supporting Kimberly Ellis’ campaign for Party chair, which is discussed in Chapter 3. Searches for (party) platform helped me compile data depicting how activists used social media to oppose the platform in the context of the 2020 Democratic National Convention. In some cases, I used date ranges to pull relevant data from the corpus. For example, I pulled all posts by 2020 convention delegates from one week before and one week after the nomination of Kamala Harris for the Vice-Presidential Nomination in 2020. Searches within this corpus for terms including specific candidates (e.g. Joe Biden or Bernie Sanders), issues (e.g. #Medicare4all), or memes (e.g. #TooFarLeft) were also employed.

In addition to activist hashtags, I also archived institutional Party hashtags used in the context of large events. For example, the hashtags #CADEM, #CADEM2017, and #CADEM2019; were the official hashtags for the California State Party Conventions in 2017 and 2019. Examining these universal hashtags provide discursive context for the activist hashtags and also make it clear how much conversation was taking place in activists hashtags as a percentage of a larger universe.
Beyond social media discourse, I also compiled data about events, largely from individual event pages and organizational calendars both of which were commonly employed on Facebook. These helped inform me of both prior and upcoming actions to discuss in interviews and attend for participant observation. As many events are co-hosted on Facebook, these also helped me see linkages between activist organizations and expand my field site accordingly.

**Documents and Other Texts**

In addition to the direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and social media data discussed above, this multi-method dissertation also took advantage of textual sources produced by traditional and citizen journalists as well as by individual activists, progressive organizations, and candidate campaigns. I compiled data about numerous debates and events to build an archive of activist websites, op-eds, press releases, blog posts, public quotes, meeting agendas and minutes, saving them in digital formats for subsequent analysis. I also compiled promotional materials, such as slate cards and biographies related to the campaigns of individual activists. Beyond these documents, I also compiled archives of livestream and promotional videos obtained via YouTube, Facebook Live, other sources. Due to the automated closed-captioning that many of these services deploy to meet the needs of persons with disabilities, I was often able to export automated transcriptions of meetings in text format for subsequent analysis. When available, I also compiled digital archives of certain important meetings that either pre-dated my in-person research or that I was unable to attend in-person or virtually.
The internet archive’s wayback machine also proved indispensable for examining campaign and activist websites from the recent past. Compared to blogs and journalism sites, activist websites are constantly updating themselves with minimal priority placed on preserving historical data on the site. For example, after elections, endorsements are often taken down from the websites of both the organizations who give the endorsement, and the candidates or ballot measures who receiving them. In fact, I found that candidate websites and those related to ballot measures regularly disappear from their official web domain within months of the election.

Via these texts, I identified common metaphors, themes, and arguments that informed my understanding of how individual activists and progressive groups articulated their values and ideals, as well as their shifting understandings of and relationships with the Democratic Party. For certain sections of the dissertation that required historical context and event timelines, I used a variety of online texts in conversation with one another to construct histories and narratives. For example, the May 2017 race for CDP chair, discussed in Chapter 3, required me to reconstruct the history of the race, including efforts of individual activists and campaigns that began in mid-2015, two years prior to the start of my field work. These efforts both informed, and filled in gaps in, the data obtained by, my interviews with activists.

Data analysis
Following Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2013) I organizeD these ideas, concepts, and themes into a priori codes. In addition to the a priori codes, I employED an open coding system (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) to allow additional themes to emerge throughout the
data analysis process. The transcripts, field notes, and primary texts were coded using Atlas.Ti qualitative data analysis software. This combination of systematic and emergent qualitative analysis allowed me to explore deeply the ideas that emerged from deep examination of these primary sources but to do it with an eye to my own personal experience with this topic as well as the extensive historical literature that exists around party activism in the U.S.
Chapter 3: Convention Delegates and the Realization of Collective Identity

Much of the popular press coverage of Sanders delegates at the 2016 Democratic National Convention depicted them as out-of-touch ideological zealots, clinging to the hope that Sanders could somehow be nominated at the convention despite his clear disadvantage in the delegate math (e.g. Mehta, 2016). These portrayals by Democratic Party regulars and the popular press characterized the Sanders contingent as having counterproductive antagonism towards the would-be nominee and naivety with regard to the political process. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat who was one of many Party leaders booed by the Bernie supporters at the delegation breakfast, when asked about the Sanders delegates in a post-event interview, echoed this feeling when she said, “some people are new and not familiar with how things work” (Hains, 2016). This one-dimensional view of delegates presumes that their protests were only in service to the unlikely political outcome of nominating Bernie Sanders. In reality, their protests, as well as their disregard for the expected norms of party conventions, were an expression of a collective identity at odds with the Democratic Party. This identity, rooted in their own values and worldviews, was formed over the course of the campaign, as they discussed at local events and on social media both their passion for Sanders as well as what they viewed as antidemocratic injustices carried out by the Clinton campaign, Party elites, the DNC, and the media. Inside the convention, they saw their use of vertical voice as not only representative of their own ideology and grievances with the Party, but also of Sanders supporters back at home as well as those protesting outside the convention. Their actions at the 2016 convention, aided by social media and traditional organizing methods, were grounded in both ideological goals—pushing the Party to the
left—as well as larger concerns about process, democratic ideals, representation, and alienation from the political system. Four years later, after Sanders again lost the Democratic nomination—this time to Joe Biden—the virtual national convention held by the Democratic Party as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic meant there was no convention floor from which his delegates could protest. However, members of the 2020 California delegation, throughout the summer of 2020, leveraged their position as delegates to engage in numerous acts of strategic activism aimed narrowly at Democratic Party leaders. As in 2016, their activities were an expression of their collective identity as delegates, which varied significantly from that of their predecessors. Compared to the Sanders delegates of 2016, these delegates were more experienced in Party politics, had a more nuanced articulation of their relationship with—and expectations of—the Democratic Party, and also experienced a notably different primary campaign. Further, after experiencing four years of President Donald Trump, many Sanders supporters believed that extending his presidency for an additional four years would be dangerous for the country. Given all of these factors, even if there had been a traditional convention, there is reason to believe the delegation would have chosen more discriminating activism over the level of disruptive acts carried out in 2016.

This chapter first explores the processes through which members of the 2016 California Sanders delegation, most of whom had minimal experience in party politics, became activated in the Sanders campaign, developed a collective identity in opposition to the Democratic Party, and eventually carried out disruptive activism at the Democratic National Convention. It then examines the 2020 California Sanders delegation, revealing
how numerous factors, including their experience in Party politics, the reality of four years with Donald Trump as president, a less contentious primary campaign, a modified delegate selection procedure, as well as the virtual convention resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, influenced the activism carried out around the 2020 Democratic National Convention.

**Activation and Organizing for the 2016 Convention**

The people who eventually formed the 2016 California Sanders delegation came from very different backgrounds and held different views on activism and its role in party politics. But, beginning with their involvement in the Sanders campaign, they went through a shared experience in democratic practice while working on the campaign, running for delegate, and self-organizing their delegation via social media. This experience came to inform their collective actions at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Specifically, their work on the campaign provided them with a sense of their own political efficacy and a focus on the progressive ideology and democratic ideals that were prevalent in Sanders’ rhetoric. As they ran for delegate positions, they carried these ideals into the practice of politics in local party caucuses, further developing in them a sense of normative democratic practice and an appreciation for process, which they then carried into their delegation’s collective efforts at self-organization. At the same time, their use of social media expanded from the individual process of information gathering about the campaign, to helping them organize for their delegate elections, and eventually to helping build a collective online environment for their statewide delegation.
Early Campaign Work and Creative Organizing

While the Sanders delegates did have some previous experience in activities like union leadership, local ballot measures, and single-issue activism, most had minimal experience in party politics. In the past, many had either passively supported the Democratic Party’s candidates or voted for long-shot candidates who aligned with their progressive ideologies but had little chance of winning an election. Some had historically been registered with third parties or had been unaligned with a political party. Others had consciously rejected voting for president altogether. One delegate admitted to a reporter from the Los Angeles Times that for the previous twenty years he had written in “dead yellow dog” on his presidential ballot rather than selecting someone from the available slate of candidates (Mehta & Moore, 2016). The Sanders delegation also included college and high school students for whom 2016 was their first opportunity to participate in a presidential election. Most of these delegates-to-be began hearing about Sanders via traditional media and in messages shared on Facebook. They admitted that they originally saw him as the candidate that most aligned with their views and planned to support him but did not initially see him as viable in the national primary.

Many of these delegates were drawn to the campaign’s use of moral claims and narratives about U.S. society, policy, and political culture that resonated with their own worldviews. Many described connecting with Sanders on policy issues like single-payer health care, free education, and corporate regulation, but also on big-picture issues about democracy, representation and the electoral system writ large. Others were drawn to his campaign because his history of registering as an independent coincided with their own
frustration with the major parties. A delegate from San Diego for whom Sanders was “the first candidate in modern history that [he] trusted”, explained:

I’m 56 years old . . . I had been either an independent or an NPP, no party preference, depending which state I was in, all of my voting life. Once it appeared to me that the DNC was going to rig the whole primary process in favor of Hillary Clinton, I decided to re-register as a Democrat to make sure my vote was going to count in the primary (Interview Quote).

For these activists, the Sanders campaign embodied many of their ideals in its rejection of corporate contributions from SuperPACs. They began to identify and refer to themselves as “Berniecrats,” rhetorically linking their involvement with the Democratic Party to their support for Sanders. For long-standing Democrats with more loyalty to the Democratic Party, the term provided an early collective identity, as well as a way to collectively articulate their voice, within the big tent of the Democratic Party and in groups of self-identified progressive Democrats. For the independents and third-party members who had entered the Party specifically to support Sanders, it also served to qualify their presence in the Party, in effect saying, “I wouldn’t be here if not for Bernie.”

One delegate, a registered Democrat, who had been a fan of Sanders for many years and had previous experience volunteering on congressional campaigns, recalled her immediate interest in volunteering for Sanders after he declared his candidacy in April of 2015. She explained:

I remember seeing him on TV and Bill Maher said, ‘you think you’ll run?’ and he said, ‘if people want me to.’ And I thought ‘boy I want him to, that’d be cool to have that voice.’ So, when he did I jumped on it (Interview Quote).
She described connecting with the campaign online and setting up a recurring monthly donation to the campaign. Via the campaign’s website, she signed up to host door-to-door canvasses on nights and weekends, recruiting other volunteers from her local area.

The campaign’s online presence was an entry point for all of the delegates early on in the race. At that time, the campaign had no physical presence or local organizers in California. In fact, the campaign would not open its first California office until a year later (Wick, 04/21/2016), just two months before the national press would call the race for Hillary Clinton on the day prior to the California primary. Because of this, all formal interaction between the campaign and its California activists took place online, largely through the predetermined options available on the campaign’s website, berniesanders.com. One activist explained:

The phone banking, stuff like that, that was kinda sourced through the campaign but that was just online. There wasn’t really any interaction with anyone…The Bernie campaign had no one out here (Interview Quote).

Other delegates described hearing about Sanders via their friends’ public posts on social media and slowly learning more about the campaign. Many joined Sanders-focused Facebook groups (e.g. Central Coast for Bernie Sanders) that local supporters were creating in the absence of formal campaign infrastructure, crafting and sharing messages about Sanders with their personal online networks. Across these networks, they followed the campaign’s social media hashtag #feeltthebern, a rallying cry originally created independently of the campaign by out-of-state Sanders supporters (Grossman, 2016).

Early on in the campaign, delegates began meeting in person. Some found out online about socially-focused meet-ups to discuss Sanders. While some of these “house parties” were publicized on the Sanders campaign website, the campaign rarely provided
an agenda or outline for what was to be done or discussed at these events. One long-time party activist and Sanders supporter who attended events in East Los Angeles described these early meetings as organized, “completely chaotically” with “30 people in [a] house all drinking wine and a few people talking about the revolution” (Interview Quote). Delegates explained how the “movement,” as they referred to the campaign, grew as people who were driving 30 minutes to the closest meeting decided to host meetings in their own cities and neighborhoods.

I went to one in Downtown LA, and we were like “do we need to start more? But why would I host? I’m not a leader. [Eventually I was like] I just have to step it up here because there’s nothing like that going on in my neighborhood. . . . Fuck it. I’ll just do it. So, I signed up and I started hosting stuff, and people started coming. So, it was like okay, I see a need for this (Interview Quote).

Several college-age delegates first got involved with, or started Sanders campaign offices, on their campuses. Those that could afford to do so also began donating to the Sanders campaign. Others used the Sanders campaign website to find local volunteer-hosted efforts including phone banks and door-to-door canvassing events, eventually leading and hosting these events themselves as they gained confidence and increased their engagement with other local Sanders supporters.

In August 2015, Sanders held his first California rally, drawing an audience of 27,500, including an overflow area, to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum complex. Several Southern California delegates explained how attending that event gave them the confidence that Sanders’ run could be more competitive in the primary than they had originally thought and moved them to increase their involvement with the campaign. One would-be delegate who attended that rally was entering her senior year of high school.
that same month. After seeing a “[USC] Trojans for Bernie” sign at the rally, she was inspired to start a group at her high school organizing student volunteers to help the Sanders campaign engage in voter outreach and volunteer recruitment in her local community.

As the campaign progressed, these activists continued to engage on social media and at in-person events organized by other local activists. They organized voter registration drives, creating their own flyers to inform new voters about Sanders’ policy positions. Some began designing and purchasing their own Sanders buttons, bumper stickers, and t-shirts. One activist even painted a Bernie Sanders mural in downtown Los Angeles.

Figure 1: A mural in Downtown Los Angeles depicting Bernie Sanders. The mural was created by local artist Lydiaemily Archibald in August 2015.

By summer 2015, as Sanders’ polling and popularity was increasing nationwide, his most ardent supporters in California, and around the country, began to express
frustration with media coverage of both Sanders’ White House bid and of the race as a whole. They felt that coverage was lopsided in favor of Hillary Clinton and that reporters often spoke presumptively about her chances of winning the nomination. Online, Sanders supporters on Facebook groups, Reddit called this the “corporate media blackout” of Sanders. In late July 2015, the national Sanders campaign hosted a “house-party simulcast” in which over 100,000 supporters at 3,500 houseparties nationwide logged in simultaneously online to watch the Senator speak. When local and national media outlets covered the events the next day, Sanders supporters crowed online that “people power” had beaten the “Bernie Media Blackout” and forced the media to pay attention to them. An activist from Los Angeles, posting on the activist-run “losangelesforbernie.org” published a list of links to mainstream media articles about the previous night’s events. He cited the coverage as proof that “by stay[ing] positive and on Bernie’s message, our movement will become powerful enough to allow our voices heard” (Los Angeles For Bernie, 2015). While this message was generally positive, it indicates that for him and other activists, they were beginning to see the media as an obstacle to be overcome.

In September 2015, a Southern California activist organized a conference call with the leaders of fifteen local Sanders Facebook groups from across the state, as well as leaders who were organizing constituency groups (e.g. Latinos for Bernie, LA Labor for Bernie). Few activists on the call reported any contact with the Sanders campaign. Those that did said the campaign’s outreach was cursory, usually from someone out of state, and provided minimal opportunity for continued coordination. One activist was frustrated because she had collected emails from interested voters for the campaign but was unsure
where to send them. Their sense that the campaign was absent was not unfounded, as the campaign was barely investing resources outside of the early states of Iowa and New Hampshire, let alone in California, whose June primary would be one of the last ten contests in the race (Dovere & Debenedetti, 2016).

Without any contact with campaign staff, the only information they received from the campaign was from its national campaign email list. Most information California supporters received about the campaign came from social media, as well as legacy and online media coverage of the campaign. Throughout the fall of 2015, these media would increasingly highlight critiques of the Democratic National Committee and its cozy relationship with the Clinton campaign as compared to its relationship with her main primary opponents, former Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley and Senator Bernie Sanders. These critiques would reinforce narratives of a “rigged” system that delegates were already reading, sharing, and discussing on Twitter as well as across national, statewide, and locally focused Sanders groups on Facebook and Reddit.

While the preference for Clinton among Democratic politicians and party leaders had been apparent for months as she racked up endorsements throughout the invisible primary, it was conflicts over the scheduling of debates that brought the notion that the process was being “rigged” by the DNC into the public discourse. In early August, the DNC announced that it was only scheduling six sanctioned debates and would bar from those debates any candidates that participated in any additional unsanctioned debates. Further, the party-sanctioned debates were largely scheduled on weekends when viewership was typically limited. In late August, O’Malley gave a speech to the DNC,
covered by national media outlets, in which he called the Party the “undemocratic party,” arguing that the limited debate schedule was a “rigged process” the likes of which the Party had “never attempted before” (Rucker, 2015). Sanders, who at that point had largely limited his rhetorical opponents to vague antagonists (e.g. “establishment politics”) and his critiques of Clinton to policy issues (e.g. her support for the Keystone XL pipeline), took a more measured approach, explaining in a CNN interview:

“I have let the leadership of the Democrats know that I think this country benefits, all people benefit, democracy benefits, when we have debates and I want to see more of them” (Tapper, 2015).

His campaign also distributed a petition aimed at increasing the number of debates. The petition stated, “I know that if Secretary Clinton wants more debates, we’ll get them,” highlighting Clinton’s strong relationship with Party leadership and trying to increase public pressure on her to also call for more debates (Frizell, 2015). Beyond these remarks, Sanders and his campaign kept public critiques of the Democratic Party to a minimum throughout the fall of 2015, focusing his critiques on Hillary Clinton’s policy positions and calling for changing the “status quo.”

By contrast, many delegates explained how they became increasingly angry and vocal about the Democratic Party and the mainstream media during that same time period. To some degree, supporting Sanders in the 2016 primary arguably brought with it from the beginning an inherent ideological critique of the Democratic Party’s policy priorities. But for many supporters this critique grew over time to include accusations that the Democratic Party’s leadership, as well as national media outlets, were stacking the deck in support of a Hillary Clinton nomination and doing so in ways that went beyond the typical “invisible primary.” On social media, activists used the hashtag #AllowDebate.
while sharing videos of O’Malley and Sanders supporters protesting outside the DNC headquarters in Washington, DC, calling for the Party to expand the number of debates. After the first debate in mid-October, communities in Sanders-focused Facebook groups, as well as on Twitter and in Reddit communities (e.g. “r/Bernie Sanders” and “r/CaliforniaforSanders”) lamented what they saw as bias from the “mainstream media,” much of which had declared Clinton the winner of the debate. This anger and frustration spilled out into broader internet communities, as many Sanders supporters overwhelmed unscientific online polls and commented on the social media posts of people and organizations in their online networks (Voorhees, 2015).

A few days later, Robinson Meyer (2015), writing in the Atlantic, coined the term “Berniebro” to negatively depict a type of over-confident, mostly white, male Sanders online supporter who dismissed those who had concerns about Sanders or planned to vote for a different candidate. As the term took off in the public discourse, most delegates, especially female delegates, saw coverage focused on “Berniebros” as the media both spreading an unfair generalization about Sanders supporters as well as a distracting from a campaign they felt was focused on important issues. While the Sanders campaign would not address the issue of the “Berniebros” until early the following year, indignation about the term was widespread amongst his supporters. As progressive online media, including Jacobin and In These Times, published critiques of the term (e.g. Bruenig, 2015), Sanders activists shared these in their Facebook groups. They also continued to develop narratives that the mainstream media was dismissive of Sanders, arguing that he received less coverage than Clinton and that the coverage he did receive
was either dismissive or focused on trivial issues. Via these interactions, they began to develop a collective identity that was not only about being progressive and supporting Sanders, but also at odds with the Democratic Party and the national media. One delegate explained:

> It appeared to me—to all of us, that the DNC was going to rig the whole thing in favor of Hillary Clinton. And…it was so frustrating because no one seemed interested in investigating what was so obvious to us (Interview Quote).

Then, in December, the tenor of the Sanders campaign became much more aggressive. First, it began making claims of media bias. Sanders tweeted out statistics from a report about candidate media coverage that showed he received less media coverage than Clinton and Trump. His campaign also circulated a petition to supporters demanding that he “receive the same level of coverage on the nightly news as other leading candidates” (Borchers, 2019). A few days later, mid-level Sanders campaign staffers were caught exploiting a breach in the DNC’s voter database system that allowed them to view data belonging to the Clinton campaign. Media coverage of the scandal was widespread. The Party’s decision to then temporarily revoke the entire Sanders’ campaign’s access to their own voter data—housed in DNC servers—was seen by supporters as a disproportionate response that, had the roles been reversed, would never have been levied on the Clinton campaign. When CNN commentator and former Obama David Axelrod tweeted that it was a “harsh penalty” and that the DNC “was putting its finger on the scale” (@davidaxelrod - David Axelrod, 2015), his comments were seized on by Sanders supporters who immediately shared it with their social media networks. Jeff Weaver, Sanders’ campaign manager, held a volatile press conference accusing the Democratic
National Committee of “denying [the campaign] access to its own data” and “actively attempting to undermine [their] campaign” (Jackson, 2015). The campaign then filed a lawsuit against the DNC to regain access to the database. Several progressive groups, including Democracy for America, chastized the DNC, accusing it of damaging the party’s Democratic Process. Former U.S. Senator Jim Webb, a relatively conservative Democrat who had briefly been a candidate for the nomination alongside Clinton and Sanders, espoused his support for Sanders’ lawsuit on social media, tweeting that “The DNC is nothing more than an arm for the Clinton campaign.”

![Figure 2: Tweet by Senator Jim Webb in support of Bernie Sanders. Webb supported Sanders’ claims that the DNC was putting its finger on the scale in support of Hillary Clinton.](image)

According to interviews with campaign insiders, the dispute over the database was a permanent turning point for the Sanders campaign, which had previously kept its suspicions that the DNC favored Clinton behind closed doors. After the database incident, they made a decision to publicly fight the “democratic establishment” and their media allies head on, intensifying existing narratives of a rigged system bolstered by Party insiders and their media allies (Dovere & Debenedetti, 2016). These narratives,
which had been circulating in activist circles for months, motivated many of the delegates interviewed for this dissertation. One activist explained:

Every time [the media] treated him like crap, which was often, I’d throw in $50. And a lot of us did that. A lot of us dug deep and got all of our change together and gave it to Bernie all along (Interview Quote).

Further, the discourse of Sanders and his supporters as David, to Clinton, the DNC, and the “establishment’s” Goliath, would become one of the dominant ways in which these activists saw themselves as they ran for Party delegate, and eventually engaged in public acts of protest at the Democratic National Convention.

**Developing and Practice Democratic Ideals**

While the experiences of Sanders activists on the campaign were unique and exciting to those participating in them, and the absence of formal campaign staffers afforded them some flexibility in their activism, their campaign activity—knocking doors, phone banking, registering voters—was in practice very similar to processes of activation and engagement described in previous studies of U.S. political campaigns (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Nielsen, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014). As discussed earlier in this dissertation, many supporters of movement-style candidates such as Howard Dean (2004) and Jesse Jackson (1984 and 1988) also felt at odds with the more intractable elements of the Democratic Party. However, as these would-be delegates moved on from the day-to-day tasks of campaign work to the process of running for delegate and self-organizing their delegation, they had experiences that were more flexible, democratic, and provided them with a sense of their own political efficacy. These experiences in normative democratic practice within the Democratic Party contributed to their collective identity as Sanders
delegates and would inform the planning and execution of actions they chose to take at
the 2016 Democratic National Convention.

Running for Delegate: Practicing Democracy

In April 2016, the Sanders campaign, in concert with the California Democratic Party,
issued a call to its supporters seeking delegates to attend the Democratic National
Committee in Philadelphia in support of Bernie Sanders. For seasoned Party activists, this
call referred to a familiar process, but many first-time delegates at the time said they had
no idea what a delegate was or how the process of becoming one was to be carried out.
We “all kinda went, ‘huh?’ and we put out hats in the ring,” one delegate explained
(Interview Quote).

In presidential primaries, each candidate is awarded a specific number of
delegates from each state based on their performance in that state’s primary or caucus.
An individual has four paths with which to become one of these delegates to the national
convention. The first way is to be a Party leader or elected official, colloquially referred
to by the acronym “PLEO”. The second is to be appointed by a PLEO, each of which has
an allotted number of delegate seats to fill, as an at-large delegate. The third way is to be
a superdelegate, the controversial long-term Party insiders that are not bound to vote for a
specific candidate regardless of the outcome of the state’s primary. In California,
Superdelegates include members of the Democratic National Committee, members of the
U.S. Congress, and the Governor.

The fourth way for a person to become an elected delegate, which was the path
for almost all of the delegates interviewed for this dissertation, is to run to be a Party
delegate for the state assembly district in which they live. In this process, facilitated by
the individual campaigns in collaboration with the state Party, separate elections are held
at the assembly district level for each presidential candidate, with would-be delegates
running against others who support their same candidate and voted on by Party members
in attendance. Because the voting pool for these contests includes any registered
Democrat in the assembly district who shows up to caucus, the process effectively
requires candidates to both convince those present to vote for them and more importantly,
to bring registered Democrats with them to support their candidacy for delegate. In
California in 2016, due to the late primary in June, candidates were actually running to be
potential, or conditional delegates, since the number of Sanders delegates from each
district would depends on his showing in each district in the primary election.

In advance of the caucuses, candidates experienced some of the more mundane
aspects of politics, writing and submitting progressive biographies to local Party websites
and creating Facebook pages with information about their backgrounds and political
priorities. Some formed or joined slates of candidates with other like-minded candidates
to help combine their individual supporters into more formidable voting blocs. In
practice, this served as a means of mutual endorsement. When a voter came to support
one candidate, they were handed a slate card, a flyer with names and photos of other
candidates who had joined together with their candidate, and encouraged to vote for the
full slate. In some cases, potential delegates who used social media to recruit support had
included their slate cards in their messaging. One Sanders supporter and long-term Party
member who attended the 2008 convention as a delegate for then-Senator Barack Obama described his experience running for Sanders delegate eight years later:

I lost and I think that’s partly because newcomers to the party did such an excellent job organizing new people to participate. There are some preexisting social networks that came in and sort of dominated because again these are sort of popularity contests. You have to turn out enough people to vote for you that know who you are. It really helps some of those people that they have those big social networks. That was really the only way they could have won. There were many other [experienced] delegates that also lost when they tried to be Sanders delegates because of that (Interview Quote).

While this activist was eventually able to leverage his local Party experience to attend the 2016 national convention as an at-large delegate for Sanders, his experience at the caucuses highlights the organizing capacity of the new Sanders activists that had entered Party politics. They were able to mobilize the networks they had formed over the previous year to place themselves ahead of many Sanders supporters who had been committed to progressive Party politics for years. Many of these new activists found they were winning delegate positions in spite of being naïve to the process. One activist who earned the most votes in her assembly district explained:

I didn’t know these games. I didn’t know what a slate was. It was kind of—and I really have to say, my situation was absolutely not rare—It’s all of my friends, all of my Bernie people, we’re all the same. You raise your hand [when someone asks] “how many of you got involved with politics before? Zero (Interview Quote).

To these newly elected delegates, being selected over long-standing Party members by local progressives provided them with validation that their movement’s goals were salient with other Democrats and gave them confidence and momentum heading into the convention. It also gave them confidence in their own political efficacy. One delegate whose first activist experience was protesting the Vietnam War explained:
I was first place in my district which shocked me . . . they announced the vote and I just burst into tears because I knew, I really really really wanted to do this. And I knew then that I was 100% going - even if he lost our district. I am going. I was just literally overcome with gratitude (Interview Quote).

After winning their assembly level elections during the contests held statewide on May 1, these would-be delegates returned to the process of campaigning for the upcoming June 7 primary between Sanders and Hillary Clinton that would help decide which candidate would be the Democratic Party’s presumptive nominee. During this time, delegates self-organized into a private Facebook group specifically for Sanders delegates, a process that is revisited later in this chapter. At this point, most delegates knew very little about what to expect from a convention and found little guidance from the Party or the Sanders campaign which from their perspective expected delegates to be Party regulars who already knew how to prepare for and participate in a national convention.

One first-time delegate explained:

And the Democratic Party [was not] ready for us. I think that’s what it was. Just so old and entrenched. No need to change anything because no one new was passing through. They didn’t explain things well. We had no idea how things worked, even if you look on their website it’s just awkward. We had—we couldn’t figure out the system, so we were asking each other—and we had to self-organize. I don’t know how but somebody started a Facebook group and added us all to it and that’s how I started you know, communicating with all the delegates [in California] at once (Interview Quote).

The Sanders staff member responsible for managing convention delegates had a different perspective:

In places like California, they had these caucuses to elect potential delegates. But who the actual delegates were was not determined until after the California primary. A bunch of them decided that because they had won one of the six potential spots in their district…they needed to book all their shit. We had to tell them that whether or not they’re actually
going depends on how well we do in the primary…and they need to be focusing on knocking on doors and talking to voters and shit to help us win more delegates. I think there’s some degree to which their lived experience could be they weren’t getting anything from the campaign in terms of guidance about how to get to convention, but I think the other piece of it I would say is we were probably telling them not to worry about it yet and they didn’t like that answer (Interview Quote).

During the three months prior to the convention this Facebook group became a mediated lens through which the Sanders delegation would experience and play out the contentious last months of the primary campaign and work to prepare for the convention. It was also a site for them to collectively experience the conflicts between the democratic ideals and practices they had been developing and the behavior they saw from Democratic Party leaders. These mediated events all contributed to a collective delegate identity that, while initially built around support for Senator Sanders, came to encompass distrust of the Democratic Party, contempt for the media, and a desire to use their collective voice to call out political elites for what they viewed as undemocratic processes.

**Democratic Ideals Meet Party Politics**

After the Sanders delegation was elected, they were excited about their new roles as advocates for Sanders beyond their roles on the campaign. One delegate described the earliest conversations in the newly formed delegation Facebook group:

> How are we going to talk to the Hillary people and really try to open their eyes about Bernie Sanders because that’s what our job is. In effect, we are supposed to be lobbying for him. That’s what we thought our jobs were as delegates. We need to start getting active and communicating with [superdelegates.] Maybe have meetings with them…where we could have these open conversations about our candidate. We thought…and we were completely fucking naive, that this was a process. Like a democratic process. . . . How should [we] present ourselves? Do we not want to be like, crazy left-wing socialist types that we may or may not have been? How should we dress and what should we avoid saying, you know that kind of thing, just discussions like that (Interview Quote).
But this vision of intra-party deliberation over candidates and issues did not last long as the ideals they had developed and practiced while becoming delegates would soon be challenged by what they perceived as unfair Party practices and rigged political and media systems. This would lead them to see their collective voice as unfairly suppressed within the broader Democratic Party electorate.

**Mediated Events Challenging Democratic Ideals**

In the months prior to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, several political events became formative focal points for California Sanders supporters on their Facebook groups. First, the Nevada State Democratic Convention on May 18th turned into a 16-hour, raucous event in which Sanders supporters accused Clinton supporters inside the Party of utilizing inaccurate “voice votes” to steamroll Sanders supporters over rules that allowed Clinton to secure extra delegates to the Democratic National Convention. As the event erupted into physical chaos and Sanders supporters rushed the stage, YouTube videos went viral on social media and were picked up by traditional media, with several outlets reporting that the event had turned violent and chairs were thrown. Democratic National Committee Chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz appeared on MSNBC decrying the behavior of the Sanders supporters at the convention and demanding a condemnation of the behavior by Sanders himself. As additional videos and photos emerged online that indicated some of these reports may have been exaggerated, Sanders supporters shared these media via Youtube, Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter.

Sanders and his campaign made similar statements in the days that followed. In a statement, Sanders called the claims that his supporters were prone to violence was
“nonsense,” citing his numerous campaign rallies that had “zero reports of violence” (Taylor, 2016). He accused Party leaders of “us[ing] their power to prevent a fair and transparent process from taking place.” He also said that:

If the Democratic Party is to be succesful in November, it is imperative that all state parties treat our campaign supporters with fairness and respect that they have earned.

This statement effectively implied that, at that moment, the Party was not treating his supporters with fairness or respect. In combination, these rhetorical statements placed his campaign, as well as his supporters, further at odds with the Democratic Party. Online, Sanders activists fumed collectively that mainstream media outlets and the Democratic Party leadership that had been so quick to sensationalize the event took no steps to either correct the record or more importantly, to respond to what they saw as undemocratic practices at an official Party meeting that had real electoral consequences. This experience further reinforced their feelings that the Party was an opponent of their movement, that they would have to defend against as delegates. One delegate described the tenor of conversation in the delegate Facebook groups at that time:

It was a forum for what was going on in the campaign. [People said things like] What did they do to Bernie now? The media is quashing him again as usual. Hillary said this. I can’t believe that. All that kind of stuff and then a little bit of ‘What’s gonna happen in Philadelphia?’ (Interview Quote).

Online conversations like this, in which the delegates began to talk about the Party and the media as the opposition would grow in number. A few weeks later, on the day before the California primary, the Associate Press declared Clinton the presumptive presidential nominee of the Democratic Party after surveys of superdelegates indicated that Clinton had exceeded the threshold number of delegates necessary for the nomination. Other
networks quickly followed suit and declared Clinton the presumptive nominee. Sanders supporters nationwide called foul, arguing that the media had put its finger on the electoral scale and decreased turnout in California and five other states holding primaries the next day, thus preventing Sanders from achieving the minimum virtual tie in the delegate count that they believed would have allowed him to contest the outcome of the convention on electability grounds. The delegates in California saw this move by the mainstream media as another example of a system rigged against Sanders and “the movement” more broadly. Months-old YouTube videos immediately circulated amongst the delegates that showed chair Wasserman-Schultz and other staffers at the Democratic National Committee telling news anchors and pundits that delegate counts that included superdelegate pledges in advance of the convention were inaccurate representations of the state of the Party’s nomination process. The next day, Clinton won the California, New Jersey and New Mexico primaries and claimed the nomination without superdelegates, but the way the primary process played out in California left Sanders delegates increasingly critical of the media and the Party. For them, Clinton’s primary win in California was illegitimate—the result of turnout that had been suppressed by the media’s improper call of the election for Hillary Clinton.

Despite a nationwide rush by left-leaning organizations that had supported Sanders, such as the Communication Workers of America and MoveOn.org, to endorse and rally around Clinton as the presumptive nominee, Sanders delegates in California, fueled by their candidate’s decision to stay in the race, continued to hold out hope that something would happen to create an opening for Senator Sanders to contest the
nomination. The state’s slow post-election process of counting 2.4 million provisional and mail-in ballots (Myers, 2016) fueled theories that Sanders had performed better in the election than had been reported in initial vote tallies. In the void left by the busy primary, delegates began to discuss online the systemic issues with the Democratic Party and the political system that they felt had handed Clinton the nomination. These included: the Party-created debate schedule in which events were held on Saturday nights and holiday weekends to ostensibly constrain viewership and favor a household name like Clinton; a consensus of public support by Party elites and elected officials for Clinton in the earliest days of the election cycle; the influence of corporate money and SuperPACs; and a media system they saw as both unsupportive in its reporting on Sanders and complicit in suppressing voter turnout via acts like the superdelegate announcement described above.

One delegate explained how social media allowed them to build community while countering narratives that appeared in mainstream media:

[Facebook provided] a lot of camaraderie and understanding of where we were all coming from. Having these shared experiences. And the media. Like the LA Times. We could say like, look what the LA Times wrote this is not true. We were able to be—we became our own media (Interview Quote).

The overwhelming support Clinton had from the Party establishment since the beginning of the campaign cycle contributed to the outsider status that Sanders delegates felt in advance of the convention. One delegate called the superdelegates “bought and paid for,” referring to Clinton’s fundraising support for down-ballot candidates, many of whom were superdelegates. Much of this collective animosity played out in the delegation’s Facebook groups as they collectively experienced and analyzed what for them was the exact “rigged system” that Sanders had rallied against throughout the campaign. While
this feeling was shared by many Sanders supporters nationwide, some delegates felt it was their duty to leverage their role as delegates to contest these injustices. Figuring out how to do that was a process they began as they came together for the first time with one another, and with Clinton delegates, at the Party’s statewide delegation meeting.

Rehearsing for the Democratic National Convention

A month after the primary, on June 19th, the Clinton and Sanders delegations attended the California State Delegation Meeting. One Sanders delegate referred to the event as “our Nevada,” referencing the controversial Nevada Delegation Meeting described above. This was the first time the delegates had met in person and the first experience they had with the Party bureaucracy that was not mediated by the television or the campaign. It also coincided with a meeting of the state Party’s executive board.

Throughout the event, the presupposition by speakers, ready to coalesce around a nominee, that Clinton had captured the nomination was met by outcries of “there’s no nominee yet!” from Sanders delegates. The fact that Sanders had not yet conceded, and would not do so for another month, emboldened his delegates. At Party events the night before, RL Miller, a Sanders supporter, long-standing Party assembly delegate, and chair of the state Party’s environmental caucus, had tried unsuccessfully to quell the impetus of her fellow Sanders supporters to keep fighting. “I’m a supporter of Bernie Sanders, but I’m also a realist,” “she implored.” (Mehta, 2016). At the delegation meeting, John Burton, chair of the state Party, reflected to Sanders delegates about his own experience supporting McCarthy in the 1968 primary, and the regret he and others felt for not
supporting the eventual nominee, Hubert Humphrey, who lost to Republican Richard Nixon in the general election.

Though the agenda of this meeting had little potential for controversy on the level that Sanders supporters had seen in Nevada, delegates nevertheless had a knee-jerk reaction as those leading the meeting began to conduct the business of ratifying at-large delegates using the same “voice vote” procedures that they knew had been used for controversial votes in Nevada. One Sanders delegate with experience in parliamentary procedures raised a point of order resulting in the chair asking the assembly to indicate both “ayes” and “nays” for each order of business, rather than only the “ayes.” The last vote of the day was to elect California Governor Jerry Brown, who had endorsed Clinton a few weeks earlier, as chair of the state’s delegation to the national convention. As the chair asked for the vote, “nays” rang out through the auditorium, forcing a count of individual ayes and nays. Though Brown prevailed in the vote, the Sanders delegation felt a sense of satisfaction that they had forced the Party to do things by the book. At this point, the delegates began to act as the opposition to problems they observed in the Democratic Party rather than solely as advocates for the nomination of Bernie Sanders. One Sanders delegate and lifelong Democrat described her interaction with a Clinton delegate who watched her vote against Jerry Brown:

The woman behind me goes, ‘How can you do that? Even Bernie thinks that’s acceptable. What are you guys doing?’ And I told her ‘Well Bernie’s from Vermont I’m from California. [Brown’s] my governor. I don’t want him at the head of my party because I’m mad at him because of fracking. I have an opinion.’ But you’re not allowed to have that in the Democratic Party anymore (Interview Quote).
This clash over decorum and processes between Clinton and Sanders delegates foreshadowed the experiences that the Sanders delegates would soon have at the convention in Philadelphia. Further, the dissonance Sanders delegates felt between their own ideals and how they viewed the Party’s treatment of Sanders would inform the actions they chose to take at the convention, actions they would take in spite of appeals for civility made to them by Sanders and his campaign staff. As the delegates planned for the convention, Sanders became less of a candidate to them, in that they knew his chances of being nominated were very slim. Instead, continued support for Senator Sanders became an act of protest by delegates against the Party and, by extension, a vehicle for bringing attention to the issues they had with the Party and with Clinton.

**Logistics as Identity Formation**

By the time California’s Sanders delegates were planning for the convention, they knew in the back of their minds that a massive movement of superdelegates away from Clinton was extremely unlikely and as such Sanders had little chance of getting the nomination. One delegate explained, “If we could get Bernie elected by flipping superdelegates sure, that was in theory. We all understood that that was not going to happen” (Interview Quote). And yet, as this section shows, Sanders delegates were extremely motivated and driven to get to the national convention despite extremely high financial costs and a very low chance of nominating Senator Sanders. When Sanders conceded the race and endorsed Clinton two weeks before the convention, it did little to change their plans. To them, Sanders had no choice politically but to endorse Clinton. If anything, the forced endorsement was just another sign of what was wrong with the Party and the system.
Many pointed to the chilly awkwardness between the two candidates at the first Clinton-Sanders endorsement rally as proof Sanders had been cajoled into support for Clinton. This narrative, according to a Senior Sanders staffer familiar with the delegations, was one that frustrated Sanders and his campaign staff. He explained:

A lot of delegates seemed to have this viewpoint that when Bernie said ‘our goal is to help the nominee win and defeat Donald Trump that there’s someone sitting behind him with a gun when he’s saying it and he doesn’t actually want that. . . . He definitely wanted Hillary to win (Interview Quote).

Continuing to support Sanders served three main purposes for the delegates: to bring public attention to key issues related to trade, the environment, and U.S. military participation in ongoing foreign wars, to highlight what they saw as the unfair practices of the Democratic Party and the political system, and to connect and network in-person with members of the movement nationwide. One delegate explained:

California was a very, very active and pre-organized group of delegates. And partly that’s I think because we were at the end of the primary season, and we were watching in horror as things went. And we went. Hey…we need to get our act together (Interview Quote).

Beyond discussing issues of politics and ideology, the California Sanders delegation spent much of the month before the convention trying to figure out how to get to Philadelphia and where to stay. They had long-since realized that their lack of both organization and information about the logistics of the trip to Philadelphia and their role as delegates was not going to be remedied by the Democratic Party or the Sanders campaign. In an interview, a Sanders campaign Director who oversaw delegate processes admitted that the staff member reponsible for communicating with delegates in advance
of the 2016 was “flaky” and “probably didn’t get a hold of a lot of people” (Interview Quote).

At the state delegation meeting they had received a single-page flyer with basic information about the official state delegation hotel in Philadelphia and about complimentary shuttles between the hotel and the Wells Fargo Center, where the large, evening convention was to be held. A Sanders staff member was assigned to the California delegation, but most delegates reported no contact with him. Those who reported speaking to him only remembered that he emphasized the importance of staying at the official delegation hotel at its $700 a night room rate, and otherwise provided little information beyond that which was available on the flyer.

The high cost of the trip to Philadelphia—the California Democratic Party told delegates to budget $3250 for the trip—was a startling surprise for the Sanders delegation who saw this as another institutional barrier to activist participation. Many delegates created pages on GoFundMe, an online “crowdfunding” platform used by individuals, charities, and fledgling businesses to raise money via small donations. The delegates modeled their pages after one-another, highlighting their reasons for supporting Senator Sanders, the work they did on his campaign, and their goal of spreading his message or building “the movement” at the convention. One delegate concluded his page by stating that he wanted to “carry [Bernie’s] message to the Democratic National Convention…in order to be able to reach out to more Democrats in the interest of our nation’s future.” Another wrote that she needed the financial support in order to “put in our 18 to 20-hour days of fighting for progressive values.” None of these pages referenced Hillary Clinton.
or Donald Trump. They raised money from their friends and family, their extended social networks, and from Sanders supporters they had never met. Delegates who could afford to do so donated money to help their co-delegates get to Philadelphia. Many delegates, after reaching their own goals, shared the pages of other delegates with their own networks to help them raise funds to attend. Using the Facebook group, delegates made plans to split single hotel rooms with two or three other delegates, many of whom were people they had never met in person. In the end, the campaign did cover portions of many delegates’ hotel bills directly, though some delegates did not realize this until they went to check out of the hotel and found their bills lower than expected. The comradery and collaborative sense of purpose present as delegates dealt with the logistics of convention travel continued as the delegation worked to organize political actions for the convention.

A few weeks before the convention, Sanders’ campaign staff became concerned that some of their delegations were going to be a problem on the convention floor and attempted to put some structures in place to mitigate such behavior. The Director of Delegates explained:

We had enough context from state party conventions in places like Colorado and Nevada to know that there were going to be issues. Which is why we tried to have a whip system in place to disseminate information (Interview Quote).

The Sanders campaign notified its California delegation that it had selected several members of the delegation to serve as “whips” for the state delegation, in order to help the delegates with logistics in Philadelphia and on the convention floor. For the roles, campaign staff had identified delegates who had experience in Party politics and conventions who could be of help to more inexperienced delegates. When these names
were floated in the delegate Facebook group, they were immediately rejected by the
delegation who saw those individuals as too focused on their own political careers to
properly represent the delegation. Instead, the delegates self-organized themselves into
groups based on regions—Northern California, Central California, and Southern
California—with each region electing its own leadership and whips. In theory, these
whips, which the delegation decided to call organizers, could help the delegation get
answers to logistical questions in advance of the convention, but the delegation’s
rejection of the campaign-assigned whips frustrated Sanders’ staff and created a
disconnect between the delegation and the campaign. The Director of Delegates for the
Sanders campaign said:

In California they pretended like the campaign didn’t exist. Which led to a
large number of problems at the convention. There were 5-10 states [in
2016 and 2020] that appointed their own whips, and we were like that’s
fine but we aren’t going to give information to anyone but the whips that
we appointed because we wanted people that were going to be responsible
(Interview Quote).

Recognizing that most delegates had no idea what to expect from the convention, one
organizer collaborated with a delegate who had been to several past conventions to create
a “Convention How-To” video for the delegation. It featured the two sitting next to each
other in chairs with the organizer asking the experienced delegate basic questions about
the convention. The video was posted to a private YouTube channel and distributed via
the delegation Facebook group. All of these organizing practices emerged on their own
with no interaction from the Sanders campaign or the Party.

During the weeks immediately prior to the Democratic National Convention in
Philadelphia, the California Sanders delegation discussed in its statewide delegation
Facebook group the many potential actions they could take during the four day-long event. The consensus amongst the delegation was that, beyond support for Sanders, they would carry out modest protests against the use of military action abroad, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and controversial practices impacting the environment, such as fracking. These were all seen as problem areas for Clinton, who was on the record with support for fracking and military actions abroad. During the campaign, Clinton claimed to oppose the TPP, but no one in the Sanders delegation believed her, especially after Clinton loyalists on the DNC platform committee vetoed the addition of anti-TPP language to the Party platform in the days preceding the convention.

While the main Facebook group continued to be the primary site for interaction between the state’s delegation, other separate online groups emerged, including smaller subgroups of the state delegation and a massive group called for all Sanders delegates nationwide that one California delegate described as “completely unwieldy.” Another group emerged when delegates, interacting in the national Facebook group, recognized a shared interest in protest and civil disobedience, and formed a subgroup. Members of this group referred to it as the “Coalition of 57,” after the number of states, territories, and abroad Party organizations represented by the Democratic National Committee. These members established a private Facebook Group for communicating with one another in advance of and during the convention. Other small groups spun off to carry out specific actions that were raised in the national group, ranging from creating anti-TPP signs that would match across delegations, to designing and ordering neon green “Bernie” shirts to
wear in protest during Clinton’s acceptance speech on Thursday night as a physical representation of the lack of unity between the delegation and others at the convention.

Coming into the convention, the delegates were dealing with the logistics of the convention independent of help from the campaign or Party and planning modest protest activities for the convention at odds with the wishes of the Clinton campaign and the DNC. The Sanders campaign also made attempts to discourage protest actions at the convention, but one staff member admitted that “we probably had a greater tolerance in 2016 for some amount of like, letting the air out of the balloon [on the floor] than the Clinton campaign and the people putting on the convention had.” For many California delegates, supporting Sanders at the convention was a way to use their collective voice to express publicly their dissatisfaction with Clinton and the DNC. The Director of Delegates for the Sanders campaign explained the dissonance between the more raucous delegations and those who were more experienced in Party politics:

It feels like before Bernie 2016 [delegates] always understood that they are there as appointees and representatives of the campaign. I think we had a lot of delegates in 2016 who viewed their role as ‘I’m here to represent the people who picked me to be here and if we don’t like what the campaign is telling us then we’re going to default to doing what they’re saying, not what the campaign is saying (Interview Quote).

In that sense, the collective identity the delegation had negotiated over the course of the campaign had in some ways transcended support for Sanders and had become about larger issues of representation, fairness, and democracy. As the delegates carried out their plans in the context of a modern political convention, they selectively used technology, combined with in-person meetings and word-of-mouth messaging, to enable and
encourage participation in acts of citizenship in the context of a highly choreographed media event.

**Acts at the 2016 Convention**

Coming into the convention, the California Sanders delegation had planned several actions protesting core issues related to the environment (fracking), international affairs (military conflicts abroad), and trade (the trans-pacific partnership, or TPP). They were frustrated by the Party’s attempt at what they saw as “manufactured unity” (Interview Quote). This section shows how the California Sanders delegation, sometimes in concert with delegations from other states, carried out disruptive acts of citizenship that were grounded in concerns about process, democratic ideals, and alienation from the political system. It also shows how, despite planning and consensus around what acts of protest to carry out or not carry out, events on the ground led to the almost unanimous adoption by the delegation of tactics like booing, despite ruling those out in advance.

**Antiparty Solidarity Outside the 2016 Convention**

Three days before the convention, on July 22, two events took place that drastically increased both the delegate’s motivation and feelings of justification for protesting the Democratic Party. First, the selection by Clinton of Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia as the Vice-Presidential nominee, who Sanders supporters saw as having almost identical policy positions to Clinton. One delegate described Kaine as “completely off with all of the values that we were focusing on including the [Trans-Pacific Partnership].” The Sanders delegation felt that, given the constant rhetoric from the Party about Clinton-Sanders unity and the fact that Sanders delegates made up 46% of the total elected delegates
nationwide, their ideology, or at minimum their views around a few core issues, should have been nodded to in Clinton’s pick for vice president. That same day, WikiLeaks released email threads between Democratic National Committee operatives, including Wasserman-Schultz, that supported Sanders’ long-standing accusations that the Party preferred Clinton to Sanders and did not behave neutrally throughout the primary. For Sanders delegates, these emails gave credence to the fears and theories about the Party that they had been discussing in the previous months.

Most delegates arrived in Philadelphia two days later, on Sunday July 24, the day before the convention started. By then, Downtown Philadelphia had largely been transformed into a multi-block convention area. On Chestnut Street, cable network MSNBC had setup a giant stage on which hosts, including Rachel Maddow and Chuck Todd, were conducting interviews. Screens on both sides of the stage displayed a feed of the station’s live broadcast. That same day, thousands of Sanders supporters marched down Broad Street, the main artery leading from Center City Philadelphia to Wells Fargo Arena, where the convention was to be held. Chanting slogans such as “Hell no, DNC, we won’t vote for Hillary,” they carried props ranging from a giant paper-mache Bernie to signs depicting upside-down Democratic Donkeys. The parade was led by a large banner that said, “Help End Establishment Politics, Vote No on Hillary.”

By that afternoon, DNC Chair Debbie Wasserman-Schultz announced that she would resign over the documents released by Wikileaks days earlier. At the MSNBC stage in Old City, Sanders supporters cheered as they watched on the massive screens as Sanders discussed the resignation with MSNBC reporters. It was in this environment of
distrust and resentment that the California Sanders delegation would enter the national
convention the following day.

Figure 3: Bernie Sanders speaks about the DNC Leaks and party chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz. His
interview was broadcast at the MSNBC Stage at the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia.

Inside the 2016 Convention: A Voice for Sanders Supporters Outside the
Convention and Nationwide

California’s delegates at the convention organized their activities both in-person and via a
variety of media. Most used the Facebook application on their smartphones to
communicate with the delegation, but others had joined a national campaign channel
using Slack, a real-time group messaging application popular with software companies
and non-profits. Each morning, they attended delegation breakfasts at their hotel like the
one described earlier in this paper. As with the convention itself, delegates were offended
by the presumption about Clinton’s nomination assumed by speakers and Clinton
delegates at the first breakfast. Each day after the breakfasts, activists from the California
Sanders delegation met separately to discuss the previous day and to discuss and debate any actions they planned to take at the convention that night. A controversial topic among the delegates was about whether to walk out during Clinton’s acceptance speech or not. In the end, the delegation decided not to protest Clinton’s speech, though they did carry out other actions. The Coalition of 57 also met several times during the convention.

*Protesting Policy and Process*

Members of the California Sanders delegation planned and executed a variety of planned actions at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Some of these were actions planned around specific moments in the convention and others were spontaneous reactions to issues of process and to perceived slights to Sanders or his delegation by the Party. On the first afternoon of the convention, Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, chair of the convention, opened the convention with the statement, “I am honored to accept this gavel as permanent chair of the Democratic National Convention. And I am excited to put Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine in the White House” followed by several sentences of campaign rhetoric about Clinton and Kaine. Sanders delegates from around the arena, including California, booed in protest for several minutes, forcing Fudge to repeatedly pause her speech.

While some of the Sanders delegates that booed the mention of Clinton likely did so because they truly opposed her nomination, most of the Sanders delegates interviewed for this dissertation said the boos were in response not to Clinton herself, but to her being presumptuously referred to as the nominee in advance of the roll call vote necessary for her to officially be nominated. None of these delegates thought Sanders was going to win.
the nomination, but it was important for them that the DNC go through the motions out of respect for Sanders, for the delegates who had traveled there, for those who had voted for him, and for the process itself. One delegate described how she and others around her felt:

We [hadn’t] put Bernie’s name in nomination yet. Nobody’s in nomination yet. This is the Democrats, right? And we have two candidates. One of whom raised all that money and got 13 million voters with no SuperPac and with no corporate money. This was people power. And instead of being proud of that, they did everything they could to shut up and get us out (Interview Quote).

She described how two delegates she was with were uncomfortable with this initial booing, but by the second day heartily joined her in booing military-related speeches. Similar acts of spontaneous protests, like the one described in the opening of this paper, broke out at delegation breakfasts and on buses. Attempts were made by Sanders and his staff to reel in the California delegation. Several delegates recalled getting an email from Sanders asking delegates on the floor to refraining from booing. On Tuesday morning, at the start of the second day of the convention, Sanders spoke to the California delegation at their daily breakfast:

“It’s easy to boo. But it is harder to look your kids in the face who would be living under a Donald Trump presidency . . . .The political revolution accomplished more than any of us here could have dreamed. What the political revolution means is that we keep going. There is no state that will play a bigger role than California.”

Most delegates I spoke to were not dissuaded by Sanders’ appeals. “I’m sure he was directed to send [the email]” one delegate posited. Several delegates gave press interviews explaining their actions. One explained how the California delegation “stepped up to push forward when Bernie had to step back.” Another said she was
grateful to Sanders but felt it necessary to protest politicians saying things she disagreed with. Talking about single payer health care, she said “we have to keep on pushing. We have a lot of work to do to convince people of this.”

The delegates’ commitment to their role as the voice of protest inside the convention during the evening was reinforced by their experiences outside the convention during the day. Delegates took part in both anti-DNC and issue-based protests that were held outside the convention hall and at other landmarks in Philadelphia. While issue-based protests are commonplace at national Party conventions (Sobieraj, 2011), the Sanders delegates were in the unique position to bring that protest inside the convention. Further, the Sanders delegates could draw a direct link between the issues and Sanders’ priorities. When the delegates would encounter members of other Sanders delegations and say they were Sanders delegates from California, they would immediately get hugs and “thank yous” for their role in starting actions that other delegations could participate in.

Inside the convention, some delegates protested by waving paper “No Fracking” and “No TPP” signs. On the third day of the convention, security guards began attempts at confiscating the “non-approved” signs upon entry to the arena and threatening to eject people who held up such signs. On future nights, delegates used construction paper to create folding signs that fit in their pockets but expanded to full size. Some delegates also put electrical tape over their mouths to signify that the Party has silenced them in some way, such as by confiscating a sign. One of the simplest and most effective actions coordinated on social media was chanting over speakers they saw as having questionable
backgrounds. Leon Panetta, the former U.S. Secretary of Defense, was repeatedly interrupted by chants of “no more war” that initiated in the California delegation. The next day, when the delegates began the same chant for another military speaker, the Clinton delegation erupted with chants of U-S-A leading to a verbal competition to be heard in the arena.

The largest, and most visible act carried out by the delegates was their participation along with many other state delegations in a “walkout” of several hundred delegates immediately following the roll call vote on the second night of the convention. This event, though perceived as spontaneous by most delegates who took part in it, was in fact organized by the “Coalition of 57” described above. In the case of the walkout, they planned it as a small group and, due to concerns about being found out, only shared it with delegates outside the coalition via word of mouth. Eventually, they did send a call to action to all nationwide delegates on a Slack channel, but only moments before the walkout was to begin. After delegates left the floor, the Coalition had wranglers in the hallways directing people out of the arena complex and into the adjacent media tent, a temporary complex created so that mainstream media outlets could work and hold events near the arena. Delegates sat on the floor of the media tent in an effort to “occupy the media tent” and garner media coverage. The next day, the Coalition sent out a press release identifying themselves as the organizers of the walkout and bemoaning the “unity façade” of the DNC’s relationship with Sanders.

On the last day, several hundred Sanders supporters from around the nation wore neon green “Bernie” shirts that they had custom made for the event. Their goal was to
visually depict the lack of unity between the Sanders and Clinton delegates. In the last part of the evening, staff dimmed the main lights in advance of Clinton’s speech and turned on black lights, causing the shirts to glow in a smattering of neon all over the darkened convention floor. While this looked like one of the more coordinated visual events crafted by Sanders delegates, several of those involved in its planning reported that the “glow-in-the-dark” effect was just a pleasant side-effect of choosing such a bright shirt.

The California Sanders delegation also carried out subtle acts of resistance throughout their time at the convention that were not visible to the audience. Each night, they reported facing increased animosity from arena staff who tried to split the Sanders contingent up and Clinton delegates who threw water at them, took their seats, and ripped their signs. As such, the act of continued participation in the convention was itself an act of resistance. The delegation’s elected organizers mobilized to have delegates save the seats of other delegates when they got up to use the restroom or visit the food buffet. The continued need to defend their space on the floor converted any member of the delegation who was initially hesitant about protesting into a boisterous participant in the actions the delegation was taking.

Using traditional organizing, combined with technology, members of the California Sanders delegation led or participated in various type of acts of citizenship during their time at the Democratic National Convention. Their continued vocal support for Bernie Sanders, despite his concession and endorsement of Clinton, was an act of civil disobedience, in that it highlighted in a tangible way for the media and those inside
the convention the unity that did not exist. It was also the most visible way to protest against the DNC’s support for Clinton throughout the primary, which did not lend itself to signs or chants. Continuing to support Sanders was their way of saying that they believed her candidacy was illegitimate. The walkouts created a spectacle for the cameras and provided a sense of catharsis for the delegates immediately following the roll call vote and the permanence of Clinton’s nomination. They also highlighted specific issues—opposing fracking, the TPP, and military use abroad—that they knew would not otherwise have been part of the convention.

**Post-Convention: A Post-Bernie future?**

Following the 2016 convention, interviews reveal that, for many of these former delegates, the political consciousness that was activated for them throughout the convention process continued beyond that election cycle. As early as the morning after the convention ended, while still in Philadelphia, delegates and other Sanders supporters began to discuss the way forward for their “post-Bernie” (Interview Quote) movement. These conversations continued after the November election, as many of the delegates weighed the prospects of #DemExit or #DemEnter, the former being a denunciation of and departure from the Democratic Party, and the latter being an active decision to stay in the Democratic Party and try to change it. A delegate I spoke to who had been involved in the Coalition of 57 explained:

> “The majority of us stayed in the Democratic Party. Some left. We pushed for people not to leave. There’s too many obstacles to bringing a third party and being viable. Right now, we’re trying to take over the California Democratic Party.”
Consistent with the above statement, a minority of the delegates interviewed for this dissertation completely left the Party or fully disengaged from it. One delegate who had been a Democrat for decades did say she would do [her] part to keep progressive but will never be part of the Party directly again” (Interview Quote). Another delegate said his experience at the convention “put to bed any hope I had of doing something just in the Democratic Party.” Within six months, both of these delegates joined a newly formed national organization “Draft Bernie for a People’s Party,” created by a former Sanders staffer with the aim of creating a new third party led by Bernie Sanders. The organization re-branded itself “Movement for a People’s Party” after Sanders declined to be involved. It continues to hold events with the goal of “a new major people’s party free of corporate money and influence” (Movement for a People’s Party, 2021).

Most delegates interviewed for this dissertation chose #DemEnter, committing to activism aimed at making the Party more internally democratic and pushing it to the left. For them, the former was the means to the latter. One delegate called for “making the party responsive to the people, the working class, and minorities in a way that goes beyond platitudes and staged media presentations” (The Press Enterprise, 2016). Dozens of Facebook groups changed their names and purpose from narrowly focusing on the Sanders campaign to continuing Sanders’ “political revolution” beyond 2016. For example, the Facebook group “Bernie 2016 - Highland Park” changed its name to “Berniecrats of America - Highland Park.” The usage of “Berniecrat” amongst activists, which had previously been narrowly focused on support for Sanders, expanded as
activists started using it to collectively organize toward bringing about change within the Democratic Party by supporting progressive Democrats who shared Sanders’ priorities.

In January 2017, many former delegates in California turned the #DemEnter discussion into action, running in local Party elections to become assembly delegates to the California State Democratic Party. The assembly delegate elections, and other political activities carried out by former 2016 delegates are discussed at length in the next chapter. What many of the former delegates did not expect in early 2017 was that they would have the opportunity to run for Sanders delegate again three years later, as Sanders ultimately entered the 2020 presidential race and subsequently won the California primary, providing his campaign with an even larger statewide delegation than the one he garnered in 2016.

Activation and Organizing for the 2020 Convention

In August 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the DNC held its first virtual national convention. Though the convention was based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, concerns about spreading the Covid-19 virus meant that only a skeleton crew of campaign staff, logistics personnel, and Party leaders were actually in Milwaukee. For years, scholars and pundits had been critiquing modern political conventions as “scripted infomercials” (Karabell, 1998, p. 3). In 2020, this was more true than ever, as the delegates, effectively the only remaining source of potential disruption inside modern conventions, had been almost completely removed from the Party’s public presentation. As such, compared to the raucous convention of 2016, the 2020 convention was
meticulously planned and executed by the DNC and the Biden campaign, working in concert with the Sanders campaign.

The virtual format drastically narrowed, if not eliminated, the capacity for the type of public protest actions that Sanders delegates had engaged in from the floor of the 2016 convention. But even absent these changes brought about by the pandemic, the disruptive potential of the delegation from California, as well as that of other delegations, was reduced in 2020, as many of the factors that led delegates to act in 2016 had been minimized. This next section discusses how differences in the primary campaign and pre-convention period brought about a mediated experience for delegates that was less contentious and also more carefully controlled by the Party and the Sanders campaign. Combined with a modified delegate selection procedure and a substantial push for decorum from the Sanders campaign, these factors contributed to a 2020 delegation whose collective identity, while ideologically similar, lacked the visceral anger toward the Party that characterized the 2016 delegation. Further, the broader Democratic electorate, which had been divided in 2016, was extremely united in its desire to get rid of Donald Trump (Seitz-wald, 2019). Together with the virtual convention format, these factors limited the motivation among delegates, as well as the opportunity, to carry out protest actions around the 2020 Democratic National Convention. It also contributed to their decision to engage in targeted activism aimed at Party leaders in the months leading up to the convention.
Activation

Compared to the activists who eventually formed the 2016 Sanders delegation, most of the activists who formed the 2020 delegation had more experience in Party politics. Some were long-standing progressive Party activists who had attended conventions in the past. Others had entered Democratic Party politics as a response to the election of Donald Trump. One delegate explained how she “sat and watched in horror as Donald Trump got elected” and then subsequently got involved in Party politics (Interview Quote). Even those who had been politically activated by Sanders’ first presidential campaign had now been active for four years. Many had chosen to enter the Party at the state or local level and, as discussed at length in the next chapter, had been working to push the Party to the left. As such, the activists who would eventually compete to be 2020 delegates had personal experience with the political potential, as well as the limitations, of both disruptive protest activity and incremental political activity.

In some areas of the state, fissures had also arisen between Sanders activists working within the Party, including on local and statewide campaigns, and an extremely vocal “#DemExit” contingent that was very active on social media. One activist characterized certain members of this latter group as “conspiracy theory live-streamers” due to their constant posting of extreme, far-fetched, anti-establishment content. These conflicts fractured some of the online communities that had formed during the 2016 Sanders campaign. The disagreements also forced activists working within the Party to articulate and defend their decision to do so. As a result, activists who were newly activated during the 2020 campaign entered a network of experienced Sanders supporters that had already negotiated their own relationship to the Democratic Party.
The 2020 delegate experience

The involvement of the Sanders campaign was also more substantial in 2016, especially early in the ‘invisible primary’ period. As discussed above, activists who become delegates are typically heavily involved with the campaign. The 2016 campaign had been narrowly focused on early states, leaving room for early supporters in California to self-organize as they saw fit. By contrast, the 2020 Sanders campaign was on the ground early and with specific campaign strategies. As a result, the 2020 delegates experienced less of an organic, democratic experience of politics and more “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley, 2014, p. 2) in their campaign work, linking some of their political self-efficacy to their success in carrying out specific campaign goals. But beyond differences in campaign work, the 2020 battle for the Democratic nomination was less contentious and settled months earlier than in 2016. Further, the post-primary period was overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2016, much of the collective delegate experience took place in the post-primary period as delegates organized for the convention and planned protests. Instead, the same period in 2020 was overwhelmed by the lockdowns brought on by Covid-19, a shared disgust with the Trump administration’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and a strong push by Party leaders and politicians, including Sanders, for unity heading into the general election. Whereas 2016 Sanders delegates had a shared, mediated experience of what they saw as blatant injustices on the part of the Clinton campaign, the DNC, and the media, the experience of 2020 delegates lacked the same controversy and by extension, failed to produce the same solidarity built around shared grievances associated with the Democratic Party.
A less controversial nominations battle

The 2020 Democratic primary was less contentious for a variety of reasons. At a structural level, the unusually large number of candidates—more than 20 at one point—muddied the progressives versus “the establishment” dichotomy that was so prevalent in 2016. Further, many of Sanders’ priorities—marijuana legalization, radical environmental protections, $15 minimum wage—had since become more mainstream among Democrats (Stein, 2016b). Progressive Party activists were split between Sanders and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, with some progressives blaming Sanders’ post-primary actions for Trump’s win in 2016 (Obeidallah, 2019). While major progressive organizations had almost all supported Sanders in 2016, they were now split between the two candidates (e.g. Working Families Party, 2019). Among the activists who would eventually be the 2020 delegates, there was certainly a preference for Senator Sanders, but also an acceptance by some that a Warren candidacy would also chart a more progressive direction for the Party and the country.
2k RIGHT NOW 🎉 @PatTheBerner · May 14, 2019

Though centrists dislike Elizabeth Warren, she’s being elevated by the media solely to try to split the progressive vote so a centrist can win.

Don’t be swayed.

She doesn’t have the grassroots support or the movement behind her a progressive needs to win this thing.

#Bernie2020

Cesar Armendariz 🌹
@LongBeachCesar

Replying to @PatTheBerner

My take: if Warren does well but drops out, her progressive policies will encourage people to stay away from Biden and go to Bernie. If Warren does well and becomes the nominee, the Dems and Independents will have a legitimately progressive candidate to support.

#WinWin

9:49 PM · May 14, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

1 Retweet 4 Likes

Figure 4: Twitter conversation between progressives about Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren.
That said, as the race became more competitive and debates pitted Sanders against Warren, as well as against more moderate candidates, discourses among these would-be delegates became more complex.

Whereas Sanders delegates in 2016 could easily point to broad, ideological differences between Sanders and the parallel antagonists of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party “establishment”, the 2020 delegates had to critique and differentiate Sanders from moderate candidates, the Democratic Party “establishment,” as well as Warren. Because Warren’s call for “big structural change” aligned with many of Sanders’ goals, discussions about Warren were less about values than about either implementation of policy toward shared values or about electability. Sanders delegates also found themselves defending Warren from a media that many of them they still saw as aligned with “corporate Democrats.” Beyond these differences in the makeup of the candidates, the relatively unprovocative invisible primary and nomination contests, augmented by deliberate procedural changes made by Party leaders, provided less fodder for antagonism toward both the Party and the eventual candidate, former Vice President Joe Biden.

When Sanders entered the 2020 Democratic presidential primary it produced both excitement and consternation among Democrats. His 2016 supporters were energized. Many in California encouraged their networks, as a show of force, to donate to Sanders’ campaign immediately following his announcement. However, many moderate and long-standing Party activists feared that if Sanders were to lose the nomination, it would reignite the intraparty conflicts of 2016 (e.g. Clift, 2019), while if he were to win the
nomination, he would be uncompetitive in the general election against Donald Trump (e.g. Martin, 2019; Merrilees, 2019). The former concern was validated by some specific events early in the campaign. The first months of Sanders’ 2020 campaign involved both a public fight with the Center for American Progress (Golshan, 2019), a prominent Democratic Party think tank, and the hiring of communications staff known for their scathing critiques of the Democratic Party and support for Jill Stein in the 2016 general election (Chait, 2019). By October 2019, there were over 20 candidates in the race and six debates had been held with no clear frontrunner emerging. News stories detailed concern among Party leaders that a lengthy primary period was inevitable and would inhibit the Party’s efforts in the general election (Linskey & Viser, 2019). For Party leaders concerned with intraparty conflict, the wide-open field did have a silver lining: it limited accusations from the left that insiders were exerting outsized influence over the invisible primary to the benefit of their preferred candidates. Reports that former-president Barack Obama had repeatedly discouraged Biden from running (e.g. Thrush, 2019) likely further constrained the emergence of any narratives that Biden had received on early support from Party leaders.

The primaries and caucuses themselves were also relatively uncontentious. The Iowa Caucuses were mired by technical problems that embarrassed the Party and produced delayed results (Fazzini, 2020), but in the end only the most ardent of conspiracy theorists saw this as a scheme by Party insiders to reduce Sanders’ momentum. After nomination contests in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada had been held, Sanders had almost twice as many delegates (42) as Joe Biden (23) and Pete
Buttigieg (24). At this moment, there was the potential for conflict to emerge between Sanders supporters and the Party. With the South Carolina primary approaching and Super Tuesday on its heels, many well-known Democratic politicians opposed to a Sanders candidacy engaged in public handwringing that Sanders was unelectable against Donald Trump (e.g. S. Collins, 2020; Pengelly, 2020). Some were quoted in mainstream media articles about how the Party could strategically rebuff Sanders in the context of hypothetical contested conventions (e.g. Siders, 2020). Reports also emerged that powerful Democratic donors were considering forming a “Stop Sanders” Super PAC (Lerer & J., 2020). On social media, Sanders supporters, including many 2016 convention delegates, began warning that the DNC and “the Democratic elite” were trying to rig the election. However, rapid changes in the state of the race meant that neither the concerns of those Party insiders nor those of Sanders activists came to pass.

In the four days before the South Carolina primary, candidates Tom Steyer, Amy Klobuchar, and Pete Buttigieg all dropped out of the race and endorsed Biden, strengthening his position as the leading moderate candidate in South Carolina and providing him with momentum heading into Super Tuesday three days later. While this raised some complaints about collusion in communities of former delegates and Sanders activists, the intensity of their criticisms did not rise to the level exhibited by Sanders supporters in 2016. Further, Sanders’ showing in South Carolina was unexpectedly poor (20% of voters) and could not be easily explained away by supporters of other candidates coalescing around Biden. Buoyed by extraordinary support from voters in the black community, Biden walloped Sanders in South Carolina, winning 39 delegates to Sanders’
15. On Super Tuesday, Biden won 9 out of 14 states, winning 698 delegates to Sanders’ 603 and taking the overall lead by 100 delegates. Between Biden’s surge, Sanders’ loss of momentum, and a global pandemic bringing about lockdowns less than two weeks later, Sanders lost 9 of the next 12 contests, winning only North Dakota, Democrats Abroad, and the Northern Mariana Islands. He conceded the race and endorsed Joe Biden on April 9 after his loss in the Wisconsin primary two days earlier eliminated any potential comeback that he and his supporters were hoping would emerge from the late Rust Belt primaries. Compared to the drawn-out battle between Clinton and Sanders in 2016, the results of the 2020 nominations battle left little doubt as to the winner. Party leaders had also made extensive procedural changes to avoid accusations that they had influenced the process.

A “hands-off” Democratic Party

In the years preceding the 2020 presidential primaries, Democratic Party leaders took deliberate steps at the national, state, and local level to build trust, diffuse potential tensions, and reduce even the appearance of a rigged system in advanced of the 2020 nomination contests. This was not an insignificant undertaking. When running for DNC chair in early 2017, Tom Perez argued that he was the “turnaround artist” necessary to fix the committee’s structural problems, heal divisions among Party factions, and restore trust in the Party (Berman, 2017). After winning the race over Keith Ellison, the favorite of Sanders’ 2016 supporters, he visited numerous state Party organizations in an attempt to increase goodwill and promote Party unity. In California, his visit coincided with the Party’s state convention at a time when Sanders supporters had just entered the state
Party in droves after running the table on local assembly delegate elections across the state. His speech was thus met with a chorus of boos from those activists, many of whom had been Sanders’ 2016 delegates. One activist explained:

   We [booed] because Perez is part of the establishment that keeps on co-opting the progressive movement. The corporatists have an ally with Tom Perez. We felt like it was important to come and voice our discontent (Dimeo-Ediger, 2017).

A 2020 delegate for whom this was her first state party convention remarked that Perez himself “seemed fine” but was frustrated that “Obama got involved to stop Ellison from winning. Why couldn’t [the Party] just give that to us?” (Interview Quote) These conflicts make clear the uphill battle Perez faced toward his goal of increasing unity and trust among Party factions. To that end, the DNC took numerous steps in the two years that followed as it prepared for the next presidential election.

   In advance of the 2020 primaries, the DNC scheduled twelve sanctioned debates, twice as many as the number initially scheduled in 2016. These debates were held at convenient times and saw high viewership. The DNC also updated its nomination rules based on recommendations from its “Unity Commission”, a group made up of former Clinton and Sanders representatives that had been tasked at the 2016 convention with “review/[ing] the entire nominating process and recommend[ing] changes. . . . with a specific focus on ensuring the process is accessible, transparent and inclusive” (Webb & Crowell, 2020). These changes included reducing the the total number of voting superdelegates and limiting superdelegate voting to only those scenarios where no candidate amassed a majority of delegates in advance of the convention. In addition to appeasing Sanders supporters who followed these proceedings closely, this change also
removed from daily election coverage the constant discussion of uncommitted Party insiders who had the power to overturn the collective will of primary voters. The Unity Commission also encouraged state parties to loosen their rules around Party registration deadlines to allow independents to register on or near election day. This reduced the swirl of complaints, amplified on social media in 2016, from independent voters in other states that had wanted to support Sanders in the primary but were prevented from doing so because they had missed registration deadlines. In California, it led to a new law that allowed No Party Preference (NPP) voters, who at the time made up 25.9 percent of the electorate, to change their Party registration or request a crossover ballot as late as the day of the primary contest (Lauer, 2020).

Despite these efforts, Sanders’ supporters, including many of his 2020 delegates, continued to regard the DNC and Party leaders as “the establishment” that they were fighting against. However, the DNC’s efforts to be clear and transparent meant that activist discourses criticizing the DNC were broad and lacked the specific evidence of wrongdoing that had gone viral within activist communities and motivated the 2016 delegates to engage in disruptive action at the convention. In addition to the DNC, local Party leaders also took steps to reduce conflict between moderates and progressives. As president of a Democratic Club in the San Fernando Valley explained:

“We’ve had a policy since 2016 where we don’t endorse in presidential races because in 2016 our club had a debate—it wasn’t even an endorsement it was just a debate—with a Hillary supporter vs a Bernie supporter. One of the Hillary supporters who was our secretary actually left the room, never to come back, with all of our club records from before 2016. So now we kind of try to avoid that. I try very hard to keep our eye on the prize. . . . There can be a big split and traditionally how clubs
fracture is rooted in these presidential primaries, so our club tries to stay out of it.”

Other clubs either declined to endorse or raised their endorsement requirements such that a larger percentage of members had to agree on a single candidate in order for the club to endorse. Even absent such changes, achieving a simple majority of members was often a difficult outcome in the context of the crowded field of candidates that existed in 2020.

Despite all of these efforts, some activists did complain about the last-minute coalescing of candidates around Biden in advance of the South Carolina Primary, as media reports speculated that even former President Obama had played a behind-the-scenes role in clearing other moderate candidates from the field (Schneider, 2020). One delegate accused the DNC of “backroom broked deals to anoint one another.”

Figure 5: An anti-DNC Tweet by a 2016 Sanders delegate in response to the surge of support by Party leaders for Joe Biden in advance of the 2020 South Carolina Democratic Primary.

At progressive Democratic Club and Our Revolution meetings leading up to the California primary, activists implied that Warren was strategically staying in the race longer in order to help Party leaders blunt Sanders’ momentum. However, discussions of
these efforts did not provoke the same aggrieved charges of a “rigged system” that had been levied in 2016. Indeed, throughout the early primaries many of those same activists similarly had been calling on Elizabeth Warren to drop out and clear the progressive field for Bernie Sanders. Further, following Sanders’ concession there was a rapid strategic pivot, sometimes reluctantly, in activist circles from discussions of nominating Sanders to instead, electing Biden and subsequently pressuring his administration to pursue progressive policies.

_A “unifying” post-primary period_

Following the primary, Sanders’ 2020 delegates also saw less intraparty conflict in the period between the primaries and the convention than their predecessors in 2016 had seen. This can likely be attributed to numerous factors, ranging from the absence of a Wikileaks-style bombshell about Biden to the outsized impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on all aspects of social and political life in the U.S. and worldwide. Even absent Covid-19, the lack of post-primary conflict was bolstered by a collaborative effort by various actors, including progressive organizations, DNC leadership, prominent elected officials, as well as both the Biden and the Sanders campaigns, to promote unity across the ideological divisions in the Democratic Party in order to defeat Donald Trump in the general election. While 2016 saw similar efforts made _in response_ to the disunity that was on display both in advance of, and during the convention, such efforts in 2020 began earlier and with more coordination.

The organizational progressive left certainly coalesced around Biden earlier and more emphatically than they had around Clinton. For example, in 2016, MoveOn.org, the
7-million-member online progressive organization endorsed Sanders in advance of the primary and then, rather than emphatically supporting Hillary Clinton, ran a “united against hate” campaign opposing Trump during the general election (Garofoli, 2020b). By contrast, in 2020, MoveOn members did not reach the necessarily threshold to endorse a candidate in the Democratic primary but did then endorse Biden in advance of the general election (Stewart, 2020). Indivisible endorsed Joe Biden in the general election (Indivisible, 2020a) even after their political action committee, Indivisible Action, had ranked him 8th (the lowest in their ranking) in their primary scorecard (Indivisible, 2019).

Leftist organizations such as Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, RootsAction, and the Sunrise Movement aimed at achieving more comprehensive policy change—Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, wealth taxes—that Biden simply did not represent, did not formally endorse Biden, nor did they oppose him. Many had committed, via a unity pledge released prior to the primaries, that, regardless of the nominee, they would work together to defeat Trump following the Democratic primary (Indivisible, 2020b). These organizations carefully threaded the needle of encouraging electoral support for Biden while simultaneously developing and publicizing plans for how they would lobby and pressure his administration beginning in January 2021 (e.g. @justicedems - Justice Democrats, 2020). Independent progressive organizations that emerged from the ranks of the 2020 Sanders campaign either focused directly on electing Biden or on amassing Sanders delegates in order to influence the Party platform and rules committee (Otterbein, 2020b).
Sanders, Biden, and their respective campaigns also worked together to avoid a contentious post-primary period. In his concession speech on April 9, Sanders both encouraged his supporters to continue amassing delegates in remaining nomination contests so as “to exert significant influence over the Party platform and other functions,” while also committing to working with Biden “to move our progressive ideas forward” (Grullón Paz, 2020). Within weeks, Biden and Sanders announced that their campaigns had formed six “unity task forces”—climate, criminal justice reform, the economy, education, health care, and immigration—tasked with making recommendations to the Party platform committee at the convention (Sprunt, 2020). In July, Biden and Sanders released a 110-page report containing policy recommendations from all six task forces. Describing the report, Sanders said:

“Though the end result is not what I or my supporters would have written alone, the task forces have created a good policy blueprint that will move this country in a much-needed progressive direction and substantially improve the lives of working families throughout our country” (Bradner, Saenz, Arlette, Mucha, Sarah, Sullivan, Kate, & Simon, 2020).

In effect, Sanders was telegraphing to his supporters that their concerns—their voices—were being heard and acted on by Biden and the Democratic Party leadership via formal channels. In a virtual conference call with his delegates following the report’s release, he urged his delegates to “engage in coalition politics with the goal of defeating Trump,” while working to “make sure that a Biden administration is the most progressive administration in modern American history” (Otterbein, 2020a). This legitimation of Biden’s nomination by Sanders, combined with near-universal support for Biden from the organizational progressive left, likely helped reduce, though certainly did not eliminate,
negative discourses about the Democratic Party and Joe Biden in advance of the 2020 national convention.

This difference was evident in the social media activity of the 2020 delegates. Some delegates explicitly advocated for Biden. For example, Amar Shergill, a staunch Sanders supporter and chair of the extremely pro-Sanders Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party, followed Sanders’ concession and endorsement of Biden with a tweet encouraging a “process of compromise” among Democrats. Karen Bernal, the former chair of the Caucus who had helped lead anti-Clinton and anti-DNC protests as a member of the 2016 Sanders delegation, held back public criticism of Joe Biden. In fact, she barely acknowledged Joe Biden. She instead focused her social media activity on advocating for a progressive vice-presidential nominee, opposing the Party platform for excluding support for Medicare for All, and pushing for progressives to formally lead the state’s delegation.

In California, many of the public unity activities discussed above actually preceded the formal processes for electing convention delegates. Accordingly, these activities likely influenced who among Sanders supporters chose to compete to be part of the 2020 delegation. For Sanders’ most anti-establishment supporters, including some of his 2016 delegates from California, both Biden and the Democratic Party represented “the establishment” that Sanders had continued to rail against in his 2020 campaign rhetoric. As such, Sanders’ embrace of Biden and goodwill actions toward the Democratic Party amounted to a betrayal. As a result, some activists who may have attempted to run for delegate in order to show support for a more antagonistic Sanders,
instead disengaged from the process. A 2016 delegate who ran one of the local activist networks discussed earlier in this chapter disparagingly referred to Sanders as “some political revolutionary” and called the Sanders-Biden unity task forces “as useless as the platform [Sanders] hoped to influence with his delegates” (@LaurenSteiner - The Robust Opposition, 2020). Also, the fact that it was becoming increasingly likely that the convention would be virtual, also may have discouraged protest-minded activists from pursuing a spot in the delegation.

Still, some of Sanders’ more anti-establishment supporters remained focused on their goal, long supported by Sanders, of transforming the Democratic Party from within. Unfortunately for some of them, the Sanders campaign, which had maintained a laissez-faire approach to delegate selection in 2016, had taken steps to influence the makeup, and by extension the activities of, its 2020 delegation. They instituted a new delegate selection process, that, combined with the unity activities above, produced a delegation whose members, while certainly outspoken, were less focused on anti-Party activity than those that led protests at the 2016 convention.

**A hands-on approach to the 2020 delegation**

Despite the narratives of insurgency about the 2016 Sanders campaign, some of its staffers were more loyal to the Democratic Party than the raucous delegates who protested on the floor of the convention. Many were frustrated by the constant and indiscriminate way in which Sanders delegates, particularly those from California, had disrupted the 2016 convention.
As it became clear that Sanders would again have a sizable delegation to the 2020 convention, these same staffers, who had returned for the 2020 campaign, instituted practices to weed out the most militant anti-Party activists from the pool of potential delegates. As early as January 2020, the campaign setup an online interest form through which would-be delegates could sign up to be included on their local caucus ballot. This interest form asked whether activists had worked on the 2016 campaign and if they had previously been delegates. It also asked applicants to include links to their own social media accounts as well as relevant groups they managed or regularly participated in.

With California’s delegate elections approaching in May of 2020, many activists who had been delegates in 2016 found that the Sanders campaign had excluded them from the ballots, effectively blocking them from running. One 2016 delegate who in 2020 had volunteered hundreds of hours for and contributed the maximum legal amount to the Sanders campaign, expressed his frustration on Twitter and found other delegates, both in California and nationwide, who had similarly been removed from from the pool of potential delegates.
Figure 6: Tweet by a 2016 delegate who failed to secure a 2020 delegate position due to new restrictions by Sanders campaign staff.

That same week, the Sanders campaign distributed to delegates a five-page document that included a social-media policy, a code of conduct, and a non-disclosure agreement. Each section made clear that delegates who violated the enclosed rules could face “disciplinary action, including but not limited to… removal from the delegation.”

The social media policy aimed to codify for delegates a variety of discursive norms aimed at reducing personal attacks on speakers and instead focusing on “differentiat[ing] the senator from his opponents on the issues.” Delegates were told to “avoid online arguments or confrontations” and to “be respectful when addressing
opposing viewpoints or commenting on the opposition.” Further, it asked that they “refrain from making negative statements about other candidates, Party leaders, campaigns, campaign staffers, supporters, news organizations or journalists.” It required delegates to apply “necessary skepticism,” prior to posting, as to whether their post, if amplified by news media, would “compromise Bernie Sanders’ message, credibility or reputation” or “risk your standing as a delegate.” It also instructed them to forward any media outreach to campaign staff, rather than responding in their capacity as individual delegates. At the same time, the policy encouraged delegates to “share campaign-approved content on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms.”

The contents of these documents made clear that the Sanders campaign aimed to avoid the combative tenor of the 2016 convention and influence the collective message of his supporters during the convention. Within hours, the document was circling in activist networks on Twitter and Facebook with activists accusing the campaign of “muzzling delegates.” A change.org petition signed by several 2016 delegates accused the Sanders campaign of censorship and stifling the free speech rights of delegates who would be attending the convention to “represent Bernie voters.” Numerous comments by former 2016 delegates echoed these feelings in signing statements, highlighting an ongoing tension between whether delegates represent Sanders voters or the Sanders campaign.

For the staffers who distributed the policy document, the uproar on social media actually validated their original impetus for taking a more hands-on role in managing the delegation membership. A Sanders campaign staffer who helped manage delegates in both 2016 and 2020 explained:
“You’ve got all these people who say they want to be more involved in strategy around the convention. And then you distribute this document and say ‘don’t share this’. And then it’s online within hours. So, from that it’s clear to us that they’re not ready for [more involvement]” (Interview Quote).

Coordinated Activism in Advance of the Convention

In the end, only 43 members of the 2016 California delegation were part of the 323-member 2020 Sanders delegation. As discussed at length in the next chapter, many delegates and other Sanders activists who had entered Party politics in 2016 were now established Party activists who had engaged in Party politics as staunch progressives. Some had even run for office as Democrats. In the period leading up to the convention, most at least tacitly supported Joe Biden, even if they simultaneously highlighted the need to lobby his future administration toward progressive ends (Irby, 2020). Despite this support for the presumptive Democratic nominee, many 2020 delegates still used their position as delegates to engage in coordinated activism aimed at pushing the Party to the left. However, unlike in 2016, the acts carried out by 2020 delegates were largely coordinated by a coalition of progressive organizations working to target the enthusiasm of delegates toward the specific goals of increasing the prominence of progressive representatives and ideas at the convention. Given that the virtual convention format would not allow delegates to leverage the large audience of a traditional convention to highlight progressive goals, they instead sought concessions from the Party, leveraging the exigency for unity that preoccupied Party leaders and the Biden campaign heading into the general election.

The activism of Sanders delegates from California sought to achieve several goals. First, they sought to install progressive leaders at the head of their statewide
delegation. They also, along with Sanders delegations from other states, aimed to influence Biden’s vice-presidential selection, the content of the convention, and the Democratic Party platform. Because these goals aimed to influence decisions that would be made in advance of the convention, most delegate activism in 2020 took place in the months and days preceding the convention rather than during the convention itself.

The Delegation Chair

As it had in 2016, the California Democratic Party hosted, this time virtually, a statewide delegation meeting. If the 2016 meeting was a harbinger of the disunity of the national convention, the 2020 event similarly paralleled the controlled environment that would characterize the 2020 national convention. As discussed above, the state delegation meeting in 2016 saw Sanders delegates protest the nomination of California’s governor, then Jerry Brown, as chair of the delegation, a Party tradition when the office is held by a Democrat. In 2020, that same tradition pointed to Governor Gavin Newsom as the presumptive chair of the delegation. Two weeks before the meeting, the California Sanders delegation began connecting online via a reactivated national “Bernie Delegates Network” that had been spearheaded by Normon Solomon, a California delegate, former journalist, and progressive activist. His organization, RootsAction.org, partnered with Our Revolution, and Progressive Democrats of America (PDA) to sponsor the 2020 nationwide “Bernie Delegates Network.” In California, this network of activists aimed to install progressive Congressman Ro Khanna, who had been a national co-chair of Sanders’ campaign, as chair of the statewide delegation. They argued that, because Sanders had won more pledged delegates (225) in California than Biden (172), a
progressive should lead the delegation. However, they would need commitments from almost 50 unpledged delegates—Party leaders, elected officials, and their supporters—in order to influence the vote for chair.

These organizations, along with the California Nurses Association—which clashed regularly with Newsom over single payer health care—mobilized their networks of supporters. They encouraged progressives throughout California to contact their congressional representatives, who were also voting members of the California delegation, and encourage them to commit to voting for Khanna over Newsom. 110 Sanders delegates, along with these organizations, signed and published a letter endorsing Khanna over Newsom (RootsActions.org, 2020). On social media, the Sanders delegates made similar asks to their personal networks of progressives. Their efforts garnered traction in the media, with several major California newspapers publishing articles highlighting the progressive push for Khanna (e.g. Garofoli, 2020a).

For the leaders of the California Democratic Party, the election of the governor as Party chair in advance of the national convention was typically a perfunctory part of the delegation meeting. They were not accustomed to competition and lobbying around the delegation chair election. However, given the noise coming from progressives and a desire to avoid intraparty conflict, they were forced to address the issue (Wildermuth, 2020). Leading up to the vote, conversations took place between state Party chair Rusty Hicks, Newsom, and representatives of both the Biden and Sanders campaigns. In the end, Newsom stepped aside in favor of a three-person “unity slate” that included Khanna, alongside Oakland Congresswoman Barbara Lee, who had supported Kamala Harris in
the primary but was well-regarded by progressives as the only Congressperson to oppose
authorizing the Bush administration to use force to respond to the September 11, 2001
attacks. The third co-chair was Hilda Solis, a member of the Los Angeles County Board
of Supervisors who had served as President Obama’s secretary of labor. While Newsom’s
office and the California Democratic Party hailed the unity slate as “reflect[ing] the
diversity and dynamism of our great state,” progressives and Sanders delegates saw it as
a flexing of their increasingly strong political muscle.

Figure 7: A tweet by a 2020 Sanders delegate celebrating the creation of a “unity slate” at the head of the
2020 California delegation to the Democratic National Convention.

Karen Bernal, the former chair of the Progressive Caucus of the California
Democratic Party, who had worked with the delegates network to help organize delegate
support for Khanna, explained that “[the unity slate was] less a show of unity and more a recognition by the establishment that the progressive movement is ascendant.”

The Vice-Presidential Nominee

The California Sanders Delegation also contributed to the attempt by the nationwide Bernie Delegates Network, to influence Biden’s vice-presidential selection. The Network’s strategy was similar to the one employed to influence the delegation chair. After Biden announced that he planned to select a woman to fill the role, Sanders delegates lobbied online for the arguably long-shot candidacy of Ohio’s Nina Turner, as well as for former California Congresswomen Barbara Lee and Karen Bass. Within activist circles, Bass, who then served as chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, generated the most online conversation and emerged as the strongest contender, especially following a New York Times report that Bass was included in the final pool of candidates in consideration by Biden’s team. Leaders of the Bernie Delegates Network distributed a Google Form through which delegations from around the country could express support for Bass. (Bernie Delegates Network, 2020). In early August, a letter, signed by 300 delegates, was sent to the Biden campaign. The press was also notified of the letter, as numerous reports about Bass’ support among progressive delegates immediately emerged in publications including The Nation (Nichols, 2020), Politico (Otterbein, 2020c), and Fox News (McFall, 2020).

For Sanders delegates, this coverage in the mainstream press meant that, despite lacking the platform of a traditional convention and having less total nationwide delegates than in 2016, media outlets were using them as a proxy for those progressives
whose support for the Democratic Party was not guaranteed. One 2020 delegate who had also attended the 2016 convention commented that “in some ways, even though we have less Sanders delegates this time around . . . we have more leverage than we did in 2016.” As online discussion of Bass increased among the broader public, delegates used their platform on social media to both promote Bass and also to counter accusations from some Democrats that her long-standing interest in U.S. policy toward Cuba was not a reason for her disqualification from consideration.

The Network also employed the same tactics to express their opposition to Susan Rice, former national security advisor to the Obama Administration, who was also reportedly on Biden’s shortlist for vice president. The delegates saw her, due to her previous comments supporting the Iraq War as well as her role in the Obama Administration’s 2011 military intervention in Libya, as problematically hawkish. A group of nationwide Muslim delegates also formed a separate network to oppose Rice. In a letter cross-published by the network on Medium.com and the Daily Kos, a California delegate expressed his hesitation with Rice, saying that “Susan Rice’s track record here is deeply concerning. We need leadership that departs from the Washington consensus that’s created endless wars” (Ahmad, 2020; @MuslimDelegates, 2020).

Beyond opposition to Rice, some delegates also posted on social media and wrote letters opposing Biden’s consideration of both U.S. Senator Kamala Harris and Representative Val Demmings, highlighting law enforcement decisions they made as Attorney General of California, and Orlando Chief of Police, respectively (Bernal & Shaughnessy, 2020). Despite these concerns from progressives, Biden selected Harris as
his vice-presidential nominee on August 11, 2020. While there was some disappointment amongst the 2020 delegates, most were “not surprised” given that “it didn’t really go with [Biden’s] strategy to pick a progressive” (Interview Quote). Amar Shergill, a Sanders delegate and chair of the California Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party which counted many other delegates among its membership, made clear that the selection of Harris, was not a major sticking point for progressives in the context of the 2020 election:

We know that Donald Trump is a threat to the country and our job as progressives is to defeat him, to elect Joe Biden and then to engage in the advocacy program to get things done and that doesn’t change whether it’s Kamala Harris or somebody we were looking for like Karen Bass to be the Vice-Presidential Nominee, or Barbara Lee or anybody else (Sogomonian, 2020).

For many Sanders delegates, that advocacy would not wait for Biden’s election. On the same day that Harris was announced as the vice-presidential nominee, hundreds of Sanders delegates from around the country cast ballots opposing the 2020 Democratic Party Platform.

**The Party Platform**

On June 24, 2020, the DNC announced what most delegates had been expecting for weeks—that they should plan on casting their votes and participating in the convention remotely. Given that there would be no convention floor from which to engage in visible public protest, Sanders delegates aiming to use the convention itself as a medium for activism during the convention itself were limited to doing so via their role as voting delegates.
On July 27, several weeks prior to the convention, the DNC’s platform committee met and approved the Party’s tentative 2020 platform. Aspects of the meeting were contentious, as the committee rejected an amendment by a minority of progressive DNC members who were pushing for inclusion in the platform of support for Medicare for All, a core priority of both Sanders and progressives (E. Collins, 2020).

On the day of the vote, the head of the Nevada statewide delegation distributed to the Bernie Delegates Network an online petition through which they could pledge to vote against the Party platform for its exclusion of Medicare for All. The petition highlighted a range of points, from the ongoing pandemic to racist and discriminatory practices of private health insurance companies. By the end of the day, 360 delegates had signed (Otterbein, 2020a). Sanders, via a spokesperson, admitted that he planned to support the Party platform, but stopped short of encouraging his delegates to do so:

“Senator Sanders believes that the Democratic Party Platform should advocate strongly for Medicare for All, and that of course is a major reason why we fought so hard for the nomination. The senator appreciates that, amid a deadly pandemic which is creating a national health emergency, his delegates understand that now more than ever we must guarantee health care as a human right.”

After two days, the number of signatories had doubled to over 700 delegates. As word of their opposition spread throughout progressive circles, Progressive Democrats of America, in collaboration with several multi-issue and health-care-specific advocacy organizations also launched a petition to allow supporters of Medicare for All who were not delegates to express their dissatisfaction with the Party platform (Progressive Democrats of America, 2020).
At a traditional convention, voting on the platform is a part of the regular business carried out on the floor of the main convention hall. For the virtual convention, delegates instead had several days in advance of the convention to submit their vote. The Bernie Delegates Network encouraged those participating in their effort to oppose the platform to hold their votes and submit them together on August 11th. In the days that followed, several prominent progressives, including Ro Khanna, head of the California delegation, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, announced that they also had opposed the Party platform. Overall, the opposition by Sanders delegates to the Party platform had mixed results, and also further highlighted the increased control afforded to Party leaders by the virtual convention format.

While their petition had in the preceding weeks briefly brought the issue of Medicare for All and the platform into the news media, coverage of the issue following their collective “no-vote” on August 11th was basically non-existent. Instead, mainstream
media coverage was largely focused on the announcement, made that same day, of Kamala Harris as the vice-presidential nominee. While it cannot be confirmed that the Biden campaign chose August 11th to announce Harris in order to compete with the platform vote, it is documented that the Biden campaign toiled meticulously over the vice-presidential selection and the crafting of its strategic rollout for months (Allen & Parnes, 2021; Corasaniti, 2020). Further, on August 17, during the first night of the convention, when the vote typically would have taken place, the Party simply reported the overall result—the platform had passed—rather than the vote totals. In fact, to the consternation of many Sanders delegates, the Party did not release the vote totals (3562-yes, 1069-no, 87-abstain) until August 24, four days after Biden accepted the nomination on the final night of the convention.

Figure 9: A tweet by the Bernie Delegates Network Twitter account criticizing delays by the DNC in releasing vote tallies from the vote on the 2020 National Party Platform.
The lukewarm response from the media to the opposition of the Party platform highlights the difficulties delegates faced as they tried to identify additional opportunities to leverage their role as delegates. This led them to instead use the convention as an opportunity to build solidarity amongst progressive activists.

**The Virtual Convention**

The Democratic Party held its virtual convention across four days from August 17 to August 20. For Sanders delegates, the convention itself offered little to no opportunity for activism that leveraged their position as delegates. Even the outdoor protests that preceded the convention in 2016 were an impossibility given safety concerns related to Covid-19 and delegates being spread out across the country. Given these constraints, Sanders delegates instead used the occasion of the convention as an opportunity to build progressive solidarity and engage in discussion about future strategy. For example, during Sanders’ 10-minute speech on the first night of the convention, many California delegates on social media began using the hashtag #BecauseOfBernie to highlight the ways in which, over the previous four years, their involvement with Sanders’ campaigns had awakened them to major progressive issues. Delegates did engage in some critique of the Party, largely around the selection of speakers. The decision to give Republican and Former Ohio Governor John Kasich a lengthy speaking slot during prime time on the first day drew the ire of delegates, who pointed out that Republicans were more represented than true progressives.
Other topics occasionally emerged that prompted a response from delegates. For example, RL Miller, a Sanders delegate, DNC member, and chair of the state Party’s environmental caucus, tweeted her disdain for a news report revealing that the DNC had quietly removed language from the Party platform calling for the elimination of fossil fuel subsidies.
Despite these occasional critiques, the majority of public discourse by delegates focused on progressive solidarity. For some delegates, this extended beyond the discursive space that surrounded the official convention. A modest group of the California delegation’s more radical delegates, independent of major progressive organizations, used the two days prior to the DNC convention to launch a progressive virtual convention: “The People’s Assembly - Building Beyond Bernie.” One of the organizers explained the impetus for the event:

“A number of us Bernie delegates decided about a month [before the convention] that instead of being frustrated with our lack of agency as delegates and the DNC platform that we could take this little window of
time as delegates to act affirmatively, positively. We decided that we should get together with grassroots activists working outside the Democratic Party to put forward our own grassroots-driven agenda [in the form of] a weekend of action addressing key issues that have been emitted or are inadequately addressed in the DNC platform.”

The People’s Assembly featured two full days of programming aimed at developing strategies and building solidarity for the progressive movement in California and beyond. It also showcased new, more radical progressive groups not generally included in the broader Democratic coalition. Organized entirely on Zoom and streamed on Facebook Live, YouTube, and Twitter, the event featured a combination of panels, discussions, and speakers. Speakers and panelists included politicians, including Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Congressman Ro Khanna, and former San Francisco Supervisor and 2020 Sanders California political director Jane Kim, as well as to topical experts, including academics and experienced activists. With the goal of directly “elevating the voices of the grassroots” (Interview Quote) event organizers encouraged anyone interested in participating to login to the Zoom meeting and engage as an active participant. To expand the event’s reach, they also live-streamed both days on Youtube, Facebook Live, and other streaming platforms.

On both days, the Assembly’s morning and afternoon sessions began with speeches by progressive politicians. Some focused on maintaining enthusiasm and motivating activists toward the next phase of the movement. To that end, Ash Kalra, a Democratic Assemblyman from San Jose, spoke broadly about movement politics and its relationship to the Democratic Party. On Zoom, Kalra spoke in front of a large poster that carried the headline “Fight the Power” over a silhouette of Bernie Sanders. California Sanders supporters would immediately recognize the poster from a March 1, 2020 rally.
that featured both Sanders and hip-hop group Public Enemy. He espoused the importance of local and state-level politics as a means to “root out the corruption that prevents us from having healthcare as a human right. . .a green new deal. . .and allows people to die in prison from Covid-19.” He also repeatedly espoused the importance of getting the “monster out of the White House” and then immediately holding the Biden administration for following through on the progressive policies “that sound great on placards and sound great in campaigns” but often fail to become enacted as policies following elections. Other speakers, such as Jane Kim, provided activists with specific actions they could take to support impending legislation—largely at the state level—that would move the needle on their progressive priorities, including the elimination of cash bail, enacting a millionaire’s tax, and combating efforts to limit the workplace benefits of workers engaged in the gig economy.

Similarly, topics for panel discussions were largely focused on specific progressive goals. For example, a session called “The People’s Budget” focused on rethinking municipal budgeting in the context of recent activism aimed at reducing funding for traditional police activity while another focused on forging a pathway to single payer healthcare. These sessions followed a similar format, with panelists—including delegates employed in the medical field—outlining the history of the issue, including recent progressive successes and failures, as well as potential steps activists could take going forward. For example, the healthcare panel discussed SB-562, the failed attempt by progressive State Senators at passing a single payer in California, and reasons it had failed to pass despite Democratic majorities in both statehouses. They then
discussed the dual obstacles of a Biden presidency and the ongoing Newsom governance to enacting single payer nationwide and at the state level, respectively.

Beyond speakers and panels, the People’s Convention also highlighted in real-time several small, coordinated protest events taking place simultaneously at locations throughout California. One protest, focused on social justice, was held at Bruce’s Beach, where in 1927 the City of Manhattan Beach had used eminent domain to seize a black-owned beach resort, a move formally acknowledged as racist by the City in 2007. Similarly, a protest focused on criminal justice reform was streamed live from Soledad prison in central California. One of the organizers of the Assembly explained how connecting directly to activism happening on the ground allowed the Assembly to “elevate the voices of the grassroots” who often lacked a direct line to Party activists, let alone those in power.

One of the more lengthy and contentious sessions was entitled—“Should I stay or should I go: A Bernie Voter Ponders the Democratic Party.” This panel, which saw engagement from several delegates in the audience, placed panelists from organizations committed to working within the Democratic Party—Lawrence Taylor, the president of People for Democratic Reform, and Judith Wells, the chair of the Nevada delegation that had spearheaded the recent push for opposing the Party platform—in conversation with those committed to third parties—Nick Brana, founder of Movement for a People’s Party, and Laura Wells, a Green Party organizer and member of the Democratic Socialist of America.
As with the #DemEnter and #DemExit conversation that took place among activists after 2016, this panel forced activists to articulate not only their relationship to the Democratic Party, but also the challenges associated with decisions to either leave or stay in the Party. For those advocating leaving the Party, they were forced to articulate—or try to articulate—their vision for achieving the radical structure change necessary for a multiparty system despite the entrenchment of the two-party system. For those committed to working within the Party, they articulated strong critiques of the Party’s “anti-democratic elements” while outlining a vision for change—that combines simultaneously pursuing goals as large as winning the Democratic nomination and as small as garnering
progressive representation on local Party committee seats—and answering questions from audience members who were concerned that such efforts were futile. The next section dives more deeply into the efforts of such activists in California to enter the Party and change it from the inside.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined how activists in 2016 took their first step into the Democratic Party, attempting to use it as a vehicle for bringing about a more progressive society via the election of Senator Bernie Sanders. I argued that early on, the absence of a formal Sanders campaign organization allowed them to self-organize volunteer activities, plan and interact at local events, and engage together in the flexible, unmoderated online communities that emerged around the 2016 Sanders campaign. Via these shared experiences, discourses, and actions, they began to develop a collective identity as “Berniecrats,” inside the Democratic Party but separate from what they saw as its more “establishment” activists and leaders. These early efforts provided them with a sense of their own political efficacy and a sense of both independence from and ownership of the Sanders campaign.

As they ran in delegate elections and then self-organized their delegation for the convention in Philadelphia, they developed and practiced democratic ideals that fed back into their existing expectations of democracy and politics. As they collectively experienced the primary, these ideals were challenged by what they saw as unfair treatment of Sanders by the Democratic Party. As tensions between the Sanders campaign and the Clinton campaign rose, these delegates developed a collective narrative
about the campaign, framed around a shared protagonist in Bernie Sanders, with Clinton, the mainstream media, and the DNC increasingly as antagonists.

As they planned for the convention, their online communities became spaces to engage in horizontal voice, collectively making decisions that linked their ideals to specific strategic actions—instances of vertical voice—that they planned to carry out both inside and outside the convention in Philadelphia. Once they arrived inside the convention, the real-time nature of social media provided them the ability to coordinate specifically-timed actions on the floor and to provide supporters outside the convention with real-time coverage of aspects of the convention that were normally not included in convention coverage by journalists. These delegates saw themselves as the voice of protest against what they viewed as both the antidemocratic practices of the DNC and the unfair antagonism experienced by Sanders and his supporters. In many ways, this collective identity came to transcend their support for Sanders, as they ignored calls by him and his campaign staff to limit their public actions critiquing the Party and the Clinton campaign.

Following the convention, as Party leaders made commitments to explore modifying Party procedures, including the role of superdelegates, for future nominations, many delegates felt a sense of success that, they had not only highlighted publicly their grievances with the Party, but also moved the needle on modifying structures that would allow for future progressive challengers to compete for the nomination. This identity and sense of success informed their online conversations about whether or not to #DemExit the Party following the convention. Most delegates chose to move beyond presidential
politics, to #DemEnter the Party and, alongside longstanding progressive Party activists, try to change it from the inside.

I then argued that in 2020, four years of the Trump presidency, combined with the Covid-19 pandemic, the virtual convention, a less delinquent Democratic Party, a more hands-on Sanders campaign, and a more critical delegate selection procedure, impacted not only the makeup of the delegation, but also its capacity to develop a collective identity as a delegation, let alone one that saw itself as wholly in opposition to the Party. Accordingly, in 2020, the activism of delegates was for the most part, more discriminant and centered on political goals—opposing the Party platform, lobbying for a progressive delegation chair and vice president—outlined by several progressive organizations who had taken it upon themselves to organize a national “Bernie Delegates Network.” These acts focused on achieving both real and symbolic concessions from Party leaders in advance of the convention. That said, the 2020 delegation also revealed fissures among Sanders movement as to how they should continue to pursue change within the Democratic Party. As such, a smaller, anti-establishment group of delegates developed, many members of whom had still aimed to use the convention as an opportunity for Party critique. As there was no convention floor through which to reach the broad audience of the Democratic Party electorate, members of this smaller, anti-establishment group, many of whom had been vocal 2016 delegates, instead used the convention as an opportunity to use horizontal voice not for planning imminent vertical voice actions, but instead for building progressive community in the form of the “People’s Convention,” providing mobilizing information for smaller actions statewide and promoting dialogue about
progressive issues. The next chapter returns to those 2016 delegation members who chose to #DemEnter the Party and explores the strategies they took for making their voices heard inside the formal structures of the California Democratic Party.
Chapter 4: Inside the Party: From Mobilization to Incrementalism

In 2018, Senator Dianne Feinstein of California, a Democrat and 26-year veteran U.S. Senator, twice failed to secure the endorsement of the California Democratic Party (CDP) in her bid for a fifth full term (Dayen, 2018). First in February, when approximately 3200 Party delegates were endorsing for the primary, she only garnered the support of 37 percent of delegates, while challenger Kevin de Leon, supported by most of the Party’s progressives, secured 54 percent. Neither achieved the necessary 60 percent required by state Party rules to win the endorsement. Because California’s “top-two” primary often results in general election battles between candidates of the same party, Feinstein was again facing de Leon in the fall campaign. Concerned about another embarrassing endorsement debacle at the CDP executive board meeting in July, Feinstein encouraged the approximately 330 executive board members to vote “no endorsement.” In the end, de Leon won the endorsement with the support of 65% of the executive board members. Feinstein received 7% and 28% voted “no endorsement.” Yet, in the general election, she defeated de Leon 54% to 46% (Cadei, 2018), largely by maintaining support among rank-and-file Democrats in major metropolitan areas.6

There are several potential explanations for Feinstein’s failure to earn the Party endorsement that she had secured in all of her previous Senate races. Her moderate

6 Exit polls showed Feinstein with 63% of the Democratic vote to de Leon’s 34%. Those same polls showed de Leon performed significantly better among Republicans compared to Feinstein, and slightly better among independents (CNN Politics, 2018). Journalists attributed de Leon’s performance among Republicans to both the effort he put into campaigning in non-Democratic areas of the state as well as a strong disdain for Feinstein among Trump-supporting Republicans following the Brett Kavanaugh Senate hearings (Cosgrove, 2018).
views, including her long-standing support for the death penalty and opposition to single payer health care, had over the years become increasingly at odds with the political priorities of California Democrats (Nilsen, 2018). In 2017, she had also frustrated many Democrats, especially progressives, with her early attempts at cooperation with President Trump. However, another likely factor is a major shift to the left that took place in the demographics of the voting delegates of the CDP since she last won the Party’s endorsement in 2012. After Bernie Sanders’ loss to Hillary Clinton in the summer of 2016, many of his supporters, including a large contingent of his former convention delegates, blamed the loss on the overwhelming support Hillary Clinton had received from the Democratic Party leadership (T. Anderson, 2017). Rather than exit the Party in protest, many made the choice to enter the CDP, choosing to use their voice to increase their influence over state, and by extension national Party leadership and priorities. The entry of new progressives was encouraged by, and augmented the size of, the already existing progressive contingent that has long existed within the state Party.

This chapter explores the internal, and ongoing fight between progressives and liberals to control and influence the priorities of the CDP. Arguably one of the more liberal state parties in the nation, this conflict is largely between the Party’s more traditionally embedded members and its more radical contingent. This fight also shines a light on representation as one of the quandaries of governance in CDP politics, as the state delegation is composed of a combination of elected politicians and their appointees, county-level Party committee members, and assembly district level delegates, all of which have their own claims to representative legitimacy. Elected politicians have
successfully won a vote of the entire electorate in their jurisdiction and county-level committee members have won a vote of the entire Democratic electorate in their jurisdiction. Assembly delegates, which almost all of the new progressive delegates were, have won a caucus-style election very similar to the convention delegate processes discussed in the previous chapter. These processes are discussed in detail in the next section. The first two groups can claim they better represent the actual Party in the electorate better than assembly delegates because they have faced the will of the voters. Assembly delegates can claim they represent the true grassroots and are uncorrupted by the top-two primary process, which favors moderate politicians in many districts and requires significant financial resources, or by the ideological compromise associated with years of working within the Party as an organization.

The chapter focuses on attempts by progressive activists to influence Democratic Party politics across three activist goals and related strategies to achieve those goals. They pursued the first goal, getting formal representation in the Party, by formally entering running for and winning state delegate positions, seats on central committees, and seats on the state Party executive board. This allowed them to formally enter the Party through a combination of statewide and local on-the-ground and digital organizing strategies for contesting Party elections that, especially in rural areas, often only saw participation by Party regulars. These newly minted delegates then organized, alongside long-standing Party progressives, towards the second goal of installing a progressive chair at the head of the state Party. While ultimately unsuccessful, the race reveals the potential, as well as the limitations, of the networked mobilization strategies that these
delegates had used to facilitate their entry to the Party. Lastly, delegates moved beyond engaging Party elections, aiming to increase the prominence of progressive ideas in the CDP’s formal and informal discourses, including resolutions and the Party platform. For many former Sanders activists, especially his former convention delegates, this required them to negotiate whether the identity they had developed in opposition to the Democratic Party was at odds with a move from trying to “take over the Party” to a more incremental experience of Party politics.

Organizing for Formal Representation within the State Party

In California, two weeks before Trump’s inauguration in January 2017, the CDP held biennial local elections—Assembly District Election Meetings, or ADEMs—to elect 1120 delegates to the California Democratic State Central Committee and 80 representatives to the CDP executive board. Across the state, many Sanders activists, members of the Progressive Caucus of the CDP, and other energized progressives organized to win a plurality of the available positions (Cadelago, 2017). For many Party activists who had been involved for years, this influx of self-proclaimed “Berniecrats,” as well as some new activists motivated by President Trump’s election victory, effectively “came out of nowhere” (Interview Quote). For progressives activated during and in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election and the long-standing activists who had worked with them, it was simply the next step in a series of actions aimed at pushing the Democratic Party to the left. Specifically for those activist groups who collectively saw the act of running for delegates as part of a larger opposition to the Democratic Party as
an organization, winning these elections effectively formalized their decision to enter the Party and attempt to change it to reflect their own open and participatory ideals.

The next section first outlines exactly what ADEMs are and how progressives were able to effectively organize around them to achieve formal representation in the CDP. They did this using a combination of on-the-ground and digital field strategies at the local level, leveraging entry points in rural communities and underorganized districts, and creating web properties to effectively create momentum by presenting dozens of local races as part of a statewide and national movement to “take over the Democratic Party.”

**Assembly District Delegates**

The CDP State Central Committee is comprised of between 3200 and 3600 delegates (California Democratic Party, 2020). Approximately one-third of these delegates are elected officials and their appointees, while another third are members of county-level central committees. The remaining third are registered Democrats that are elected in Assembly Delegate Election Meetings (ADEMs) held every two years in January. The CDP provides support for local Party leaders to hold these meetings in its 80 assembly districts across the state. Via this process, Democrats elect a total of 1120 (14 per district) Assembly District Delegates (ADDs) to the Democratic State Central Committee (DSCC) and 80 delegates (1 per district) to the CDP Executive Board (E-Board). ADDs can vote on resolutions and other Party business at the annual state convention, as well as in

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7 Because a number of delegate positions are held by politicians and their appointees, the total number of delegates varies depending on the number of Democrats elected throughout the state.
elections for executive level state Party positions which include a chair, male and female vice chairs, secretary, and controller (financial officer). E-board members conduct business between conventions and also vote to elect California’s representatives to the Democratic National Committee (DNC). While the state Party bylaws require that all registered Democrats be notified of their respective election meeting, participation by most of the general public in these meetings is uncommon. In fact, the average Democrat in California is likely unaware that these positions exist or that, as a registered Democrat, they have the opportunity to vote on them. Typically, those people whose engagement in Party politics extends beyond regularly voting in major elections are those who would participate in an ADEM.

Because the pool of potential voters in an ADEM is very large—all registered Democrats in a given district—but participation is low, the opportunity exists for activists to mobilize voters from outside the usual suspects of local Party activists in order to win these elections. In effect, the 14 candidates who show up to an ADEM with the most supporters win the delegate positions. This type of popular election lends itself to the type of mass, populist organizing that Sanders supporters had used to mobilize support during the 2016 Democratic presidential primary. A cursory examination of the progressive success in the 2017 ADEMs reveals how the same loose networks of supporters that in 2016 flooded non-scientific online polls with Sanders votes and packed thousands of supporters into rallies and campaign events across the country created momentum around the ADEMs at the regional and statewide level.
Further examination, however, reveals how the organizing strategies and roles of progressive activists and movement actors around the ADEMs varied from district to district depending on the existing Party infrastructure and whether or not progressives had seen success in the ADEMs in the recent past. It also reveals how, despite this variation, a small group of individual activists worked in concert to aggregate district-specific “mobilizing information” (Lemert, Mitzman, Seither, Cook, & Hackett, 1977)—time, location, etc.—and progressive candidate details from across the state into an easily shareable web portal that could be shared across social media platforms and allow for organizing in statewide or location-agnostic social media properties. This allowed relevant mobilizing information to simultaneously be disseminated throughout the statewide and local online progressive communities that had formed throughout the 2016 presidential primary.

**Local Organizing**

In the weeks following Hillary Clinton’s loss to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, many progressive online communities, particularly those that had emerged around Bernie Sanders’ presidential run, were extremely critical of the Democratic Party. One common thread amongst activists was the idea that not only had the Democratic Party leadership steered the primary process towards Clinton’s nomination, but in doing so they had ignored “the people” and put forth an unpopular candidate out of touch with working people whose grievances Trump had leveraged. The hashtag #BernieWouldveWon echoed through these online spaces, often alongside media—video clips, op-eds, etc.—featuring pundits critiquing the Democratic Party or hypothesizing
that Sanders may have fared better in the upper midwestern states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania where Clinton had faltered. As progressives nationwide were looking for ways to mobilize the energy they had directed toward the Sanders campaign, many in California began discussing in Facebook groups and blog posts the upcoming ADEM elections.

Activists motivated toward Party change saw these elections as a means to “#DemEnter,” a social media hashtag used by activists advocating for entering the Party, getting involved in campaigns, building connections, and “tak[ing] as many elected positions as possible within the Democratic Party” (Interview Quote) These activists aimed to create a formidable progressive bloc within the Party’s formal institutions. One self-proclaimed socialist with no experience in Democratic Party politics, who had attended the 2016 Democratic National Convention as a Sanders delegate, wrote and shared a post on medium.com entitled, “#DemEnter-It’s Time for Progressives to Take Over the Democratic Party.” He called on those who had left the Party to return and “bring that necessary infusion of progressive values that we need to ensure that this wave isn’t just a flash in the pan” (Skolnick, 2016). Similar articles and related discussions took place on many of the Facebook pages, Whatsapp groups, and Slack channels that had formed during the 2016 primary. The ADEMs were also a topic at the local meetings and in the online fora of other progressive groups, including local chapters of both the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the newly-formed Our Revolution, a loose network of local activist groups that grew out of Sanders’ 2016 campaign infrastructure.
These activists were not the first network of progressives to consider using the ADEMs as a potential means to gain influence and push the Party to the left. A wave of progressive activists, many of whom had been activated by the 2004 presidential primary campaigns of Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinich as well as the anti-Iraq war movement, entered the CDP following the 2004 presidential election (Larimore-Hall, 2014). In 2005, many of those activists were instrumental in forming the Progressive Caucus of the CDP, which is discussed at length later in this section.

Several of the leaders and members of the Progressive Caucus that were in place after the 2016 election had been part of that previous wave of activists. Because of their support for the Sanders campaign, their networks overlapped with the online networks of newly mobilized activists discussed above. These veteran Party activists encouraged the newcomers to leverage their networks to get the necessary attendance at the individual ADEMs for a progressive sweep. For activists frustrated with the 2016 election, the idea of flooding Party events with outsider progressives dovetailed well with the rhetoric of “the establishment” versus “the people” that had been deployed in the Sanders campaign. RL Miller, a Progressive Caucus member, the chair of the CDP Environmental Caucus, and an unabashed climate activist known within the Party for clashing with Governor Jerry Brown, published an article in the California Politics Blog of The Daily Kos entitled “How to Be a Party Insider: Win California ADEM Elections” (Miller, 2016). In it, she outlined for newcomers the ADEMs process and also cited tangible ways in which she, in her years as an ADEM, has pushed the Party to the left on climate issues. To aggregate support in the ADEMs, she advised progressives to strategically form slates of
candidates that were both ideologically similar but racially, ethnically, geographically, and culturally diverse enough to turn out different networks of supporters.

Figure 13: A post inquiring about the ADEMs by a Sanders supporter and 2016 DNC delegate from rural Northern California.

Figure 14: A post by San Francisco Berniecrats recruiting Sanders supporters to run for ADEMs.

By the early December deadline for ADEMs to declare their candidacy, progressive slates had been formed in almost all of the state’s 80 assembly districts. The process for organizing slates varied across districts. In some areas, the netroots-era progressives who remain active in the Party began organizing around ADEMs in 2005 and have continued to do so in the years that followed (Larimore-Hall, 2014). In those
areas, new entrants reached out to existing progressives or vice versa. In many cases, the Sanders campaign had already brought these activists together months earlier during the 2016 primary election. In other areas, individuals or progressive groups took up the process of building slates themselves. For example, in East Contra Costa County, 40 miles inland from San Francisco, the local Our Revolution Chapter organized the entire progressive slate from within its network. A local activist explained:

I got pulled into ADEM through Our Revolution on the progressive slate. I was asked by an Our Revolution member to join that slate. [They were] 100% leading the charge. . . . They’re able to bring in different kinds of people. You don’t have to be a member of your local young Dems chapter anymore. You could be someone who wasn’t even registered as a Democrat and Our Revolution will find you and then from that teach you why this matters. (Interview Quote)

Karen Bernal, a former chair of the Progressive Caucus, explained how the experience of self-organizing the Sanders delegation at the 2016 DNC Convention in Philadelphia had prepared new activists for the ADEMs. For activists who had formed slates and campaigned to be convention delegates in 2016, this process was a familiar one (Interview Data).

In advance of that convention, Bernal had been elected by her fellow delegates as the statewide leader—an unofficial position—of the California Sanders delegation. The collective identity she and other Sanders delegates built in advance of and during the convention, combined with her experience as chair of the Progressive Caucus, allowed Bernal to serve as a trusted organizer to activists who had a collective distrust of the Party and its processes. The trust she had built with new activists across the state allowed her to recruit and support activists—many of whom were hesitant to get directly involved with the Party—in areas of the state that had not yet formed a progressive slate. The activists
she reached out to were able to serve as trusted organizers that could reach out to their local networks and find additional candidates. In effect, she, and other activists like her, enabled acts of horizontal voice between experienced and new activists. In those conversations, they emphasized the potential for new delegates to help progressives win an upcoming race for state Party chair, discussed at length later in this chapter, as a means to bring rapid, radical change to the state Party. In most districts, this influx of new candidates resulted in the formation of progressive slates, under a variety of names, such as “Progressive Labor Slate,” “Revolutionary Progressives,” and “Rising Tide.”

Once slates were formed, activists had a month to organize supporters to attend and vote for them at the ADEMs. In many ways, this new wave of post-2016 progressives was building on the strategies of those netroots progressives, supported by new organizations like Our Revolution as well as local progressive Democratic clubs, which regularly organized around ADEMs but had seen renewed attention following Sanders’ 2016 presidential run. The California Nurses Association, a progressive labor union focused on pushing for single payer healthcare, also mobilized its substantial membership to support progressives at the 2017 ADEMs (Petterson, 2017). Our Revolution encouraged supporters to attend caucuses in each of the 80 assembly districts. In an interview with The Hill, Shannon Jackson, the executive director of the national arm of Our Revolution, explained that this was the first step in a larger process to “transform the Party” (R. Wilson, 2017). According to Jackson, between the national organization and local chapters, Our Revolution sent 100,000 emails and 40,000 text messages to support 800 Sanders supporters running for delegate seats throughout the
state. Activists used social media to educate and encourage their local networks to support their slates. In the month preceding the ADEMs, activists created websites, Facebook pages, and Facebook events to promote their slates, inviting their friends to “like” the pages and to expand their reach to include friends of friends. Typically, these included slogans such as “Unbought, Unbossed!,” logos of progressive organizations, a statement of priorities, as well as photos and bios of candidates. In many cases, these bios highlighted work on the 2016 Sanders campaign as a means of legitimizing candidates as sufficiently progressive.

Figure 15: A slate card for the Revolutionary Progressives slate, running in Assembly District 12, in the northern Central Valley.
While many of those who were running for delegate were doing so from a critical perspective on the Democratic Party and a desire to change it, they had inherently made the strategic decision to pursue progressive change by working within the Democratic Party. In order to win these elections, they often had to convince their friends and family, many of whom were not members of the Democratic Party, either because they had never been or because they “#DemExited” after the 2016 primary. A newly elected Assembly delegate who had participated in the protests inside the 2016 Democratic National Convention explained how they encouraged many of their peers who had “#DemExited” the Party after Sanders lost the nomination to “see that they can move [the party] more to the left as more of a progressive Party.” He explained how he used Nancy’s Pelosi’s statement following Clinton’s loss that “people don’t want a new direction” for the Democratic Party as a way to motivate progressive to attend the ADEM s and “fight for change.”.

Figure 16: A tweet by a Sanders supporter debating whether or not to rejoin the Democratic Party in order to vote in the 2016 ADEM elections.

As mentioned above, certain districts had seen organizing around ADEM s by progressives for years, managing “an ongoing slate that people get added to, and gets re-
evaluated each delegate election” (Interview Quote). Progressives in these districts already had networks of supporters who were accustomed to attending ADEMcs every two years to support their slates. As a result, these areas had seen ongoing progressive success. In other areas, slate members and outside groups, were organizing from scratch, or with support from outside groups like Our Revolution or National Nurses United. The districts where progressives saw the most gains were those where the local Democratic Party was either disorganized or less engaged in state politics.

**Leveraging Entry Points**

In many districts, especially those with robust Party organizations, putting together a slate was only a first step in what would be a competitive and sometimes frustrating electoral process. One delegate from San Francisco described the weeks leading up to the election:

> We worked our tails off. Phone banks, twice a week, four hours a day. Batch texting. Online outreach. Facebook messaging. Forms set up for pledged votes. Donation pages. Printed slate cards. We went to all the Democratic Party clubs in the district, events, progressive clubs. We hosted events the day before. Gave speeches…” (Interview Quote)

Despite that labor, the competitive San Francisco district in question only saw the success of 4 members of the progressive slate. By contrast, rural areas of the state, or those suburban areas where the existing Party organization was minimal, offered an entry point for progressives. One delegate from a suburban district that saw a progressive sweep at the ADEMcs explained:

> But our [district] wasn’t super contentious. We had less than 300 votes vs like AD14 which is over 1000. I felt [ours] was all Our Revolution members and…maybe a few from unions.

Activists were also able to find like-minded candidates to run—and supporters to back them—in rural areas where the local Democratic Party often struggled even to find 14
potential delegates, let alone hold a competitive election. An interviewee from Nevada County in the Sierra Nevada foothills explained how she won her delegate position “by simply showing up and raising her hand” (Interview Quote). In many rural areas, Party activists were stunned by the influx of new activists at ADEMs that were typically sparsely attended. A long-standing delegate from Auburn County described the huge influx in new participation:

The place was crowded with people - they were people I’d never seen before and actually that was a good thing, like hey now we’ve got some people here. Now I have to compete. I had to stand up and give a speech and ask people to support me and they said, ‘are you a progressive?’ and I go ‘what’s a progressive - I’ve been a liberal all my life what do you call that? I guess I’m one of those.’ I found out later that I didn’t qualify because I supported Hillary Clinton and I didn’t support Bernie Sanders but besides the point - I got reelected again (Interview Quote).

**Local and Statewide Mobilization Strategies**

On the January 2017 weekend in which ADEMs were held, the Twitter accounts of numerous individual activists and progressive organizations called on people interested in “help[ing] shape the Democratic Party” (@Delight, 2017) and “ridding California’s Democratic Party from its corporate democrats” (@TheTrojanLeft - University of Southern California Progressives, 2017) to attend the ADEMs. The discussion sections of progressive slate Facebook pages were filled with photos of enthusiastic voters in line at the ADEM locations, as well as ad hoc updates about parking, transportation, and on-site logistics.

**Local Mobilization**

Again, the ADEM experience of would-be-delegates and their supporters varied significantly between locales. In many urban and suburban assembly districts with robust
Party institutions, many insurgent progressives entered the ADEMs with a distrust in Party processes and saw it as their role to increase transparency at the events themselves. In real time, they documented the lines, evaluated the process for voting, and pointed out what they perceived to be bias and antidemocratic irregularities. In San Francisco, activists highlighted how allies of Assemblymember David Chiu bussed in and provided breakfast for local supporters who would vote for his preferred candidates, or how Party social events were scheduled concurrently at the same location, to increase participation by local Democrats that many progressive activists viewed as sympathetic to ‘the establishment’. One self-described ‘Berniecrat’ running for delegate in San Francisco described how he and other activists “walked the line, [and] fought to prevent line-cutting and proxy voting” (Interview Quote).

In a district in central San Diego, the ADEM received attention from progressive social media accounts across the state. Attendees documented and accused the local ADEM convener, Richard Duquette, who was also on the County Democratic Central Committee, of numerous irregularities, including threatening to disallow voting by those asking for hardship waivers on the suggested donation⁸, and taking the ballots home for the evening prior to announcing tentative results. Activists called out Duquette on social media and posted photos of him leaving with the ballots despite objections by local volunteers. A copy of a complaint filed with the state Party and written by a local volunteer who had been assigned specifically to assist in ballot counting made the rounds

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⁸ The Democratic Party asks ADEM attendees for a non-mandatory $5 to help cover the costs of running the election.
on social media and in articles published by the Ocean Beach Rag (Porter, 2017), a local online newspaper, and progressivearmy.com (Payne & Roberge, 2017). Despite these irregularities, the progressive slate eventually won all 14 seats in that district. Two weeks later, at a meeting of the County Democratic Central Committee, progressive activists showed up and used their collective voice to protest Duquette’s run for Northern Vice Chair of the County Democratic Central Committee. He was soundly defeated in the vice chair race and subsequently resigned his position as a member of the Central Committee.

Figure 17: A Twitter conversation accusing a San Diego ADEM convener of tampering with ballots.
Similar progressive organizing took place in assembly districts across the state. But there was also organizing happening focused on the state as a whole. A small group of activists aggregated information about local ADEMs online to help mobilize supporters and to create a sense of collective momentum around the ADEMs.

**Statewide Mobilization**

Because of the federated nature of assembly district slates, it would be a stretch to say that there was a coordinated statewide system to organize turnout for ADEMs. That said, they were efforts to aggregate local efforts and create systems to make participation and mobilization easier for progressives. Members of the Progressive Democrats of America and the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party created a site, progressiveslates.org to aggregate district slates on a single site for the whole state. The
similarly constructed site that actually took off, however, was created by a motivated Sanders activist in Central California who built a website, adems2017.vote, that allowed users to enter their home address, find out their district and the location of the election meeting, and look at progressive slate cards and bios of progressive candidates on a single website.

The effort to aggregate these slates into a single website was not without its critics. Because of the disparate ways in which slates were formed, activists had attempted to vet the credentials of the candidates and slates on adems2017.vote to weed out those who they thought were co-opting the progressive mantle. Bernal, based in Northern California, worked with a Southern California activist in an attempt to verify that those looking to be included were indeed sufficiently progressive. An activist from Courage Campaign, a statewide progressive advocacy organization, explained how his organization encountered blowback after sharing adems2017.vote via their mailing list and social media properties.

There isn’t one person driving – or there’s not one person organizing [the creation of progressive slates]. Each region is complicated and does their own thing – and in a lot of places I’ve noticed – especially in safe blue places – everybody like, fought each other about who’s the fucking progressive slate which is so ridiculous. When that adems.vote thing went out – if you didn’t know the people putting the site together and had some separation/degrees of connection separation…We pushed that website out through Courage and we had all these people in LA of all places being like ‘what these candidates aren’t actually progressive where did you get them’. Its so silly and so I can’t say that we have [coordination] – its a real mess all around. (Interview Quote)

But for the average progressive, adems2017.vote served as a universal portal for would-be delegates and other progressive activists to push out to their networks on social media. Other activists added to these efforts.
One Sanders supporter who was running for delegate and had experience in film and television production created and published on YouTube an easily shareable educational video, “ADEM 2017 Elections Explained” (Liberman, 2016) which laid out the importance of ADEMs with links to adems2017.vote. Think-pieces and articles linking to adems2017.vote and rallying activists to either run or vote in ADEMs appeared in long-standing national and local blogs. In a piece published in the well-known liberal blog, The Daily Kos, entitled “Walk the Walk: How Downtrodden Progressives Can Win in 2017…Starting This Weekend,” Los Angeles activist Ken Franklin (2017) explained how after the 2016 election, he toyed with the idea of #DemExit[ing] the Party for a more progressive third Party, but at a pragmatic level, he saw the ADEMs as the “ticket in” for progressive activists “to operate more officially within the Party” and get a foothold for their ideas amongst “the establishment.” The websites and blogs of local Democratic clubs, as well as advocacy organizations also published articles about the ADEMs and linked to adems2017.vote. For example, a medium.com post by the San Francisco Chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA San Francisco, 2017), which typical endorses a very small number of Democrats for elected office, encouraged its members to “deliver the ‘Rank and File’ of the left to the polls,” providing specific “mobilizing information” (Lemert et al., 1977, p. 721) about the San Francisco ADEMs and linking to both adems.vote and the “ADEM 2017 Elections Explained” YouTube video.

As discussed above, the 80 ADEMs in 2017 were distributed across two days (one weekend). Because of this, activists participating in ADEMs on the first day used their
social media networks to build momentum for ADEMs taking place the next day. On sites including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, they posted photos of themselves posing with slate cards, of unexpectedly long lines, and of vote tallies.

Figure 19: A photo, posted on social media, of voters waiting in line at an Assembly Delegate Election in Northern Sacramento
New Progressives Enter the Party

After a weekend of voting, progressives claimed to have taken 600 of the approximately 1200 delegate seats to the Democratic State Central Committee. In an interview with the social media-based NowThisNews.com, Bernal, then the chair of the Progressive Caucus...
of the State Central Committee explained that “[after the 2016 election] we knew that right away the next step was going to be the inside fight. To have Berners join the fight on the inside of the Party.” Having been drawn into Democracy for America and state Party politics herself after the 2004 election, Bernal knew the importance of maintaining the momentum from moments of heightened progressive excitement to achieve change in the state Party. Bernal credited the surge in progressive success at the 2017 ADEMs to a combination of traditional strategies for on-the-ground organizing supplemented by strategic use of digital media to educate and mobilize supporters. She explained:

Technology being what it is, we have a lot of tools at our disposal that we didn’t have five, ten years ago. That being said, nothing is going to replace having relationships in your community. . . .One phone call at a time. One door knock at a time. One on one outreach. Those are the things that win elections. Many of the people that turned out for our Berners were people that remembered him during the primary days.

The vice chair of the progressive caucus sent out an email to its members arguing that the progressive turnout in ADEM elections was a mandate for change in the Party. On social media, the new delegates and their supporters reveled in their win as the first step in turning the momentum of the Sanders campaign toward making the Democratic Party more progressive. The same activist who had created the “ADEM 2017 Elections Explained” video created another YouTube video, “Berner Earthquake” (Liberman, 2017) that touted the progressive wins across the state and was shared amongst networks of progressive activists.

On the Monday after the elections, RoseAnn DeMoro, the head of the California Nurses Association that had pushed so hard to recruit and support progressive delegates tweeted an image of blue California bears superimposed over photos of two progressives
who would be engaged in Party leadership battles in the coming months: Keith Ellison, who would carry the progressive mantle to the race for Democratic National Committee Chair in February 2017, and Kimberly Ellis, who was competing with California Party Vice Chair Eric Bauman to lead the California Democratic Party as its new chair. DeMoro used a hashtag that was picked up by many new delegates, #SeeYouInSac, referring to the upcoming California State Party Convention in May 2017 where the election between Bauman and Ellis would take place.

Figure 21: A tweet by California Nurses Association president RoseAnn DeMoro, using the hashtag #SeeYouInSac, and depicting both Keith Ellison and Kimberly Ellis. This tweet foreshadowed the
upcoming battle between Kimberly Ellis and Eric Bauman in the race for chair of the California Democratic Party.

The state convention and the election for Party chair would be the first major event through which the newly elected progressive delegates could attempt to leverage their new formal voice in the state Party. For these activists, the ADEMs had in many ways been an expression of their identity in opposition to the Party as an organization, leading them to utilize organizing strategies aimed at leveraging existing networks of critical progressives to build popular momentum. But their success was also specific to these single events that are essentially low-participation popularity contests that can be overwhelmed by a barrage of disaffected registered Democrats turning out to vote. The limits of those affordances would be tested in the race for state Party chair which would be a very different contest, with a relatively small, finite pool of potential voters.

**Pushing for a Progressive Party Chair: 2017 and 2019**

When I walked into the California Democratic Party State Convention in Sacramento in May of 2017, I was greeted by a chanting group of activists wearing matching hot-pink shirts with the phrase “Unbought, Unbossed” superimposed on a silhouette of the familiar “California Republic” bear from the California State flag. Beneath the bear was the hashtag #ImWithKimberly, referring to Kimberly Ellis, the progressive underdog in the upcoming election for Party chair, whose insurgent run for chair had upset many Party regulars. The supporters of her opponent, Eric Bauman, did not sport matching TV shirts, but all carried bright yellow signs highlighting his constituencies, such as “Labor for Eric,” “Grassroots for Eric,” and “Young Dems for Eric.” The other politician prominently presented by activists at this convention was Bernie Sanders, despite having
been defeated in the 2016 Democratic Primary a year earlier, and not currently on any ballot at the California convention or elsewhere in the U.S. On the floor as well as outside the convention were groups of activists wearing well-worn Bernie Sanders hats, pins, and shirts. From their additional pins, signs, and t-shirts, it was clear that those in Sanders gear almost exclusively supported Kimberly Ellis in the chair’s race.

Figure 22: Kimberly Ellis (left) and Eric Bauman (right), both candidates for California Democratic Party Chair, speak to the 2017 California Democratic Convention.

The previous section outlined how progressives worked to win formal representation by becoming delegates to the State Central Committee of the California Democratic Party in the January 2017 ADEMs. Just four months later, in May 2017, the retirement of State Party Chair John Burton presented these newly minted delegates with the rare opportunity to vote in an open race for a new state Party chair. One long-standing progressive Party activist explained how capturing the chairpersonship is the primary opportunity through which delegates can rapidly change the Party:

Honestly man, as a delegate, you get like four votes. You get to vote for chair, you get to vote for [endorsements of] candidates in your district…but honestly in the two years you’re a delegate, you really just vote on chair. . . . [If progressives could] get a chair elected, the chair could then be in a powerful position to hire more progressive staffers, a progressive director, all that shit, which could completely change the
That vote was to be held at the 2017 California Democratic State Party Convention in Sacramento in May 2017, which served as the first official event through which the newly elected progressive assembly delegates could make their presence heard. The Party chair election was also the culmination of a 2.5 year campaign spearheaded by progressive supporters of Kimberly Ellis to challenge Eric Bauman, the current Party vice chair and president of the Los Angeles County Democrats, for the top leadership position in the state Party. This section first provides background on the Party chair position, including the dynamics of previous races for chair, the unique dynamics of the 2017 race, and the candidates involved. It then outlines the strategies and tactics of the Ellis campaign throughout 2015 and 2016 and how those tactics changed after the election of Donald Trump and the interest in ADEMs by a new wave of progressive activists became clear. It then outlines the tactics employed by new and long-standing progressive delegates attempting to use their numbers to install Ellis as a progressive figurehead to lead the California Democratic Party. Beyond that, the section also outlines how the chair’s race, which Ellis ultimately lost by 62 votes, also served as a platform to raise issues, build solidarity for the progressive wing of the Party, and to publicly critique the Party’s election procedures. It concludes by describing how, two years later, these new progressives had to re-orient themselves to the political realities of the next race for chair, using their time at the 2019 convention also to focus on mobilizing support for Bernie Sanders’ 2020 presidential run, to influence the committees that approve and enforce
Party rules and procedures, and to push for progressive candidates to represent their issues on the Democratic National Committee.

**Background on the CDP Chair Race**

For long-standing progressives in the California Democratic Party, the idea of a progressive chair had historically been out of reach. When Kimberly Ellis declared for the race in October 2015, the Party had seen only two chairs in the previous two decades. Unlike both Bauman and Ellis in 2017, both of these prior chairs were well known politicians. When the Progressive Caucus was formed in 2005, Art Torres, a former ten-year member of the California State Assembly (1974-1982) and State Senate (1982-1984) was in the ninth year of what would eventually be a 12-year tenure at the head of the state Party. When he stepped down in 2009, progressives considered fielding a candidate for the position, but the entry of former San Francisco politician John Burton into the race made such an attempt a non-starter. Burton had served for 16 years in the state assembly (1964-1974, 1988-1996), ten years in the U.S. House of Representatives (1988-1996), and 7 years as the president pro tempore of the California State Senate (1998-2004). As an institution in his own right, he cleared the field of all potential challengers (Capitol Weekly, 2015).

Prior to Burton’s entry into the race in 2009, Bauman, who would eventually face Ellis in 2017, had considered pursuing the chair position, but ultimately had to wait eight years for a chance to compete. A former registered nurse and union member, Bauman had been involved in the leadership of local and state Party institutions for decades. As both a Democratic Party and gay rights activist, he served as president of the Los Angeles
Stonewall Democrats (1994-2001) and was the founding co-chair of National Stonewall Democrats (1995). At the time of the 2017 race, he was serving both as president of the Los Angeles County Democrats, the largest county Party in the state, and as male vice chair of the state Party. The influence he developed over these years led LA Weekly in a 2011 article to describe him as a “kingmaker” in Los Angeles politics (Aron, 2011). Ellis, while certainly involved in the Party, was not part of the inner circle of the Party as an organization. She had minimal experience in the formal institutions of the state Party, at the time serving on the finance committee and as recording secretary of the African American Caucus. However, Ellis was an up and comer in progressive circles of the CDP, serving from 2010 to 2016 as executive director of Emerge California, part of a nationwide advocacy group aimed at training and supporting progressive women to run for office. In that capacity, she was the first African American woman to head a statewide Emerge organization. She also previously served on the Community Development Commission in Richmond, California. Beyond the differences in their activist backgrounds, their differences in age, race, and demeanor also created a significant contrast. Bauman, 58, was by his own admission a physically intimidating white man with a Bronx accent and a brash personal style. He often played up his roots growing up in the Bronx borough of New York City as the reason for his hard-knuckled political style and his laser focus on winning elections. Ellis, 43, by contrast, was a stylish African American woman who spoke with a populist tone about “the people,” organizational culture, and inclusivity. All of these factors made it easy for activists and journalists to see the chair’s race as a battle between “old school” and “new school” Democrats (e.g.
Willon & Mehta, 2017), although the actual dynamics of the race were much more complex.

Ellis Campaign Pre-Trump

The Ellis campaign, and its rhetorical transformations over her 2.5-year run, exemplify the difficulty of running a change-focused, outsider-themed campaign in a context where it is inherently necessary to court activists who have by definition chosen to be insiders. Further, by what many insiders consider the most important metric of state Party success—percentage of Party officials in elected office—the CDP was one of the most successful in the country and difficult to critique on that front. Ellis launched her campaign with an initial focus on structural issues, including lack of diversity within the Party. In September of 2015, Kimberly Ellis declared herself as a candidate for the May 2017 election for Chair of the California Democratic Party (Flores & Zapien, 2017). Over the previous year, she had been recruited by progressive Party activists looking for an alternative to Bauman, who was considered by most Party insiders to be the presumed successor to John Burton. The president of the Los-Angeles-based East Area Progressive Democrats, the largest Democratic Club in California explained:

I helped recruit [Ellis] to run for the office of chair of the Party in part, because the climate of repression inside the Party was so ferocious that we had to look outside the ranks of the Party to find a candidate who was willing to stand up against Eric Bauman, and Kimberly was willing and took on that rather heroic role (Interview Quote).

In a tweet, she linked to a site on CrowdPAC.com, a fundraising site that claimed it existed “to give politics back to the people.” Soon after, in October, she launched a website emploring visitors to support a “new kind of politics” in the Democratic Party by donating to her candidacy. The site featured a YouTube video montage of supporters
holding signs featuring a social media hashtag, #ImWithKimberly (ImWithKimberly, 2015). The testimonial of these supporters highlighted how Ellis would create a Democratic Party that would “represent us all” and “inspire a new generation to join us old timers and fight for our progressive values.” To the average Democrat, the testimonials in the montage showcased a diversity of age, racial, and sexual diversity. But the target for this message was not the average Democrat, but rather the 3200 delegates to the California Democratic Party who would be voting for Party chair 19 months later at the State Party Convention. For those in the know, the video showcased Ellis’ support from progressives within the Democratic Party, including Hilary Crosby, who had upset the race for state Party controller two years earlier. Over the course of the next 19 months, many of these same activists, as well as others, made the case for Ellis at events throughout the state and on numerous social media platforms, using the same “I’m With Kimberly” signs and using the #ImWithKimberly hashtag.

Within the circles of California Democratic Party politics, it was well known that Bauman planned to seek the chairmanship in 2017, though he did not officially declare until December 16, 2015, three months after Ellis (Cadelago, 2015). When he did declare, he leveraged his years as a Party leader in a variety of ways to immediately establish himself as the clear front runner. In an email announcing his candidacy, he touted the support of female vice chair Alex Gallardo-Rooker, Reggie Jones Sawyer, the chair of the Legislative Black Caucus, and state board of equalization member Fiona Ma, a well-known San Francisco politician. He also had support from Susie Shannon, a regional chair and co-founder of the Progressive Caucus of the CDP, making clear that he was
both able and planning to compete with Ellis for progressives. In addition to these individual endorsements, he also listed the endorsement of the New Frontier Democratic Club, a decades old Los Angeles-based Democratic Club founded by African Americans. Seven days later, he used his regular spot as head of the Los Angeles County Democrats on the local TV program “Charter Local Edition” to discuss his candidacy (Pomerance, 2015). Bauman focused on his Party experience, repeatedly touting his decades of “winning elections.” In a YouTube video disseminated as part of his campaign launch, he said he was the “most visible Party officer around the state” and warned against disunion within the Democratic Party going into the 2016 elections (Bauman, 2015). In general, his rhetoric focused on growing the Party by contesting and winning more races around the state, rather than on internal Party concerns or ideology. By February 2016, Bauman announced on his website that he had “pledged support and endorsements from more than 550 official state Democratic Party delegates,” and was on his way to the 1600 necessary to win the election (Fleming, 2016a).

An examination of Ellis’ speeches, candidate statements, and other campaign materials reveals that the first year of her campaign was focused not on economic policies popular with the emerging Sanders crowd, but on progressive organizational change and on flagging relationships between the Party and constituents. The themes of Ellis’ early video testimonials continued as she and her supporters argued that she would make the Party more racially diverse and increase excitement amongst young voters and voters of color. Ellis repeatedly contrasted the supermajority of Democrats in elected office in California with the increasing number of voters in California choosing to register as “no
Party preference” as a sign that the Party as an institution was failing to connect with voters (Fleming, 2016b). These early campaign activities took advantage of her experience advocating for women as the executive director of Emerge California. For example, in February 2016, she spoke at One Billion Rising North Bay, a Santa Rosa based chapter of the international organization focused on reducing violence against women (One Billion Rising North Bay, 2016), and also was featured on the San Francisco-based podcast “See Jane Do,” in which she was interviewed by local feminist Elisa Parker (Parker, 2016). Her first endorsement from a Party organization came in April 2016 from the Democratic Women of Monterey County (Wu, 2016). In her candidate statement asking for their endorsement, she highlighted her strong support from the women’s political community (Ellis, 2016). The California Nurses Association was also supporting Ellis and sponsoring events that allowed her to showcase her vision for the Party. With these various events, she was slowly picking up some support from institutional players connected to the Democratic Party.

However, the dynamics of garnering support necessary to win a race for Party chair was very different from those of an assembly delegate race. While running for assembly delegate offers progressives the advantage of being able to recruit from a large pool of potential voters for a low participation election, the race for Party chair is the exact opposite. The pool of voters for the Party chair election is limited to the 3200 delegates discussed above. As such, a run for Party chair involves intense fundraising, direct and in-person campaigning, and one-on-one outreach to the finite number of delegates that decide the outcome of the election. Essentially, it is an exercise in
horizontal voice across the entire delegation. As discussed above, approximately 2/3 of the delegates that vote for Party chair are elected officials, their appointees, and members of county central committees. As Party activists—progressive or otherwise—many delegates have both a respect for and a predisposition towards leaders who “show up and do the work.” Bauman’s decades of Party leadership gave him a headstart in that he was a familiar face to most of these delegates, as well as to many elected assembly delegates. On his website, ericbauman.com, he touted more endorsements from across the Democratic political spectrum, including Speaker of the California State Assembly Anthony Rendon, a centrist by California standards, and liberal Kevin de Leon, the California Senate pro tempore. In February 2016, when asked about Bauman’s early delegate lead, Ellis said, “I’m not worried about numbers right now…numbers can change,” (Fleming, 2016b). However, three months later at the state convention in May 2016, a year out from the election, Bauman claimed to have received pledges from 800 of the approximately 1600 delegates necessary to win the election. As such, in order to be competitive, Ellis’ campaign organization and her supporters needed a catalyst to help turn the momentum created by Bauman’s experience and name recognition. The catalyst would come in two parts. The first was Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton in November 2016. The second was the influx of progressive assembly delegates that entered the Democratic Party in January 2017. This combination of factors would push Ellis to adopt a decidedly leftist tone and more aggressive, anti-institutionalist critique of the Democratic Party in the final six months of her campaign.
Leveraging Critical Narratives of the Party

After Donald Trump unexpectedly defeated Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, pundits and media nationwide began critiquing the Democratic Party for both underestimating the Trump campaign and being disconnected from voters (e.g. Dovere, 2016). A week after the election, the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party held a debate between Bauman and Ellis, in which Ellis capitalized on the ongoing critiques of the Democratic Party—specifically that it was not democratic enough or progressive enough:

I believe in telling hard truths and facilitating difficult conversations, and the truth of the matter is that the Democratic Party, as an institution, is not as small d-democratic as we’d like to believe it to be. It’s time for us to build power in others, not consolidate and collapse power. We need to show we are listening by our actions, not just our words (Global Voices for Justice, 2016).

Around the same time, progressives began to criticize Bauman for connections between his consulting firm, Victoryland Partners, and lobbyists in the pharmaceutical industry who had opposed a recently failed bill that would have lowered the cost of prescription drugs (Matier & Ross, 2016). Citing the corrupting relationship between Party officials and special interests, Ellis called for increased rules and transparency within the Party to prevent conflicts of interest in the interactions between Party officers and lobbyists (Cal Coast News, 2016). Ellis’ rhetoric and vision resonated with progressives. One long-standing progressive activist explained how:

Kimberly Ellis came along and was like fuck this I’m gonna run and be chair because we can no longer allow people to run as Democrats when they’re not actually Democrats. It’s not a winning strategy. Our people are still suffering. We still have the highest poverty rates. We still have all these problems (Interview Quote).
As Ellis’ message was lining up with Party critiques taking place after the 2016 election, organizing was ramping up around the ADEMs. As discussed in the previous chapter, a contingent of long-standing progressive activists worked to recruit many disaffected Sanders activists to “take over the Democratic Party,” first by stacking the race for Party chair and installing a progressive at the head of the Party. Progressive organizations like Courage Campaign pushed out legislative scorecards through a wide network of organizations, arguing that a change at the delegate level and in leadership was necessary to stop the state Party from endorsing “corporate democrats.” One delegate who also worked for a progressive organization explained:

We had—all the organizations that were really progressive have email lists—we blasted all of our list telling people to go elect progressive delegates who can then support Kimberly. . . A lot of our donors contributed to her campaign, and she used that to hire volunteers to phone bank and call delegates (Interview Quote).

On January 6, 2017, the day before the ADEMs began, Ellis pushed out a message to her supporters to vote for delegates who would “help shape the makeup of the California Democratic Party.” After their success in the ADEMs, the wave of progressive assembly delegates entered the California Democratic Party in January 2017. Many long-standing progressive delegates had already been supporting Ellis’ campaign since she declared in October 2015. However, the influx of new, progressive, assembly delegates in January 2017 made winning the race a potential reality. One progressive activist explained: “It was like this huge wave, so for the first time ever a bunch of activists getting elected to the state Party which the whole machine was so terrified and pissed about [be]cause now they’d have to like do democracy.”
Despite Ellis’ support for Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential primary election, most progressives, including the large contingent of Sanders supporters, found her views on politics and the Party to be in line with their own.

By the time these new ADEMs arrived, long-standing progressives had already been introduced to Ellis via the Progressive Caucus of the CDP or at their local progressive Democratic clubs where she received widespread support. An important factor for many delegates, was that her run was against *the establishment*. One new activist, who had also been a convention delegates for Sanders, explained why he was supporting Ellis:

> We are all coalescing around Kimberly Ellis, who is the non-establishment candidate, and she’s actually brought people on that were Bernie delegates onto her campaign and she’s willing to open up the Party where the Party right now you have to be deep in the Party to have any kind of say or be on any kind of committee. She wants to open that up, she wants to take big money out of the Democratic Party. She wants to take corporate money out of the Party. She’s not taking any corporate money in her campaign either (Interview Quote).

Sanders himself, as well as Our Revolution, endorsed Ellis, providing legitimacy to her candidacy among the Sanders contingent. Long-standing progressives in the Party were already familiar with Ellis. Some had helped recruit her to challenge Bauman and championed her candidacy over the previous two years. The environment of Party critique that emerged after Trump’s victory allowed her to tap into many of the same issues that Sanders leveraged to resonate with progressives. Further, the support she received from National Nurses United, who had aggressively supported Sanders due to his support for single payer healthcare, provided legitimation with progressives, who increasingly used the issue as a litmus test for progressive credentials. In a November 2016 debate with Bauman, Ellis argued that the race for chair was not about either of
them as individuals, but about “where we are as a party, what we stand for, what our values are, what we are willing to stand up and fight for…” and also “new voice, vision, and perspective” (Global Voices for Justice, 2016). She also began to invoke the rhetoric of “the people” vs “the establishment” that had been such an integral part of the 2016 Sanders campaign. The Democratic Party, she argued, has “taken the people for granted.”

In a radio interview discussing both Clinton’s 2016 loss and the race for Party chair, Ellis explained:

the system, the establishment, the Democratic Party, and really the Republican Party as well, are out of touch with its base and the people that make up its party. . . . Many of us who have been members of our parties for decades feel like our party as an institution has lost [its] way. We have forgotten who we are and what we stand for. We have forgotten the values and the principles that we hold so dear. In many respects its about power, consolidating power, and money. And that is not where the people—not just of our parties—but of this country are right now. And as a result, we saw that played out. We saw people vote not just—and again, sexism and racism absolutely played into [Clinton’s loss]—as well as the system, the institutions of power, both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party not seeing that and/or completely ignoring it and thinking that we could squeeze this one out. And we saw very clearly on Tuesday that we could not (Kemp, 2016).

Further, she highlighted her “500 unique and individual donors, most of which have come in at $100 or less” (Global Voices for Justice, 2016). Just as Sanders had touted his small-dollar donations, Ellis also used them to represent her connection to “the people” rather than to corporate donors.

Ellis’ critique of the Democratic Party and anti-establishment rhetoric resonated with many progressives, particularly those who had in 2016 engaged for the first time in party politics. In the final six months of the campaign, Ellis travelled the state making her case to delegates and working to counter Bauman’s long list of Party and union
endorsements. Ellis racked up the endorsements of numerous players in the progressive space. She also had the endorsement of nine, mostly rural, county central committees (Ellis, 2017b), the delegates of which were dominated by the progressives who had ran up numbers in those areas during the 2017 ADEMs. Dozens of Progressive Democratic Clubs, such as the San Diego Progressive Democrats and Wellstone Democrats of Sacramento endorsed her in the early months of 2017. National Nurses United also began a major push for Ellis. Further, many of the new progressive delegates who had come from local chapters of extraparty organizations like Our Revolution and Indivisible made clear to their groups the importance of the Party chair race and created momentum for Ellis on social media. The national arm of Our Revolution endorsed Ellis, highlighting her platform to “detangl[e] California’s political ties to corporate money” (Wildermuth & Garofoli, 2017). As each endorsement came in, the groups that had already endorsed her would blast out updates on social media to excite their constituents about Ellis’ momentum (San Diego Progressive Democratic Club, 2017).

Beyond mobilizing delegates and organizations, progressives in California also highlighted, and in some cases hosted, several debates between Ellis and Bauman. The Progressive Caucus of the CDP hosted their first debate in San Diego on Nov 19, 2016. At a January 2017 debate held in Cerritos and hosted by the Humbert Humphrey Democratic Club and Yes We Can Democratic Club, the debate moderator asked each candidate to describe the purpose of the California Democratic Party (Global Voices for Justice, 2017). Ellis called for laying out progressive principles and holding Democratic elected officials accountable to uphold them in office:
I believe that one of the main functions of the California Democratic Party as an institution is to move forward in a bigger, better, bolder way our progressive values as Democrats. I believe it is the responsibility of the California Democratic Party to make sure that every elected official who wears the banner of Democrat, who comes to this party to get our endorsement, who comes to this party to get our money, who comes to this party to get our sweat equity, knocking on doors, phone banking, out in the trenches...if you are a Democratic elected official in the state of California it is your responsibility to be beholden not to the special interests in Sacramento, it is not your job to focus on protecting your incumbency, it is not your job to focus on protecting special money interests, it is your job to do the will of the people of California.

In contrast, Bauman focused on the Democratic Party as a big tent of competing interests that work together to win elections:

The California Democratic Party as an entity is the place where grassroots progressive activists, elected officials, labor unions, and all the people that make up the big tent of the Democratic Party get to come together. . . . And you see in California we’ve been doing it right. Its the one place in the country where we keep electing more Democrats. Its the one place in America where we’re passing progressive legislation. It’s the one place in America where wall-to-wall Democrats control the state.

He also highlighted his belief that Party members share core, but not all values:

We share a core set of values. And in our party being a big tent, we have some members of our party in elected office who probably strap their guns to their waists when we’re not looking, and we have others who probably don’t think marriage equality should be the law of the land, and we surely probably have a few that have questions about reproductive choice and a few other issues not to mention.”

Down the stretch of the campaign, his rhetoric focused on building on the state Party’s existing electoral successes in order to fight Donald Trump, who he referred to as the “orange haired monster” (United Democrats of the San Gabriel Valley, 2017). He described the California Democratic Party as a “big blue beacon of hope” for the rest of the nation, that could provide the “roadmap back to power [for the rest of the country].”
Further, he explained that Democrats needed to “embrace three core pillars: that we are the party of the big tent; the party of bold ideas; and the party that is building the future.”

Ellis turned Bauman’s embrace of the Party’s electoral success into a critique of its ability to enact real change under the current leadership. She argued that other state parties could blame Republicans for their inability to move forward progressive legislation, but in California the Democratic Party was to blame. Ellis argued:

“Let’s talk about the supermajority that we have - I would like to remind us that we had a supermajority a few years ago. The question for then and for now - what are we doing with it? What are we doing with this supermajority now that we hold all of the houses? What are we doing as it relates to getting money out of politics? What are we doing to make sure we close the loopholes in proposition 13 to make sure we redirect those funds back to our public education system? Yes, California does some things good, and we still have work to do.”

Progressives rallied around Ellis’ critique of the Democratic Party, organizing numerous events for Ellis across the state (2/19: Fresno; 2/22: Orange County; 3/12: Upland; 3/13: Los Angeles; San Francisco, 3/20) to “kickoff” the final five months of the campaign in the new year. At these events, she touted herself as a “battle tested warrior to lead the resistance,” (Steiner, 2017) linking herself to the term now associated with popular opposition the Trump administration and said her campaign would “redefine what it means to be a Democrat.” At these events, and on her website, she presented a seven-point plan focused on prioritizing Party organizing (Evans, 2017), strategically deploying resources, and pushing for long-term growth in the Party across the state. She also specifically highlighted the need to “lead through coordination” with organized third parties, “rather than be threatened by their efforts or dismissive of their longevity. We need to lead with open mindedness, leverage energy and enthusiasm, find common ground—
not reject them.” To that end, she started to use in her own campaign the “#SeeYouInSac” hashtag that had emerged around the ADEM elections.

Figure 23: A tweet by Kimberly Ellis following a meeting with the College Democrats of UC Irvine.

As the convention approached, the basic narrative that many Ellis supporters pushed was that Bauman was a Party insider whereas Ellis was an organizer. There was pushback from some progressives on this narrative. Indeed, interviews revealed that some long-standing progressive Party activists who had supported Sanders in 2016 were backing Bauman in the race for chair. In the Daily Kos, David Atkins, a progressive Party activist since the 2004 Dean Campaign, argued that progressives who try to “throw out everyone in the old guard” do so at their peril (Atkins, 2017). He acknowledged the “constant conflict between those who advocate making change by pushing aggressively
from the outside, versus those who advocate pushing hard more quietly from the inside,” but argued the latter was more expedient in bringing about change. He cited numerous times the Party had benefitted on progressive issues from Bauman’s connections with legislators. The Bauman campaign worked to highlight this narrative. His campaign sent out a mass email to Democratic activists and club mailing lists containing a letter of support from Hilda Solis, President Obama’s former secretary of labor, signed by a who’s who of female politicians from all over California (Fresno County Democrats, 2017). The letter highlighted Bauman’s role in unseating Republicans in prior campaigns and said:

We applaud Kimberly Ellis and EMERGE for all the incredibly important work they do for women candidates—let’s be clear about that. But for this job at this time, Eric is our choice.

One assembly delegate and self-described “Warren Progressive” who also leads a Democratic club in Ventura County explained how, he, and most of his club, supported Eric Bauman, given the strong relationship that most had with him as the chair of the Democratic Party in nearby Los Angeles County. While some long-standing progressives, particularly those closer to the Party leadership, were certainly privately debating the benefits of experience vs ideology, the progressive caucus and its many new members were active on social media promoting Ellis’ #ImWithKimberly campaign and organizing other progressive events for the weekend of the 2017 California State Convention. On Twitter and Facebook, progressives highlighted the existence of appointed delegates as antidemocratic, encouraging elected officials not to “instruct [their] delegates for CDP chair. Let them decide who to support!” Others lamented the lack of a true secret ballot, arguing that, because the processes called for the votes eventually being made public, there were pressures on delegates to maintain loyalty to the
powerful out of fear of political retribution down the line. The #SeeYouInSac hashtag also saw a resurgence in the week before the convention, as progressive activists used it to create a sense of momentum for the Ellis campaign and the convention as a whole. The hashtag was also used by activists—both delegates and critics of the Democratic Party—to organize events outside the convention around specific issues and related critiques of the Democratic Party.

**The Convention and the Ellis Campaign**

Going into the convention, Ellis had a lot of momentum with progressive assembly delegates. These delegates were able to provide visible support for Ellis around the convention center and in the general session. Some progressive activists worked to introduce Ellis to any delegates who had not yet had the opportunity to meet her personally. Given that most delegates arrived on Friday, and the vote was not until late Saturday, activists saw the first 24 hours as their final push to garner support for Ellis.

That said, many of the new progressive entrants to the Party did not have the insider relationships to support Ellis in her campaign by interacting one-on-one with long-standing delegates. As discussed above, delegates elected in assembly districts only comprise 1/3 of the total Party delegates that vote in the election for chair. As with the “superdelegates” at the national level, many progressives saw the one third of delegates comprised of Party leaders and elected officials (PLEOs) and their appointees as a means for members of “the establishment” to put their finger on the scale of the chair election.

One activist explained the difficulties that challenger candidates face in garnering support from those delegates.
I mean [in a traditional campaign] data’s really helpful…when you’re running for office. You can walk up to someone’s door and know ahead of time who’s in the household, how old they are…whether or not they’re a Republican or a Democrat. You actually don’t have that kind of nuanced information when you’re running for CADEM [positions] because you don’t always know who the PLEOs are gonna be…I mean you hope that you can talk to the elected official and the elected official is going to direct the PLEOs to vote the elected official’s conscience and sometimes they allow the PLEOs to vote their own conscience but not usually and you hope that you’re able to sway those elected officials.

One progressive delegate who also worked for a progressive advocacy group felt that most minds are made up by the time of the convention. He explained:

The convention is a dog and pony show. They do these like, protests…where a candidate will walk around the convention—you know 50 of their volunteers or staff with their signs to show—its a pissing contest, you know . . . [but there may be some] conversations there to be had. By the time of the convention the work has been done. I mean, most of its behind the scenes and so when you get to the convention all you really have time for is – ‘oh you’ve never met Kimberly Ellis and you’re still undecided – you should just meet her and let’s talk. Let me see if I can introduce you to her’ There’s some of that, but that’s it (Interview Quote).

Despite many votes being solidified in advance of the convention, there were some undecideds and in my observation, they often shared a similar profile—certain delegates who leaned progressive and had been involved in the Party since well before the recent influx of new progressives. Many of these delegates told me they valued Bauman’s experience and his knowledge of the inner workings of state and Party politics. One such activist, who had been a Sanders delegate at the 2016 DNC convention and remained undecided on the chair’s race until hours before the vote, told me he was leaning toward Bauman due to his experience, despite being excited by the surge of excitement around Kimberly Ellis. A friend of his who was a Bauman supporter spent over an hour on the first day of the convention lobbying him personally to support Bauman as well, citing the
need to balance ideological concerns with the experience necessary to lead the largest state Party in the country. In the end, the activist ended up supporting Bauman. In my limited observation, the tactic of trying to identify and convince persuadable delegates at the convention was employed to a much larger degree by Bauman supporters. That said, it is possible—indeed likely—that some long-standing progressive Party activists with intraparty relationships were indeed attempting to persuade their peers to support Ellis. However, a large contingent of progressive delegates were engaged in other more visible public activities.

The activist who told me that delegate support is largely cemented prior to the convention suggested that the main tactic delegates can employ at the convention itself is to “make a shit ton of noise” (Interview Quote). Indeed, many progressive delegates certainly did just that. Prior to the start of the program on Friday evening, activists held protests both outside and in the halls of the convention center, chanting “hey hey, ho ho, corporate dems have got to go.” As DNC chair Tom Perez attempted to make a speech, protestors in the audience, many with Kimberly Ellis signs, repeatedly interrupted with calls for single payer health care. At many moments, the audience could no longer hear Perez. Many seated delegates in the audience, who had applauded Perez when he was introduced, looked at each other in exasperation, many rolling their eyes at the commotion coming from the delegates with pink Ellis shirts or Bernie gear. These repeated interruptions eventually led outgoing Party chair John Burton to tell the protestors to “sit the fuck down, please” and show “some fucking courtesy” (T. Anderson, 2017). During the morning general session on Saturday, Party leaders,
including Nancy Pelosi and Gavin Newsom, made speeches to the convention hall, protesters again in the audience, many with Kimberly Ellis signs, repeatedly interrupted with more calls for single payer health care. Newsom’s speech received particularly fierce ire from progressives, likely because of his recent decision to endorse both Ellis and Bauman (Tavares, 2017). On Twitter, delegates expressed frustration that the speeches, mostly by elected officials, focused too much on Trump, impeachment, and Russia, and not on policy issues.

While there were numerous events around the convention aimed at Ellis supporters, they seemed aimed at creating solidarity and excitement rather than at reaching undecided delegates. Indeed, there were so many progressive-focused events that one could largely choose to ignore all Party-sponsored events in favor of spending time with like-minded progressives. After rallies on Friday, an active progressive delegate could choose to attend a “Berniecrats Dinner” hosted by Wellstone Progressive Democrats, Our Revolution, and Organize California, followed by an Ellis campaign mixer at the Capitol Garage (Ellis, 2017a), a bar and restaurant across from the convention. The latter event, a sea of pink Kimberly Ellis shirts, allowed supporters to meet Ellis, take photos, and meet other supporters. Later that night, a group of progressive delegates organized to crash a party hosted by the California Young Dems, who had endorsed Bauman, carrying #ImWithKimberly and #BernieWouldveWon signs. On Saturday, many progressive activists, including Ellis, went and joined a picket line where a Communication Workers of America local was protesting against AT&T while others attended a meeting of the Progressive Democrats of America.
On Saturday afternoon, a few hours before voting began, the general session had the attention of progressives, many of whom were livestreaming the convention on the Facebook pages of Berniecrats of California and California for Progress. First, RoseAnn DeMoro, president of the California Nurses Association, directly addressed the cheering “Bernie supporters” as “the future of this party.” To loud cheers from the insurgents in the audience, she called for the Democratic Party to have “vision, courage and a sense of purpose,” arguing that neither “the status quo” nor “be[ing] more conservative in conservative areas” were effective paths forward for the Party. She then called on Democrats to unite behind SB562, the single payer healthcare bill that was facing resistance from some Democrats as its way through the state legislature. In her speech, she did not hide her contempt for many leaders who would not commit to single payer, saying: “I listen to all the doublespeak on this issue and frankly I’m sick of it.” Then, in a tone mocking those Democrats with more moderate healthcare goals, she said: “I support universal healthcare,” and then respond to herself with “well then support SB562. It’s the real deal.” She closed with a warning:

If you dismiss progressive values and reinforce the dynamic status quo, don’t assume the activists in California or around this country are going to stay with the Democratic Party. . . . I want the Party unified but we’re not going to unify around the status quo, we’re not going to unify around consensus about nothing. . . . Consensus for consensus sake is over. We’ve lost and we’ve lost and we’ve lost. And we’re gonna win. We’re gonna win and we’re gonna move this movement, Berniecrats, across the nation.”

The new progressive delegates responded loudly, yelling and waving their signs. Soon after, Bauman and Ellis made their closing speeches, Bauman again focusing on his decades of Party work, travelling to “every corner of the state many, many times.” At this
point, the Ellis campaign doubled down on her outsider standing, energizing her supporters in the room, and likely those watching on progressive livestreams, perhaps at the expense of any persuadable delegates that remained in the room. She was introduced by Nina Turner, an out-of-state former Ohio Congresswoman and staunch Sanders supporter, who called on delegates to “mount up and exert [their] power,” and, citing Nelson Mandela, “make the impossible possible” by voting for Ellis. In Ellis’ speech, she said the race was about the “heart and soul of the Democratic Party” and “remembering that we are the party of the poor, the party of the working class.” She called for a focus “not just on winning elections, but on winning back hearts and minds.” As she closed, her supporters cheered loudly in the hall. They marched out and down escalators, posting photos on social media of their noisy, hot pink wave as it headed to the rooms where the vote for chair would take place.

Four hours later, Ellis’ supporters gathered in a large room inside the convention hall to hear RoseAnn DeMoro announce that Ellis had lots by 62 votes. It was clear from the silence that overtook the room that most in attendance had expected Ellis to win. Conversations in the room varied from indignance over what they felt was an inherently rigged process and attempts to highlight how well the campaign had done in what was inherently an uphill battle. This range of feelings was exemplified by posts on social media from those in the room. A progressive who had been active in the Party for several years offered a more measured reminder on Twitter to the disappointed new delegates:

Peeps: We just made a huge statement in a race that never should’ve been close. Stop bitching. Keep fighting. #CADEM17 #ImWithKimberly”
About an hour after the announcement, Ellis briefly came to greet supporters, letting them know that her team “has serious concerns about the vote.”

**Critiquing the Election**

At the convention the following morning, it was clear that Ellis and supporters felt there were legitimacy issues with the previous day’s vote. In advance of the vote, the Ellis campaign had identified over 50% of those attending the convention as their pledged supporters, or their proxies. As such, their primary complaint was not necessarily with the count of votes cast, but with the eligibility of those who had voted.

Ellis called not for a recount but for “validating the votes.” Bauman’s acceptance speech was repeatedly interrupt by boos and chants by Ellis supporters. One supporter, after asking to be recognized during open discussion of proposed rule changes unrelated to the chair’s race, proposed, to cheers from throughout the room, that the rules be suspended, and Ellis and Bauman be elected co-chairs by affirmation. He was told that the Party by-laws provided no means through which to suspend the rules.

Around mid-day, to chants of “Kimberly, Kimberly,” Ellis spoke to her supporters in Cesar Chavez Park, down the street from the convention center. In a livestream interview given to a Youtube-based citizen journalist as she headed to the park, reiterated her call to “validate the votes” by making sure everyone who voted was credentialed and eligible to vote. She invoked the imagery of the “smoke-filled rooms” of past Party conventions and, as she had in the campaign, insisted the Party was not as “democratic, truthful, transparent” as it claimed to be.
One long-standing Party activist who worked for a California-focused progressive advocacy organization held short from accusing Party insiders of rigging the election. He did, however, explain how the lack of electoral transparency and financial incentives for maintaining the status quo made it plausible to imagine.

I wouldn’t put it past the state Party that it was totally rigged. And I’m not like, a conspiracy theorist. It’s so easy. They control how the votes are counted. They control where the votes are counted [and] who takes what boxes where. I mean the whole thing is very easy to manipulate. And if everyone’s like – what’s most important is that we win. They’re gonna do whatever it takes to win. And win means making sure everyone gets paid. The consultants stay. All that bullshit. Let’s just keep everything the way it is. (Interview Quote)

In the months that followed, Ellis and her supporters attempted to put pressure on the CDP to allow for various steps of independent auditing. As she interacted with the CDP, she posted updates on her website that were shared widely within progressive circles online, including by numerous local Our Revolution groups, progressive Democratic clubs, the CDP Progressive Caucus, Sanders groups, and local chapters of the Progressive Democrats of America.

Ellis and her supporters also attempted to keep progressives focused on the story via media. As traditional media stopped covering the conflict shortly after the convention, they used digital media to keep the story alive in online progressive circles. Much of this advocacy took place in progressive blogs, online newspapers, and internet-based video news programs. Ellis supporters published critiques in numerous online publications critiquing the process. In the Spanish language newspaper, La Opinión, delegate Linda Perez (2017) accused the state Party of negligence in eschewing a review of all votes, pointing out that Bauman’s position as Party vice chair and president of the Los Angeles
County Democrats gave him disproportionate access to the Party’s machinery of operations. In an open letter to the California Democratic Party published in IndyBay, a project of the San Francisco Bay Area Independent Media Center, delegate Joel Block (2017) accused CDP staff of numerous procedural irregularities. These included, announcing Bauman’s win on a Saturday night via the Party’s Twitter account, and refusing to provide vote totals or any opportunity for delegates to act in any official capacity to resolve the disputed results.

In the months that followed, Ellis gave interviews to progressive podcasters and online media programs. On numerous occasions, she, and other progressive delegates appeared on The Young Turks Rebel HQ, a left-wing YouTube channel to discuss the status of the contested election. In the end, Ellis never conceded the race to Bauman, and it is unclear what a forensic audit might have revealed. The Ellis campaign never went forward with a lawsuit but maintained that there were legitimacy issues with approximately 200 votes.

Ellis’ loss forced a decision on many of the new activists who had entered the Party earlier that year. Many of them had been encouraged to run with the understanding that they were doing so in order to “take over the California Democratic Party” by installing Kimberly Ellis as party chair. When that attempt failed, it raised some of the same questions about whether to exit the Party or remain inside in their new formal rules to use voice to push the Party to the left with tactics that were less sweeping, and more incremental. After the vote, a delegate who had also been a Sanders delegate to the 2016 convention, and ran a statewide “Berniecrats” Facebook page, told me:
A lot of people over here don’t believe that it was a fair election because of all the shitty things that have happened. . . . It’s hard to know what’s gonna happen now to the Party. A lot of people may be leaving. I don’t know. I don’t know what the right answer is. It’s very disheartening. It would [have been] great to be able to start raising money and running against the establishment Democrats in multiple different races (Interview Quote).

This delegate effectively abandoned the goal of taking the state Party over from the inside after Ellis’ loss and did not reengage in Party politics until Sanders announced in early 2019 that he would again seek the Democratic nomination. A comparison of the 2017 and 2019 progressive slates for assembly delegate revealed that his decision was not unique. While many “Berniecrats” did run for assembly delegate again in 2019, some had been replaced on the slates by new activists, many of whom had been engaging in local progressive groups over the previous two years. The leader of a local progressive group in the Bay Area explained that “many of them did not know what they were getting into. There was a lot of excitement in the beginning…and having to keep that up was going to be difficult” (Interview Quote). RL Miller, who had written the Daily Kos article, discussed above, that encouraged activists to run in 2017, inserted a caveat into her updated post in advance of the 2019 ADEMs:

The California Democratic Party is in a transitional phase at the moment. People form slates and run for Party delegate for all sorts of reasons (notably, in 2017, to stack votes for the chair’s race). When I vote, I’ll be voting for people who are not committed to any single person for Party chair, but rather committed to building a better Party that can change California and the world (Miller, 2018).

Her reference to an upcoming vote for Party chair is notable, not only in that it discouraged entry into the Party by activists only interested in the race for Party chair, but also in that it referenced a 2019 race at all, as Bauman had in 2017 been elected to a four-
year term. As it turned out, delegates would have the opportunity to vote, and Ellis would have the opportunity to compete, for the chair position much sooner than expected.

**An Attempt in 2019:**

In late November 2018, just 1.5 years into his four-year term, Bauman would resign after accusations of sexual harassment by numerous Party staff members and Party activists (Willon & Mason, 2018). A new election would be held in May of 2019, but, the structure of political opportunity would be much more difficult for progressives. First, long-standing Party activists who had been caught off guard by progressives in the 2017 ADEMs were ready to compete in January 2019. While progressives still did very well, they lost some ground compared to their wins two years earlier. Second, the campaign saw multiple candidates competing, and those candidates were less clearly defined as establishment vs progressive. The most moderate candidate, Rusty Hicks, the president of the Los Angeles Federation of Labor, entered the race with much of the support Bauman had received, as well as extremely strong support from across the labor movement, arguably the strongest institution in California politics. Further, the race saw two progressives competing. Ellis was challenged for the progressive mantle by Daraka Larimore-Hall, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, the current male vice chair of the state Party and former chair of the Santa Barbara County Democrats. In interviews with supporters of both Larimore-Hall and Ellis, the consensus was that Hicks was unbeatable from the start. One Ellis supporter recounted her disappointment over Larimore-Hall’s run and the election as a whole:

> We were really mad at [Larimore-Hall]. Even though he’s really really qualified. But he’s not the revolution because he’s still a man. At least
that’s how I felt about it. I don’t think that’s necessarily universal. Daraka and Kimberly have very similar politics. And he’s just an inspired speechgiver, its really amazing. I think we saw Kimberly’s candidacy and what she stood for as being real change within the Party. And, even if Daraka’s votes would have gone to Kimberly the results would have been the same. Rusty won by a landslide which was really disheartening.

Her disappointment was echoed by others who felt the real opportunity for progressives to lead the Party had been lost back in 2017. Many progressives certainly supported Ellis or Larimore-Hall with their votes but had not campaigned to the degree they had during Ellis’ initial campaign. As the next section shows, many had instead been working to push the Party to the left in more incremental ways, by building progressive solidarity and increasing the prominence of progressive ideas within the state Party’s formal and informal discourses, including the Party platform.

**Increase the Prominence of Progressive Ideas in the California Democratic Party**

At an August 2017 regional meeting of the Progressive Caucus of the CDP at the Sheraton Hotel in Anaheim, California, I observed as caucus chair Karen Bernal welcomed delegates from the podium:

> “Are there troublemakers in this room? Are you here to go along to get along? Are you here to make trouble? Beautiful. You’ve come to the right caucus. This is the original raucous caucus. Welcome to the Progressive Caucus.” (Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party, 2017)

Each of Bernal’s prompts elicited a loud roar from the several-hundred delegates, a mix of long-standing progressive Party activists and new activists who had entered the Party via the January 2017 ADEM elections. I had seen Bernal rally up the crowd before, always reveling in presenting the caucus as a team of radicals, inside an intransigent institution, that would do what it takes to drag the rest of the Party kicking and screaming towards their vision of progress. Unsurprisingly, this attitude was attractive to many of
the new delegates who had come to find a home within the caucus. And indeed, the Progressive Caucus certainly engages in some raucous protest actions and was an integral part of Kimberly Ellis’ run for Party chair. But despite her revolutionary rhetoric, the Progressive Caucus of the CDP also serves as an avenue through which activists engage in some more mundane and institutional tactics for influencing the Party as an organization.

Thus far, this chapter has discussed how activists organized to enter the Party as assembly delegates and immediately had the opportunity to use their voices to try to bring about a groundswell of support, for “taking over the Democratic Party” via the election of Kimberly Ellis. Had Ellis won, it likely would have brought significant change to the California Democratic Party as an organization. That said, such opportunities for a drastic ideological change at the head of the Party are rare. Long-standing progressive delegates to the CDP are accustomed to the limits of their role as delegates and Ellis’ loss made clear that, while their numbers had grown following the ADEMs, they still lacked the majority numbers necessary to bring change so quickly to the Party. As such, they, along with many new progressive delegates, returned to their strategy of using their voices to increase the prominence of progressive ideas within the Party as an organization. One of the primary vehicles for exercising that collective voice is the Progressive Caucus of the CDP, which, through in-person and online events, allows progressive activists to build community, share information, develop strategic, consistent discourse for discussing their issues. Via these processes, they also develop a collective identity as progressives within the CDP that influences their choice of actions at statewide Party events, in their home
communities, and in shared digital spaces. Beyond the caucus, activists also organize strategically and independently to make their voices heard via formal resolutions and acts of dissent at Party conventions and committee meetings.

The Progressive Caucus of the CDP

The influx of progressive delegates into the CDP in 2017 was by no means a completely new phenomenon. As discussed above, the last year of George W. Bush’s first term saw progressive activists across California become activated in Democratic Party politics through a variety of avenues, including but not limited to, the anti-war movement, as well as the presidential campaigns of Howard Dean and Dennis Kuninich. After the primary, many of these activists became involved in the loose, hybrid (in-person and online) networks of Democracy for America (DFA), Progressive Democrats of America (PDA), and other “netroots” organizations that were emerging nationwide. Like the recent Sanders supporters, many of these activists worked to gain formal representation in the California Democratic Party by running for delegate to the CDP State Central Committee via the ADEM or by running for their local County Central Committee. At that time, dozens of small organizations—local DFA and PDA groups, blogger networks, etc.—formed loose networks around two larger groups, SoCal Grassroots and Take Back Red California that would lead to the creation of a formal Progressive Caucus within the California Democratic Party. In Southern California, SoCal Grassroots was a robust, ideologically progressive organization that had grown out of the Dean and Kuchinich campaigns. By contrast, Take Back Red California, based in Northern California, was specifically focused on combatting the narrow funneling of resources by the state Party to
candidates in reliably Democratic areas. They fundraised for, and lobbied the state party to support, Democrats in parts of the state that had long been ignored by the state Party.

At the CDP State Convention in April 2005, activists from these organizations came together for a meeting of an unofficial, unchartered, progressive caucus. The meeting, attended by over 100 activists, was the most well attended caucus meeting at the convention. Interviews and archival research reveal the early progressive caucus served activists in a variety of ways. One of the co-founders of the caucus explained that it was conceived as “an incubator for ideas, activism, and leadership, to impact the Party platform” (Interview Quote). In a 2005 blog post, a leader of California for Democracy, a statewide umbrella group of DFA chapters, outlined how the caucus was meant to expand the left-wing of the Democratic Party. The post read:

The Progressive Caucus speaks to those people who have left the Democratic Party because the Party was not meeting their needs, nor adequately representing them. This caucus has a unique opportunity to reach out to disenchanted Democrats, Greens, and Independents, and offer them a home within the Democratic Party. The Caucus also provides a voice for grassroots activists within the Party” (California For Democracy, n.d.).

In 2009, the Caucus helped elect their first endorsed progressive to the five-person state Party executive board. Hilary Crosby, who came up through Take Back Red California, upset the race for Party controller, defeating Eric Bradley, a well-connected incumbent (Larimore-Hall (2014)). Her win followed a grassroots campaign that saw her personally organizing up and down the state calling both for increasing financial transparency within the state Party and for grassroots fundraising as a means of countering the influence of special interests in determining Party priorities.
Given the fact that it has been around for fifteen years, the Progressive Caucus is accepted within Party circles, but is by no means without controversy. Prior to the creation of Progressive Caucus, the CDPs caucuses were traditionally formed around a specific issue (e.g. the Environmental Caucus) or constituent group (e.g. the African American Caucus). When it was created, many Party regulars were upset because the establishment of an ideologically-based “progressive caucus” within the state Party implied that the Party itself was not sufficiently progressive (Larimore-Hall, 2014). Further, over the years, the Caucus has taken public positions that have drawn the ire of Party leaders. Most infamously in Party circles, the caucus sponsored a resolution in 2011 encouraging a primary challenge to then-President Barack Obama, a controversy which created uproar in the African American Caucus and nearly led to the official decertification of the Progressive Caucus as an official entity within the CDP. In many ways, the Caucus revels in its agitator reputation, with its leaders referring to it as the “raucous caucus” (Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party, 2017) and the “troublemaker caucus”. In conversations with Progressive Caucus members, elected officials have conceded that the caucus, while at times frustrating, serves a purpose by holding Democrats accountable and pushing on specific issues (e.g. McCarty in the July 25th virtual meeting and someone in Larimore Hall). That said, its inability to bring about rapid change has at times frustrated its own members.

While the Progressive Caucus has consistently been since its inception the largest caucus in the CDP, it saw significant attrition by those activists who entered following the 2004 election and “didn’t see change as quickly as they would want, being disgusted
with the process for all kind of reasons and leaving” (Interview Quote). Despite this attrition, the durability of the caucus itself, its constant role as a link between progressive activists and Party leaders, and the ability of its leaders to maintain its size by recruiting candidates to run for delegate, all serve to create infrastructure for leveraging progressives entering into the Party during moments of increased progressive activism.

Most importantly, the Caucus provides within the formal structure of the CDP a space for activists—particularly new activists—that is unabashedly progressive. As mentioned above, one of the goals of the Progressive Caucus of the CDP upon its creation was for it to serve as “an incubator for [progressive] ideas, activism, and leadership” (Interview Quote). To enable such an environment, its leaders and members work together to develop progressive solidarity, community, and a collective identity that influences and enables actions by both veteran and new Party activists. They do that by serving as a networking environment for building community, and a conduit for information sharing, while also allowing for the ongoing negotiation of a shared progressive discourse and understanding of issues and priorities.

**Community Building, Information Sharing, and Shared Discourse**

To those strategic ends, the caucus utilizes a specific repertoire of organizing tactics. First, the Caucus hosts public meetings for its members to engage in dialogue with its one-another and collectively decide the election of its leadership. For example, at the same 2017 CDP State Convention where activists were attempting to install Kimberly Ellis as Party chair, the Progressive Caucus also held its own meeting. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the large, general sessions of the 2017 CDP State Convention in
Sacramento saw numerous interruptions by activists protesting the Party’s lack of commitment to single payer healthcare and to environmental issues. If there was any doubt in my mind as to which activists were making the bulk of that noise, it was abundantly clear upon entering the meeting of the Progressive Caucus later that day. Prior to the start of the caucus meeting, hundreds of Caucus members in hot-pink Kimberly Ellis shirts and Bernie gear were clustered together engaged in loud discussion. For activists who had just entered the Party, this was their first in-person meeting, and the Bernie gear served as a means of identifying themselves to like-minded progressives. Many Ellis supporters also wore Bernie pins or hats along with their hot-pink Kimberly Ellis shirts, signaling that Ellis was the pick for those ideologically aligned with Sanders.

At this lively meeting that lived up to the group’s “raucous caucus” nickname, the Caucus was holding its own elections for its executive board and numerous candidates made their case for caucus chair as well as other positions. Across candidates, numerous themes arose, but the most consistent arguments made related to their support for Sanders in 2016. Karen Bernal, running for another term as caucus chair after a two-year hiatus, cited in her speech her experience as chair of the 2016 Sanders delegation to the Democratic National Convention. Her opponent pointed to his time working for Bernie in Iowa. Another candidate, running for central vice chair, claimed to have worked to convince Sanders to run and explained how she “opened the Fresno office for Bernie when he ran, and staffed it.” Across the candidate statements and beyond, the meeting was a friendly space for Bernie supporters and those with critiques of the Democratic
Party, many of which were still focused on the 2016 election. In general, the elections were not contentious, as Karen Bernal was re-elected as chair after a ___ year hiatus.

Beyond determining their leadership, in-person meetings also allow the caucus leaders and members to engage in dialogue and develop a shared discourse, as well as activist capacity for understanding and discussion of progressive issues. In its capacity as a statewide caucus of the CDP, the Progressive Caucus meets four times a year—a full membership meeting at the annual state CDP convention and three regional meetings throughout the year held alongside CDP executive board meetings. Speaking to her membership, Bernal explained how the caucus “is quite famous [within the CDP] for not allowing the cattle call that we see at all the other caucuses with lines of people [waiting to make pitches to the caucus]. . . . We come for real talk about the issues.”

For example, at the same 2017 meeting where she was re-elected, Bernal insisted that as progressives, “we will not be denied our issues” and unveiled a report entitled Autopsy, Democratic Party in Crisis. The report was sponsored by RootsAction, a progressive advocacy organization co-founded by a long-standing member of the CDP Progressive Caucus. From the podium, Bernal outlined the report’s key critiques of the Party on issues including, but not limited to, race, corporate power, mobilization, and the military. Around the room, most audience members were nodding, while reading through the individual copies of the report that had been distributed throughout the room. For many of those in Sanders gear who were new entrants to the Party, these critiques were in line with the reasons they had supported Sanders and subsequently ran for assembly
delegate. The report shared with everyone in the room a vocabulary for critiquing the Party in a constructive way.

There are numerous other examples of the Progressive Caucus organizing opportunities for its members to engage in discussion and debate about policy issues and also engage with political leaders and experts. The August 2017 regional meeting in Anaheim focused on Single Payer Healthcare and a post-mortem of SB 562, a single payer healthcare bill that had recently been stymied by Democrats in the state legislature. Featuring a panel that included Progressive Congressman Ro Khanna, a representative from a major trade union, and the director of government relations for the California Nurses Association, the meeting outlined for grassroots activists both why the bill had failed and also how they could best direct their energy toward establishing single payer at the state level. Activists could ask questions and offer feedback while also learning how to discuss the benefits of single payer and overcome objections by historically skeptical groups such as labor unions. Khanna explained to activists that they needed to better make the ‘moral and economic argument’ for single payer and develop rhetorical strategies for discussing progressive policy. He implored single payer supporters to engage head-on with those who oppose single payer on free market grounds. “This is not a free market,” he said. “It is a market that has been captured and is actually enriching people at the expense of competition.” In addition to this discussion of single-payer healthcare, from 2017 to 2020, Progressive Caucus meetings saw similar extended discussions about eliminating cash bail, increasing disclosure requirements around the
funding of statewide ballot measures, abolishing the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE), and police violence.

Because the Progressive Caucus is limited to four in-person membership meetings per year, its leadership and members have long relied on digital media for engagement and communication throughout the year. Since its inception, the Progressive Caucus has maintained an email listserv which remains an extremely active, albeit vociferous, forum for member-to-member conversation about Caucus activity and progressive issues. That said, this type of conversation is not for everyone. One activist who identifies as progressive described the listserv to me as “a nightmare of emails and incessant debates” (Interview Quote) that, among other factors, led him to leave the Progressive Caucus and instead engage in progressive activism within the state Party in other ways.

The Caucus also employs other digital media tools, such as YouTube and Facebook, for live-streaming its regional meetings, like the health care panel discussed above, and facilitating member-to-member discussion. However, digital media—particularly social media—allows the Progressive Caucus to serve as a hub for its leadership, members, and external progressive actors.

The public Facebook page is managed by a member of the Progressive Caucus executive board and features a mix of posts about California’s issues and related progressive policies, and highlights of progressives engaged in electoral battles at the local and regional level. The Facebook events page serves as a hub for connecting activists to extra-party progressive organizations and their events and actions. Examination of 124 co-hosted events on the caucus Facebook page, held from 2017-
2020, reveals a combination of Caucus events, such as regional and statewide meetings, as well as approximately 100 “co-hosted” events with extra-party organizations, including, but not limited to Our Revolution, NARAL pro-choice California, Tenants Together, and Fight to Win Medicare for All. Granted, “co-hosting” an event on Facebook does not necessarily mean that the Caucus put time and resources into the planning and executing of these individual events. But at minimum, the Caucus events page on Facebook serves to legitimate progressive organizations and their events and connect delegates with tangible means to engage in local activism. These media allow the Caucus to serve as a conduit for ideas from extra-party progressive organizations to enter the Party via delegates that engage with these movement activities.

They also allow the Party to create linkages across geographies, both linking state level activism to national issues and expanding the reach of local activists to statewide audiences. Recently, the Caucus co-hosted a webinar focused on mobilizing activists to support procedural reforms in the United States Senate, including the elimination of the filibuster. The event, The Fight to Fix Our Senate, featured Senators Elizabeth Warren and Jeff Markley and was sponsored by a who’s who of national progressive organizations, including the Center for Popular Democracy, the Daily Kos, the Communication Workers of America, the Working Family Party, the Sunrise Movement, and Our Revolution. Of the twenty listed sponsors, the CDP Progressive Caucus was the only state Party organization listed. In the presentation, Amar Shergill, who succeeded Karen Bernal as Chair of the Progressive Caucus in 2019, highlighted how obstacles to Senate reforms exist within the Democratic Party and are based at the
state level. He criticized California Senator Dianne Feinstein’s opposition to such reforms and highlighted the need for activists to apply public pressure to California Governor Gavin Newsom to appoint a progressive Democrat to replace Senator Kamala Harris after her (then speculative) ascension to Vice President of the United States.

“Right now there are PACS for centrists that are spending tens of thousands of dollars to push their candidate so we’re going to need your help to bring pressure on Governor Newsom…to nominate a progressive, yes, but also someone that’s committed to getting rid of the filibuster and making sure the Senate is run by the majority not minority obstruction. . . . We’re going to push our social media platforms…but we’re going to need your help to bring that pressure in California. And that’s right now. And then we will turn around and help bring that pressure from California out across the states to help all of you get it done wherever you are.”

The Caucus also works to connect local activists to statewide audiences. In September 2020, the Caucus hosted an event in which a panel of grassroots organizers who recently moved into electoral politics were strategically addressing the recent movements for police reform. A month later, it co-sponsored an online event, Let's Win Progressive Majorities on California City Councils, alongside several democratic clubs and “Berniecrats” organizations based in the San Francisco Bay Area. These events serve to educate and mobilize potential candidates and organizers in locales across the state. All of these activities—meetings, learning opportunities, connections to external groups and action opportunities,—allow the Progressive Caucus to help activate, recruit, and leverage new activists in the maintenance of a durable community of progressives inside the state Party. For those new activists, it also provides a clear path to learn Party politics and increase their own political efficacy.
Recruitment, entry points, and action opportunities

In discussing her experience as a progressive entering the Party in 2005, current DNC member Susie Shannon remembered having to figure a lot of logistics out for herself. “There was no comprehensive website,” she said. “No one knew about the ADEMs meetings”. But for progressives entering the Party in 2017, the Progressive Caucus served as entry point to understanding progressive action within the state Party. As discussed earlier, one of the primary ways through which the Progressive Caucus maintains the size, or volume, of its voice in the CDP is by helping local activists form progressive slates. This involves curating progressive slates for ADEMs in districts where progressives have, even between surges in activism, seen continued success. During moments of increased progressive activism, the caucus also works to provide resources to activists looking to form slates in districts where progressives have historically been less active. An activist from Sacramento explained how Amar Shergill, chair of the Progressive Caucus, also maintains a progressive slate in his home district across elections:

Amar Shergill who is the caucus chair of the progressive caucus, he’s also our leader in the slate. And he was actually pretty smart the way that he selected folks to run with him. One, he wouldn’t take anybody that didn’t fall in line with his values. . . .He selected people that are trusted messengers within their community. So he got somebody in, including himself, who is a trusted messenger in the Sikh community, I myself I’m very trusted in [another] community in Sacramento - I was actually able to register about 40 people in one day. . . .A lot of these people aren’t organizers - and they also don’t trust the Party and electoral politics, but they trust me and they trust him, and they trust the other delegates. So, he selected people that all had a different demographic but also fell in line with his values. That way there wasn’t any problems that would happen like we would agree on the same issues, we’re all on a team, and we all were able to vouch for new Democrats and old ones that were in our communities to show up and vote.
The relationships between the Progressive Caucus and extra-Party progressive groups—Our Revolution, DSA, PDA, etc.—also allow for the recruitment of, and entry into party politics by, potential activists. For example, one Our Revolution member from east Contra Costa County in the Bay Area who ran for her local school board in 2016, had such a negative experience with the local Party that she decided to run for delegate in 2019. She explained how, in addition to helping recruit and support progressives in their delegate election, the Progressive Caucus—both in person, via its listserv, and via Facebook and WhatsApp groups, provided a means for new activists to more quickly understand Party processes and increase their efficacy. For her, the caucus also provided solidarity inside a party that she viewed as an elite club to which she, despite winning her delegate election, did not inherently belong. She said:

I don’t know if I would be even be able to stomach some of the things I’ve seen in the Party if I didn’t have my fellow progressives to be like ‘that was messed up’ you know to just have that kind of sense of community of just look like what were continuing to do, or even like to celebrate look what we were able to do.

Similarly, a delegate from Sacramento that had long avoided Party politics said that, in recruiting him, a progressive caucus leader wanted him to understand the inherent contradictions involved in an inside-outside approach to Party activism.

“He really wanted me to understand [that] you can equally hate people that are in the Party, you can equally hate Party politics, you can even hate the fact that you know its corrupt and treated like a corporation instead of an electoral process. But you can still [get involved] and share your opinion.”

After being members of the Progressive Caucus, many delegates also choose to use the Caucus as part of a ladder of engagement towards elected office or Party leadership roles. For example, Liz Lavertu, a Sanders supporter who became a member of the San
Diego Progressive Democratic Club and subsequently ran for assembly delegate in 2017, successfully ran for an officer-at-large position within the Progressive Caucus. From there, she ran a campaign for state assembly in a historically Republican area of San Diego. While her campaign was unsuccessful, she succeeded in engaging with the thousands of military families in her district that typically had minimal contact with the Democratic Party. Another activist, Brandon Harami, supported Sanders in 2016, founded the San Francisco Berniecrats, and became an assembly delegate in 2017. Through his work as a delegate and in the caucus, he connected with Kimberly Ellis and ran her second campaign for Party chair. That success led him to successfully run for Bay Area Vice Chair of the Progressive Caucus. For motivated activists less interested in leadership roles, the Caucus offers other opportunities. For example, a Sanders supporter who also wrote #DemEnter blog posts, served as the moderator of a Progressive Caucus meeting that focused on single payer healthcare.

Progressive Caucus members also often choose to join and engage with other caucuses, such as the Environmental Caucus, the LGBT Caucus, or the African American Caucus. As such, they are able to bring the shared discourse of the Progressive Caucus to these groups. Further, some Party activists who identify as progressive are not members of the Progressive Caucus and choose to focus their progressive activism primarily on these other caucuses.

**Other Progressive Insider Strategies**

While the Progressive Caucus was certainly a vector for activity, progressive insider strategies were not limited to members of the progressive Caucus. Regardless of which, if
any, caucuses progressive activists are engaged with, there are numerous actions they can take to increase the prominence of progressive ideas within the broader state Party. One of the most common of these is crafting and lobbying for Party resolutions.

**Resolutions**

At the Resolutions Committee meeting of the 2017 CDP Convention, I watched as Dorothy Reik, head of the Progressive Democrats of the Santa Monica Mountains and a member of the CDP Progressive Caucus laid into one of the committee chairs. The chair was proposing changing the language of a proposed resolution, authored by Reik, to have the Party endorse a ban on cash bail throughout California. “You can’t change it from ‘ban cash bail’ to ‘limit cash bail’. That’s not what we want. We want to ban cash bail. If we say limit, then people are going to find ways to keep doing it.” Reik knew that getting a resolution through the resolutions committee has little meaning on its own, except that the CDP executive board will consider the resolution at its next meeting. By insisting on the less fungible language, Reik and her co-authors were trying to force the board to take a position on a difficult issue. Changing the language would have made it easier on the executive committee by watering it down.

Some activists criticize spending resources on crafting formal resolutions, given that neither resolutions nor the Party platform bind elected officials to vote in a particular way. However, resolutions serve as a means through which grassroots Party activists can collectively amplify their voice. Indeed, Party leaders may decline to pass a proposed resolution, and elected officials may ignore those that do pass, the resolutions process allows activists to articulate and argue for their priorities. For example, seventy
progressive delegates in 2019 submitted to the CDP a two-page resolution “in support of abolishing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).” While the resolution failed to pass the full vote of the Party, it forced debate on the issue and provided the opportunity for activists to articulate their claims beyond the reductive catch phrase, “Abolish ICE” that had become commonplace nationwide amongst the left.

In other cases, progressives in the CDP see resolutions as an essential way to engage in legislative influence. In the case of cash bail, Reik had been writing on blogs and websites about cash bail for several years prior to submitting her resolution to the CDP (e.g. Reik, 2016). Fourteen months after the passage of Reik’s resolution to support the elimination of cash bail, Governor Jerry Brown signed into law a bill (SB 10) replacing cash bail with a system based on risk analysis (this bill was overturned by voters via Proposition 25 in the November 2020 statewide election (McGreevy, 2020)).

In some cases, it is possible to see the direct influence of resolutions on legislation. For example, in May 2015, RL Miller, a progressive caucus member and chair of the environmental caucus, authored a successful resolution calling on the state to divest from fossil fuel investments in their major retirement funds and public university endowments (Hirji, 2015). When California lawmakers passed a divestment bill later that year, it included much of the language from Miller’s resolution.

Susie Shannon, a founding member of the Progressive Caucus, used the issue of gay marriage to explain how issues that begin as resolutions can eventually make an impact when added to the Party platform.

I had helped run the grassroots movement at the California Democratic Party level on marriage equality, so we were all very excited for the first
time it was going to be in our [national] platform in 2012. President Obama had started off just supporting civil unions but not supporting marriage equality and there was a lot of pushing within the Democratic Party and outside the Democratic Party to move the Party at the national level. You can see that basically, the White House really stepped up after marriage equality made it into the platform in terms of pushing on marriage equality and fighting for it and ultimately it was the court that made the decision. You can see how the platform is so important…but those of us that are fighting on the inside and even on the outside to make sure that we have a platform that actually speaks to where we are as a society, what we believe in as Democrats, what we think is important, actually does make a difference in people’s lives and can be used to help push legislation.

She similarly pointed to changes in the Party platform in the 1970s and 1980s related to welfare programs. She argued that they ultimately provided language the Party used to support President Bill Clinton’s effort to “end welfare as we know it” via the 1994 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. She regarded this series of events as extremely unprogressive on the part of the Party. While this is an older example, there are many contemporary examples of progressive activists disagreeing with the state and national Party’s actions or positions on issues. The next section outlines strategies progressives use to voice dissent at Party conventions and committee meetings.

**Dissenting at Party Conventions and Committee Meetings**

As discussed above, the work to increase the prominence of progressive ideas and issues within the CDP is carried out by a variety of actors including, but not limited to, members of the Progressive Caucus. At times, the same actors seek to vocally express dissent related to actions or issue positions taken by the Party organization or elected officials. For example, at the 2019 CDP State Convention in San Francisco, I could hardly hear moderate candidates John Hickenlooper and John Delany over the angry crowd after they argued that single-payer healthcare was “socialism” and “not good policy,” respectively.
The crowd responded with boos, jeers, and the waving of signs in support of single payer healthcare. There is also a contingent of progressives that regularly attempts to try to pass resolutions in support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement to pressure Israel on human rights issues. While these never come close to passing, they result in both protests and counterprotests on the convention floor.

In some cases, cross-cutting digital media groups can work to further particular issues at state conventions. For example, an activist from rural Nevada County explained how numerous chat groups that were formed during Kimberly Ellis’ 2017 campaign—LGBT people for Kimberly, Women for Kimberly, Black People for Kimberly, etc.—merged into a single large group called “One Chat to Rule them All” after the campaign was over. She explained how this group has remained durable and has been activated towards progressive ends:

“When something’s happening [at the state convention], like for example when the DNC told the platform committee…that they were rejecting California’s proposal with regard to the way that gender is identified, because they went back to “other,” which is really offensive to our trans community because basically it dehumanizes them. It was that chat group that said that the executive board would be voting on this, and we needed people to speak to its rejection and we wanted to tell the DNC “no” that is not something that we’re okay with. We will not dehumanize our trans community and we want to tell the DNC that we reject their platform requirement. That organizing tool, getting bodies in the room and being able to say, “we need you down here right now” because many of us are staying in the hotel where the meetings are happening.”

In the end, the activists found out that Party by-laws prevented them from overturning the DNC platform committee. The by-laws allow a state Party to add things to the Party platform that are not in the national platform, for example if the national platform did not have a poverty plank they could add one. But if the platform of the DNC has a specific clause that is misaligned with a state Party then the state is out of compliance and its charter can be revoked.
Similarly, an activist from East Contra Costa County who became a Party delegate in 2019 explained how she prioritizes being present at other caucuses and committee meetings that she identified as less progressive.

I would say first and foremost [my strategy] is just to take up space. What I mean by that is ‘I’m here and the way that I think about the direction this Party should be going matters.’ So, I joined the LGBT Caucus I joined the veterans Caucus. I joined certain caucuses that have had more what I would categorize as more centrist kind of leanings. Me being there is just like ‘I am progressive, unequivocally a Berner, and I just want to sit here so that you know that that we exist’ (Interview Quote).

While simply being present or participating at caucus and committee meetings may not on its own be enough to move the needle on progressive ideas within the Party, all of the activities discussed in this section should be viewed as part of a repertoire of political action that is most effective when used together. Nowhere in the CDP is this clearer than in the work of RL Miller and the Environmental Caucus.

In 2011, RL Miller, frustrated by the Democratic Party’s support for fossil fuels, successfully ran for assembly delegate to the CDP. Two years later, she co-founded the activist group Climate Hawks Vote, which works to develop and elect leaders that support aggressive steps toward combating global climate change. The group regularly publishes a scorecard ranking elected officials’ commitments to climate change, focusing not just on legislative votes but also on public appearances championing the fight against climate change. That same year, she ran for chair of the CDP Environmental Caucus, a position she remained in until she was elected to the DNC in 2020. One of the primary ways Miller and the Environmental Caucus have worked to push the Party to the left is by pushing for Party resolutions and legislation to reduce the influence of fossil fuel money
in the CDP and by extension, state institutions that can be influenced by the legislative majority held by the Democratic Party.

In 2013, the same year she became chair of the Environmental Caucus, Miller authored and attempted to pass a resolution calling for state agencies to divest from investments in fossil fuels. The resolution failed. In the subsequent two years, Miller worked with caucus members and other activists to approach Party officials in all 58 of the state’s counties. Two years later, she introduced and successfully passed another resolution, this time with the support of 20 county parties. In the following months, the state Senate and Legislature both passed a divestment bill. While the bill was narrower than Miller’s resolution—it focused on coal rather than all fossil fuels—it included language taken directly from the resolution. When a legislative committee was waffling on passing the bill, Miller brought activists to the capitol to meet with committee members. After the bill and resolution passed, Miller touted their importance in forcing Party members and elected to make the politically difficult decision to oppose fossil fuels rather than solely supporting renewable technologies.

Miller has also seen success at reducing the influence of fossil fuel money via negotiations with CDP staff and elected state officers. In 2016, she convinced Party chair John Burton to ban political contributions to the state Party from oil companies. Because this ban was an order that could easily be overturned by new leadership, she used caucus meetings and digital media to remind activist to hold Party officials accountable not only on maintaining the ban, but also on moving toward expanding it to exclude all fossil fuel companies.
Over the last four years, Miller has also used digital media at in-person events to push politicians to commit to refusing political contributions by fossil fuel companies. At the 2017 CDP State Convention, she carried around a large poster board with a pledge to refuse fossil fuel money printed in the center. She collected signatures from dozens of politicians, sharing photos online of politicians standing next to the poster. On social media as well as sites like the Daily Kos, she highlighted politicians, including those attempting to win races in traditionally Republican counties, who were willing to sign the pledge. She also called out those politicians, including Gubernatorial candidates Gavin Newsom and Antonio Villaraigosa, who were absent from previously requested speaking time at the Environmental Caucus meeting, ostensibly because they did not want to be confronted about the pledge.

Miller has also partnered with the Progressive Caucus and outside allies to try to increase the prominence of climate issues at the national level. In August 2019, when the Democratic National Committee held a meeting in San Francisco, she helped organize a protest calling out the DNC for rejecting a resolution to hold a presidential primary debate focused specifically on climate change.

This section has outlined ways in which progressive activists work to make their voices heard within the state-level organization of the California Democratic Party. It showed how the Progressive Caucus of the CDP serves to create and maintain a durable progressive community within the Democratic Party. By enabling communication amongst its members, the Caucus develops a collective discourse around the Party and progressivism. Through participation in these structures and discourses, activists
construct and maintain a collective identity that influences their goals and the actions they organize to achieve them. This section also outlined how progressive activists use formal mechanisms of the Party, such as resolutions, and acts of dissent, such as protests, to both increase the prominence of progressive ideas within the CDP and to advance progressive policies.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined efforts of progressive activists to enter the California Democratic Party at the state level and to enact progressive change within the Party. I first outlined how and why new activists organized to formally enter the Party in January 2017 via the ADEM elections. I then presented two ways in which the new ADEM's, along with long-standing progressive Party activists, used voice in attempts to change the Party from the inside by pushing for a progressive Party chair, and by working to increase the prominence of progressive ideas inside the Party as an organization.

As activists organized for the ADEM's, I argued that, for those who had been Sanders activists in 2016, their understanding of one another as “Berniecrats” remained durable, as activists broadened their understanding of the term to encompass their activism in support of Sanders’ priorities, not just of Sanders himself. This shared identity was leveraged by long-standing Party activists working to recruit self-described Berniecrats to compete for ADEM’s positions throughout the state. I also argued that the strategies for networked mobilization employed by these activists were informed by their success using similar strategies in their 2016 delegate campaigns.
The chair’s race showed how, years before the influx of delegates in 2017, progressive activists within the Party were already working to recruit a progressive activist, Kimberly Ellis, to challenge Eric Bauman in the state Party chair’s race. It showed how her campaign strategy, which initially focused on her potential to bring progressive ideas to the Party as an organization and diversity to its outreach strategies, leveraged a climate of Party criticism among both supporters of Bernie Sanders and those disappointed by Hillary Clinton’s loss to Donald Trump. Ellis and her supporters presented her candidacy as part of a broader movement for Party reform, engaging in media activism to bring the conversation about the race for Party chair, normally of little interest to those outside Party circles, into the public conversation. This strategy was augmented by the mobilization efforts of groups like Our Revolution and by the endorsement of Ellis by Bernie Sanders. These efforts brought national attention to the race via coverage in legacy media and conversations in progressive social media communities. Activists were thus able to link Bauman to a problem—an inaccessible Party, more in touch with the needs of corporate leaders than everyday Americans, whose strategic failings had led to the unexpected election of Donald Trump—and introduce Ellis to activists as a potential solution. This strategy resonated with activists who ran for assembly delegate positions in order to “take over the Democratic Party.” These new delegates, many of whom had successfully used digital media to mobilize support for their own delegate races, applied similar strategies in support of Kimberly Ellis, culminating in a raucous showing at the 2017 CDP state convention where Ellis ultimately lost to Bauman by 60 votes.
This chapter also shines a light on the ideal opportunities, as well as the limitations of certain strategies and tactics for networked mobilization in the context of internal Party elections. In Chapter 3, we saw the would-be Sanders convention delegates mobilize their large networks of Sanders supporters to help contribute to the “political revolution” by supporting their slates at local contests in which participation was typically limited to long-standing Party activists and their networks. In this chapter, the ADEMs were structured identically, and again allowed those with large, online networks to mobilize, this time to “take over the Democratic Party,” and find meaningful success in many districts throughout the state. And yet, they were less successful in areas like San Francisco and Los Angeles that featured strong Party organizations. This points to the possibility that success in these elections, beyond the low-hanging fruit that was available in certain 2017 districts, may require a more hybrid—both online and community organizing—approach. Similar limitations were revealed in the race for Party chair. In that case, the same type of networked mobilization, in which success largely depends on turning out voters from a large pool of like-minded individuals, was limited by the fact that only a few thousand delegates were eligible to vote in the race for chair.

Given the limited opportunities for additional activism aimed at quickly taking over the Democratic Party, I argued that many activists, following Ellis’ loss, began engaging in more incremental political action via the internal processes of the CDP. I showed the Progressive Caucus of the CDP served as an entry point for many of these new activists, providing them with primers on CDP processes and specific actions through which they could learn internal Party politics. Following Bauman’s resignation,
activists reoriented themselves to the difficult realities of the 2019 race for Party chair, dividing their activism between supporting multiple progressives on the ticket, and working on resolutions and rule changes aimed at increasing the prominence of progressive ideas in the Party’s formal and informal discourses. The next chapter focuses on similar multi-pronged strategies of progressives, this time focused on local progressive groups. It outlines the repertories of strategies and tactics that exist across the universe of progressive groups, and then explains how differences in their implementation manifest around each group’s unique understanding of progressivism and its relationship to the Democratic Party.
Chapter 5: Local Activism and Its Relationship to the Democratic Party

The previous two chapters have focused largely on progressive activists leveraging specific moments—political conventions, ADEM elections, an unusually competitive race for State Party Chair—as opportunities for political activism aimed at critiquing the Democratic Party and pushing it to the left. Chapter 4 also examined how the Progressive Caucus of the Democratic Party serves as a vehicle for like-minded delegates to the State Democratic Party to learn about and engage with the State Party toward progressive ends.

In those contexts, leaders of local progressive groups worked to recruit Kimberly Ellis to challenge Eric Bauman in the Chair’s race and other local activists to run in local races to become assembly delegates. To those ends, local progressive groups helped craft and market slates of progressive assembly delegates aimed at leveraging progressive networks at the district level. This chapter aims to dive deeper into the role that local progressive groups play in developing activists and facilitating activism aimed at building both a more progressive society and Democratic Party.

The groups that are the focus of this chapter are multi-issue activist groups that identify foremost as progressive and also whose activism includes engagement with Democratic Party politics. These include Party-chartered progressive Democratic Clubs such as the East Area Progressive Democrats, Modesto Progressive Democratic Club, and the Wellstone Democratic Reform Club. They also include chapters of Progressive Democrats of America, Indivisible, Our Revolution, certain chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America, local “progressive alliance” groups, as well as individual independent local progressive groups, such as Alameda Progressives or FUN (Fremont-
While this is by no means an exhaustive list of the progressive groups operating at the local level throughout the state, this selection of players allows for examination of the varied ideologies, relationships with the Democratic Party, as well as the strategies and tactics employed towards progressive goals, that exist in numerous individual communities throughout the state.

Examining local progressive groups makes clear what sustained progressive activism looks like outside the context of both major election cycles and the limited avenues available to activists via State Party processes.

Local progressive groups are important because they are where activists learn politics in a real and lasting way and, compared to the other venues in previous chapters, it is where they are most regularly engaged. They are where activists are connected to elected officials and candidates, educated on issues, legislation, and referenda, and mobilized into actions. These groups are a primary avenue through which activists are educated on the complexities of local, regional, and state governance as they exist in internal Party structures as well as in representative bodies, such as city councils, school boards, and the state legislature. They then have the opportunity to apply this increased knowledge to influence local and state politics, as they endorse candidates and ballot measures, and engage in activism aimed at holding elected officials accountable. The local level is also where we see more nuance in the actions and priorities of progressives. For example, Chapter 4 depicted how, at the state level, a critical mass of newly elected delegates to the State Party helped self-described progressive Kevin DeLeon win the

10 For descriptions of these various groups, see the Research Design section>
Party’s endorsement over incumbent Senator Dianne Feinstein in the 2018 California Senate Race. This chapter explores variation in the priorities of progressives, examining how and why, for example, the East Area Progressive Democrats, which counts among its membership many of de Leon’s constituents, opted to endorse Feinstein over de Leon in that same Senate race. It further outlines how, across these diverse local groups, acts of progressive activism utilize a relatively universal repertoire of strategies and tactics that activists choose from. However, these groups have distinctly different group identities that they construct collectively that influence when and which tactics they choose to deploy, as well as how they choose to deploy them. Local progressive groups serve as discursive venues for activists to come together, building community through the process of articulating diverse interests and experiences with the Democratic Party. These ongoing processes of articulation allow them to collectively determine their group’s issue priorities, relationship to the Democratic Party, and how they define progressivism. These distinct identities allow individual activists to choose their ideal group, or groups, from a menu of options with complementary worldviews about political issues, activism, and what activism, as well as opposition, looks like in the context of the Democratic Party. The tactics a group employs influences who joins that group in an ongoing process which further contributes to and reinforces the group’s identity. Beyond group identity, participation in these groups by individual activists contributes to their own ongoing process of individual identity formation, as they negotiate and renegotiate what it means to be a progressive, an activist and a Democrat.
More specifically, this chapter 1) lays out several strategies common to progressive activist groups, highlighting the repertoire of tactics employed by their leaders and members as they work toward the goal of bringing about a more progressive society and Democratic Party. It then explores how progressive groups, both explicitly and via internal and public discourse, 2) define what it means to be progressive, 3) articulate their relationship with the Democratic Party, and 4) assert those identities through political action.

**Strategies and Tactics**

Across California, there are numerous progressive organizations working to broaden the progressive movement and to achieve progressive change both in Democratic Party and in the whole of society. While these groups are extremely heterogenous in their political philosophies, memberships, discourses, and the activities they prioritize, there are certain strategies, and associated tactics, that are relatively universal across groups. All of these groups work to provide opportunities to leverage their membership toward political action, endorse and support progressive candidates, and aim to hold political leaders and candidates accountable. In order to pursue those strategies, they must also work to build capacity for pursuing progressive goals through the development of activists and leaders.

**Building Capacity for Progressive Action**

The concept of capacity building in politics refers to the process of increasing an organization or community’s ability to engage in collective action or other political activity. Local progressive groups do this by working to develop and train activists. These groups begin this process by serving as an entry point for new activists interested
in getting involved in local politics. They also work to educate their membership and their communities about progressive issues by building local progressive networks, and by developing political leaders.

**Serving as an Entry Point for New Activists**

As discussed throughout this dissertation, activists become activated in politics in a variety of ways. Just as the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party provides an entry point for newly elected progressive state-level delegates to understand and focus their activism within the state Party, local progressive groups provide opportunities for new activists at the local level. Through these groups, new activists gain experience in politics outside of the ephemeral context of electoral campaigns. Progressive groups also help recruit activists, activated by individual campaigns, into more consistent progressive activism. For example, a college student now involved in her campus Democratic club explained how, following an initial stint with a local congressional campaign in her hometown, she was moved to sustained activism, including her eventually run for assembly delegate, via her interaction with her local Party club:

“The [local club] really showed me the ropes. They want to mentor young people to help them get involved as much as possible because these systems can become so unacceptable for students and for people of color and all kinds of people who don’t have access to the kinds of resources that everyone does. They really pushed me to get involved with the Party as much as I could. I get emails from the Party. I’m sure I got an email about ADEM, too.” (Interview Quote)

Similarly, a Sanders supporter who entered Party politics in 2016 and ran for her county school board in 2018 explained how participation in local independent progressive groups eventually led to direct participation in Party politics.
I started to get involved in the Party really more on the outskirts… So it was like through Our Revolution I was part of that organization, in East County Indivisible, and then… I decided to run for local office. Post-2016 till today I’ve been really thinking about not just organizing by trying to get people to sign the petition, but needing to work within these systems, i.e. the Democratic Party, to ensure that what the masses want is represented.

Local groups encourage this new participation in a variety of ways. When potential new activists express interest, progressive groups aim to catalyze their interest by both welcoming them to the community and by engaging them via an upcoming activity or action. The San Diego Progressive Democratic Club makes a specific effort to engage with new activists before exposing them to the minutia of monthly club meetings. To that end, its leaders host a new-member orientation and social hour immediately preceding their monthly general membership meetings. Via these events, new recruits meet leaders one-on-one and then are introduced to other like-minded activists. At the meeting, they see first-hand how these activists are working to turn their progressive ideals into action. They can also volunteer for actions themselves—e.g. phone banking, door knocking, voter registration—as sign up sheets are passed around during the meeting. Similarly, Our Revolution Los Angeles (ORLA) asks new members to self-select into one of five activism teams (e.g. media, research, community relations) that correspond to the four suits, plus the joker, in a deck of cards. This selection also links activists directly to their internal social media. On ORLA’s digital organizing system, which utilizes the Slack platform, new members are automatically added to specifically-focused chat rooms, called channels, based on their selected activism team. Using digital media for internal organizing in this way is common among progressive activist organizations across California.
Most progressive groups use digital media to attract new activists and to help them feel immediately connected and engaged. These groups attract, motivate, organize, and leverage activists using a combination of public and private digital properties that vary from group to group. While most progressive activist groups maintain a formal website, in most cases these provide only basic information about bylaws, leaders, and events such as regularly scheduled general membership meetings. Surprisingly, foregoing a traditional website is not uncommon amongst progressive activist groups. Instead, the most common and up-to-date digital property amongst all groups, even those with their own websites, is the public-facing Facebook Page with an events calendar, photos, links, and posts about meetings, actions, and other membership updates. Many groups also maintain a private-facing means of communication for members, most often in the form of a Facebook group, although Slack workspaces, or email-listserves are also common. Participation in these groups typically requires an invitation or permission from a group administrator. As a result, the conversation and debate in these groups is much more candid than the discourse that takes place on public groups or pages. Adding new members to these groups helps connect new activists with veteran members quickly, and outside the formal agenda of general membership meetings. A 70-plus year-old activist from rural Northern California who participates in his local Democratic Club, Indivisible Chapter, and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) Chapter explained how DSA began using Slack after the organization saw an influx of members after the 2016 election:

“I resisted it at first - I come from an older organizing school. Most of my organizing was done with paper. Its very much electronic now. So, I
resisted Slack, but once I got on there its a very efficient means of communication through DSA. We have an environmental justice working group channel on Slack and then there’s a general and a random channel. They’re all under the DSA auspices. Its an extremely quick way to contact either the whole group or individuals about organizing.”

Indivisible chapters throughout the state also use private Facebook groups towards similar engagement goals. To keep these groups focused on linking local community members around shared progressive goals, these Facebook groups are limited to activists living within the boundaries of the Indivisible Group’s congressional district (e.g. the private Indivisible-33 Facebook group is limited to activists living in Congressional District 33 in Santa Monica). These groups are thus less likely to be overwhelmed by the intermittent influx of campaign operatives and volunteers organizing around state-level and national campaigns. That said, in many counties there are also umbrella Facebook groups (e.g. Indivisible Los Angeles and Indivisible Orange County) where activists can learn about and sign up for a variety of events—campaign work, social gatherings, protests, etc.—taking place over a wider geographic area. These catch-all groups can also serve a purpose of group cross-pollination, as leaders of Democratic Clubs or Our Revolution chapters often post their own events and meetings in these fora.

These various online and offline entry points all provide activists with opportunities to get involved with progressive groups and campaigns within their individual communities. The digital properties serve as entry points but also as a means to engage activists between meetings and actions. Also, because activist groups are more durable than campaigns, they are able to take on an extended role in the development of these newly onboarded activists, which they do by providing resources and running events aimed at educating their members on local and statewide issues.
Many progressive groups see their individual members as the primary vector through which they can communicate with their local communities. The president of the East Area Progressive Democrats of Los Angeles (EAPD) explained how the club aimed for its members to be “trusted ambassadors of facts” in their communities. To that end, most progressive groups devote a portion of their monthly meeting agendas to a progressive topic or speaker. Others organize standalone, issue-focused educational events for their membership and the local community. These events follow a similar model: where we are on the issue, how we got here, and how we move forward. For example, in January 2020, Our Revolution East Bay, in partnership with the Coalition for Police Accountability, hosted a “Criminal Justice Townhall” to educate their membership on both the history of the criminal justice system in the U.S. as well as potential avenues and actions for progressive reform. The panel included Bilal Ware, a historian from UC Santa Barbara, Chesa Boudin, the District Attorney of San Francisco, a Democrat who had been endorsed by numerous progressive groups, Jody Armour, a USC Professor focused on race and legal decision-making, and Pamela Price, a progressive candidate running in the technically non-partisan election to challenge the 12-year incumbent Alameda County District Attorney. This event contextualized the criminal justice system as a product of the country’s roots in slavery and white supremacy, and also explained the complex power structures and political economy of the current criminal justice system. In the end, they laid out the significant role that progressive district attorneys can play in bringing about change in the criminal justice system and encouraged their members to get involved in those campaigns.
Progressive groups around the state also hosted similar events on issues including, but not limited to, single payer healthcare, education, abortion rights, public transit, and strategies for fighting hate. The Harvey Milk LGBTQ Democratic Club of San Francisco used a portion of its April 2018 meeting to host a discussion with the co-founder of the SF Public Bank Coalition, an activist organization focused on garnering support for a San Francisco-based public bank. At the meeting, he highlighted detrimental aspects of the City’s relationship with the private banking sector and their incongruence with progressive priorities of racial, social, economic, and environmental justice. Such educational activities serve to provide activists with a baseline understanding of progressive goals, strategies and tactics, that can be utilized in progressive activity that extends beyond their local progressive group.

These events also serve as opportunities to engage or partner with other local progressive and issue-based groups with the aim of building durable progressive networks and engaging their communities. For example, the EAPD co-hosted an event, with several other Democratic clubs from the greater Los Angeles region, that included a screening of a documentary focused on the history of non-violent voting rights activism in the U.S. followed by a panel discussion drawing linkages to the history of the Antelope Valley in Northeastern Los Angeles. The educative events of progressive groups sometimes go beyond policy issues. For example, Indivisible of Auburn, located in the Sierra Foothills in Northern California, co-sponsored an event with Field Team 6, an activist group focused on strategically registering Democratic voters in “the most flippable states and districts” (Field Team 6, 2020). The event, entitled “Overcoming
Activist Fatigue,” aimed to provide activists with strategies for maintaining enthusiasm and energy throughout “the political adversity and general chaos we face everyday” (Indivisible Auburn, 2020). While some of these events link activists with community members outside their individual group, progressive groups also engage in more direct tactics aimed at network building and community organizing.

**Network Building and Community Organizing**

Consistent with previous research on Democratic Party activists in California (e.g. Larimore-Hall, 2014), this research showed that leaders and members of local progressive groups often wear more than one political hat and are involved in additional local groups focused more narrowly on issues such as the environment, education, and social justice. Some are also members of local county parties or hold local political offices. As such, local progressive groups often serve as a nexus for members of like-minded issue-based organizations to come together under the broad banner of “progressive.”

The president of the EAPD in Los Angeles explained how cross-network collaborative political actions—letter-writing campaigns, advocacy, or lobbying—toward shared goals helps “develop relationships of reciprocity, solidarity, and trust” that remain durable across local community networks. These latent networks can then be mobilized when political opportunities present themselves. For example, the networks that EAPD members formed in the mid-2010s around the fight for a statewide ban on single-use plastic bags is now able to be leveraged around an ongoing battle opposing the City of
Glendale’s plans to both expand the size of a local landfill or build a local gas plant within its boundaries.

Network building among progressive groups is also operationalized as the breaking down of silos and building of loose networks of groups. Several leaders of the Our Revolution-Wellstone Progressive Democrats of Sacramento described how they worked with other progressive organizations to form a local progressive alliance, a “fluid, countywide network” of progressive organizations, beginning with the creation of a public calendar to showcase as much local progressive activity as possible in one place. Similar networks have emerged in other areas of the state, including in the South Bay Area and Orange County.

**Applied Leadership Development**

While the above categories of capacity building—onboarding new activists, education, as well as network building and community organizing—are all tactics for training local activists and developing leadership, there are also more explicit ways in which progressive organizations work to build leaders. As activists participate in local progressive groups over time, certain individuals grow their leadership skills, often beginning with running small events and chairing committees. Such activists also often take on formal roles in the campaigns of local candidates who they initially connect with during group activities. In many cases, activists who develop as leaders within local progressive groups use the skills and confidence gained from their experience to launch their own bids for local office or for Party positions such as assembly delegate or county central committee member. The president of the EAPD explained how the group
encourages individual members to “cultivate their own network of influence…to reach a lot of the grassroots opinion leaders and community leaders in their districts.” One such leader started with the group, moved through committee chair roles within the group, and in 2022 is challenging a local Democratic Assemblymember for her seat. Numerous progressive groups also funnel activists into leadership development programs sponsored by the Party or by progressive organizations. For example, it is common for groups to encourage female activists with leadership potential into the Emerge California program, which until early 2017 was run by Kimberly Ellis, whose run for the Chair of the California Democratic Party was a major focus of Chapter 3. The Emerge program trains women to run for office and builds a network of women leaders across the state. An officer at SF Berniecrats explained the Emerge program itself, as well as how the number of progressives participating in the program increased after Ellis ran for Party chair.

“They get a lot of ‘libs’ (i.e. liberals) in there, they’ve got a lot of progressives. A lot more progressives have been signing up for Emerge since Kimberly ran for chair of the Party which I really think helped inspire a lot of folks. The program is amazing, they really get into the weeds of things for women. . . . Emerge is also very selective. They’re going to pick people who they think would be good candidates.”

Promoting the Emerge program, as well as other leadership development activities, helps build a bench of leaders that not only expand individual groups as they create new committees and programs, but also increase progressive representation as those activists pursue positions in public office and within the local and state Party structure.

All of the above activities—onboarding new activists, education, network building, and leadership development—serve to build and maintain collaborative groups
focused on progressive change. The next section focuses on how those groups leverage that capacity towards progressive political action.

**Mobilizing Effective Political Action**

The ultimate goal of the capacity building efforts described in the previous section is to mobilize effective political action on the part of those who have been trained. Progressive groups do this first by serving as a venue through which local progressive actors—candidates, issue-based organizations, campaigns, and other activists—can share mobilizing information and engage in volunteer recruitment. Second, they organize and cosponsor their own actions as determined and prioritized by their leaders and members. Third, they export their capacity beyond their individual locales to support progressive activity across their regions.

**Mobilizing Information and Recruitment Opportunities**

In many cases, progressive groups serve as a nexus through which campaigns can connect with and recruit like-minded volunteers. It is quite common for a progressive candidate or their surrogate, or a representative of an issue advocacy group, to approach group leaders in order to place a recruitment pitch onto the meeting’s agenda. In some cases, groups keep a standing item on their monthly agenda specifically for such recruitment. The San Diego Progressive Democrats, for example, opened their February 2020 meeting with a parade of local candidates who were all running in the impending primary, less than a month away. Each made their pitch and passed around clipboards so that activists could sign up for volunteer shifts and help to carry their organizing plans down the stretch of the campaign. Groups that endorse specific candidates will often have
a formal mechanism, via their website, social media, or listserve, for helping those candidates with ongoing recruitment from the membership. For example, in October 2020, Our Revolution Kern County used its Facebook group to help organize and recruit activists to make calls in support of its endorsed candidates for various local offices.

![Facebook event listing](image)

Figure 24: An event listing posted on Facebook by Our Revolution Kern County. The group organized a day of action in support of their endorsed candidate for mayor of the town of Arvin.

As mentioned above in the context of network building, many progressive alliance groups have constructed community calendars that maintain, for dozens of local progressive groups and candidates, information on canvassing, phone banking, protests, public meetings, and other activities. These allow many single-issue organizations, ranging from environmental groups to anti-fascist groups to animal rights groups, to inform progressive activists about their events. That said, progressive groups also
organize and co-sponsor their own actions in support of the issue priorities of their communities and members.

**Organizing and Co-Sponsoring Actions**

Local progressive groups also organize direct actions around issue priorities specific to their local communities. In many cases, these activities extend beyond electoral campaigns. For example, the EAPD engaged in numerous activities as part of its years-long opposition to a proposed expansion of a local landfill site in Glendale and then to a subsequent proposal to build a biofuel power plant at the same site. These activities included mobilizing members to participate in public comment processes, to attend local meetings, and to canvass communities to build public opposition to the projects. The group also crafted and distributed an online petition about the expansion, allowing them to demonstrate local opposition to the project as well as collect the names and information of like-minded supporters to use in future mobilization efforts. Other group-organized actions are more mundane, such as registering voters at local events, such as Farmers Markets and street fairs.

Such activities also provide opportunities to partner with and leverage the capacity of other local groups towards shared goals. For example, the President of an Indivisible Chapter in the San Fernando Valley explained how his group partnered with a local Democratic Club to send postcards to voters highlighting progressive candidates in advance of a major election. He explained:

“We write them, and the Club pays for the postage so we have postcard parties once a week. We write them and when the time comes, we’ll tell them how much we wrote and they write a check for the stamps. We use postcards with their information on it, so it works out well for them, too.”
Similar partnerships existed around progressive action in communities across the state. In May 2020 the Wellstone Democratic Renewal Club of the East Bay Area mobilized its membership, along with the followers of its Facebook page, to help the Berkeley Tenant’s Union and the California Renter’s Council organize a two-part action to block proposed changes to an upcoming bill in support of amending Berkeley’s Rent Stabilization Ordinance. They provided activists with a template for emailing the Berkeley Rent Control board and City Council in support of the measures, and then provided talking points for activists to use during the live public comment period.

Similarly, the co-branded group Our Revolution / Democratic Socialist of America of Santa Clarita mobilized its membership in November 2018 to attend a Santa Clarity City Council Meeting to oppose repeated efforts by the city police to both criminalize homeless people and cite street vendors operating in public spaces. Local events like these allow local activists to pursue progressive policies and social change in their own communities, but progressive groups also aim to provide ways for activists to work directly toward regional and national political goals.

**Mobilizing Local Activists to Influence National and Regional Politics**

Sometimes, particularly during the Democratic Primary election season when urban, highly Democratic areas have limited competitive races, progressive groups organize and export their volunteer capacity to contests taking place outside their local area. During the 2020 primary cycle, dozens of progressive organizations from throughout the greater Los Angeles region all organized canvassing trips to Northern Los Angeles and Ventura Counties to support Assemblywoman Christy Smith in her extremely
competitive race for U.S. Congressional District 25, just north of the San Fernando Valley. Their goal was to help maintain the Democratic Party’s majority in the U.S. House of Representatives. Exporting capacity in that way is not limited to congressional races. The EAPD strategically organized a volunteer trip to San Pedro, on the far side of West Los Angeles, to support a progressive candidate in her race for a seat on the board of the Los Angeles Unified School District. While the geographic area where that seat was based was well outside of the area covered by EAPD, a victory there would have changed the makeup of the board so that the majority would be held by those in opposition to charter schools, with implications for the entire geographic area covered by the LAUSD. Examples such as this reveal how progressive groups can strategically mobilize their membership toward complex political challenges that require ongoing engagement across election cycles.

Progressive groups also engage in political activism towards goals that go behind mobilizing and engaging volunteer labor toward relatively traditional forms of political organizing and collective action. They also engage in strategic activities and messaging to influence electoral outcomes and build support for their policy priorities.

**Increasing Public Pressure for Preferred Policies**

Local progressive groups aim to influence electoral outcomes and the behavior of leaders by engaging in strategic public communication with the goal of increasing public pressure for their preferred policies. They do this not only by publicizing their preferences on candidates and issues in advance of elections, but also by working to hold candidates, elected officials, and Party leaders accountable.
**Taking Public Positions on Candidates, Legislation, and Ballot Measures**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, local progressive groups work to both build their own activist capacity and also to engage with the broader progressive community. Via their internal and external networks, they work to disseminate strategic messages with the goal of influencing electoral campaigns and contests. The primary way they do this is via their **formal processes for endorsing candidates and ballot measures**. Just as they were when Wilson [@-Wilson1962] first described organized groups of “amateur democrats” in 1962, electoral endorsements remain a key function of local political groups. As in the ADEM elections that were discussed in Chapter 3, many trusted local progressive activists see it as their role to help their community with political decision-making towards the goal of advancing progressive causes. Endorsement processes also create incentives for elected officials to adopt positions that align with a group’s values and policy priorities. In addition, the interactions between members and candidates builds relationships that can be leveraged should a candidate get elected to office.

The endorsements made by progressive groups are not limited to candidate endorsements. In fact, the ease with which the California constitution allows interest groups in California to place statewide and local propositions on election ballots means that voters are often asked to vote on numerous issues that they may have little familiarity with. In reaching out to their communities, progressive groups have the opportunity to **influence persuadable voters who may be less flexible in the candidates they support, but remain open to information about the issues presented in ballot measures**. For example, the 2020 primary ballot in Los Angeles County featured an ultimately successful ballot measure that now allows the existing Sheriff Civilian
Oversight Committee to develop a plan for reducing jail populations and incarceration rates. Our Revolution Long Beach endorsed the measure, and also hosted a representative of the measure’s sponsor, Reform LA Jails, at its monthly meeting. Similarly, Our Revolution / Wellstone Democrats of Sacramento endorsed and held local and statewide phone banks in support of Proposition 21, an eventually failed ballot measured that would have increased rent control protections for tenants throughout the state.

Figure 25: An event listing on Facebook posted by Our Revolution / Wellstone Democrats of Sacramento. The group organized a phone bank in support of Proposition 21, which would have increased rent control protections for tenants throughout the state.

In the months preceding the 2020 primary, almost all progressive groups were engaged in endorsement processes. While the efficacy of a group’s endorsement depends on a lot of factors—its level of influence, the political makeup of the geographic area, etc.—the formal means through which endorsements are carried out is relatively consistent across groups. In most cases, a candidate seeking a progressive group’s
endorsement presents herself before the membership at a regularly scheduled meeting. Candidates generally seek endorsements from progressive groups for two reasons. First, they aim to tout the group’s support as evidence of both local activist support and also their own progressive credibility. Second, they hope that the endorsement will provide them with support—media outreach, fundraising opportunities, and volunteer labor—from the group’s leaders and members.

A request for endorsement generally begins with a pitch from the candidate, followed by a question-and-answer period, in which the membership queries the candidate about their background and issue positions. These interactions pressure candidates to articulate progressive positions and get them on the record so groups can hold them accountable in the future. In February 2020, I saw incumbent Congressman Alan Lowenthal, who had represented California’s 47th District (Long Beach, South Los Angeles, North Orange County) for the previous eight years, attend the monthly meeting of Our Revolution Long Beach (ORLB). At this point in the campaign, the group had already endorsed one of Lowenthal’s opponents, Peter Mathews, who had made repeated critiques of Lowenthal’s acceptance of money from companies and representatives of the oil and gas industry. Lowenthal took questions for fifteen minutes, during which ORLB’s membership questioned him about these accusations. Lowenthal did not deny the accusations but pointed out his 98% lifetime rating on climate and environmental issues from the League of Conservation voters. ORLB’s members also questioned Lowenthal, a Jewish man, on the specifics of his support for Israel. In the end, ORLB decided to
endorse both Lowenthal and Mathews in the primary, and Lowenthal in the subsequent general election, where he easily defeated his Republican challenger.

Many progressive activists want to find out how non-incumbent candidates will conduct themselves if elected. They want to feel confident that endorsed candidates they hold the line on progressive issues rather than make deals to satisfy donors or corporate-funded legislative colleagues. Some groups are even more explicit in communicating their priorities, asking candidates to complete questionnaires about their personal background, political past, and issue positions, in advance of being considered by the membership via a formal endorsement process. For example, the Richmond Progressive Alliance asks about a candidate’s previous runs for and experiences in political office, priorities if elected, and whether they plan to refuse corporate campaign contributions.

Once endorsements are made, they are communicated to the broader public via a variety of media. As discussed above, candidates themselves communicate endorsements they receive via their social media accounts as well as via printed campaign communication.
Most candidates also feature a list of endorsements on their website. When viewed in the aggregate, these endorsements can reveal a great deal about a candidate’s intraparty support. In a 2020 Los Angeles City Council race, incumbent David Ryu listed the endorsements of numerous labor unions, the LA County Democratic Party, numerous local chambers of commerce, and a list of Democratic Clubs, including but not limited to: New Frontier Democratic Club, Progressive Democrats of the Santa Monica Mountains, Valley Grassroots for Democracy, and Miracle Mile Democratic Club. His challenger, Nithya Raman, listed endorsements from the Working Families Party, Democratic Socialist of America Los Angeles, Feel the Bern Democratic Club, and East Valley
Indivisibles. While both candidates certainly had some progressive chops on display, an information-seeking voter looking at both of these lists, even with minimal knowledge of these groups, could quickly infer that Raman was challenging Ryu from the left.

Most progressive groups **communicate their endorsements digitally, sending voter guides to their mailing lists, and pushing them out via social media.** In some cases, they are also sent to physical mailing lists prior to the beginning of voting periods. For example, EAPD distributes their ballot guide via traditional mail, door-to-door canvasses, email, its website, and social media.

![Balloon](image)

**Figure 27:** A ballot guide produced by the East Area Progressive Democrats in advance of the November 2018 General Election.
Some organizations push their endorsements out through **posts in local blogs and the social media accounts of both partner organizations and individual members.** Endorsements can also be captured indirectly as earned media, as journalists writing about specific candidates or races will often list a candidate’s endorsements as part of a larger profile (e.g. Garofoli, 2021). Media tactics such as these allow groups to do much more than publicizing endorsements. They also use traditional and social media to carry out another one of their strategies, holding elected officials, Party leaders, and candidates accountable to the progressive grassroots.

**Holding Leaders Accountable to Grassroots Progressives**

One of the major ways in which progressive groups push for a more progressive society is by holding elected officials, Party leaders, and candidates accountable. Especially in strong Democratic areas, holding incumbents and Party leaders accountable is one of the primary ways to push for, and maintain, progressive change. The process of holding a political leader accountable manifests itself in different ways depending on the person’s relationship to the organization, to the progressive movement, and to the constituents the organization and leader claim to represent.

In some cases, political leaders have made commitments *directly* to a progressive group. As discussed in the previous section, the processes through which group’s endorse local candidates often involves the candidate engaging directly with the membership at its monthly meeting. In such cases, progressive activists can **point to these prior commitments and statements in attempts to hold leaders accountable.** For example, in a debate about rescinding the endorsement of Ammar Campa-Najjar in his run for
Congress in San Diego’s conservative 50th district, members of the San Diego Progressive Democratic Club pointed to his “double-talk” on true single-payer healthcare, or Medicare for All, after he began using the phrase “Medicare for all who want it” in public interviews. The president of the Club explained how its members aim to counterbalance the forces that push candidates to the Center in advance of electoral contests:

“When our candidates disappoint us, we do need to hold them accountable because that sometimes is the only thing that pushes them in the right direction. And unfortunately, that is just the case. It's human nature. That is politics. And we need to just own up to that reality and be the club that’s willing to hold the candidates accountable because I promise you, no other Dem clubs are doing that.”

Feel the Bern Democratic Club in Los Angeles explicitly states that, due to threats…from within the corporate Democratic Party…it’s endorsements will be withdrawn if once in office [candidates] no longer uphold the mission statement of the Club (Feel the Bern Democratic Club, n.d.). That said, this threat seems more rhetorical than practical, as endorsements carry little weight when candidates are not seeking to win an election, and standard practice is that a candidate reapply for an endorsement each election cycle.

To combat such tacks to the Center, progressive groups aim to get candidates on the record with the broader public. They often cosponsor debates and candidate forums, or have their membership attend local events to get candidates and elected officials to take public positions on specific issues. In another example from the San Diego area, three Indivisible groups—Indivisible Committed to Building a Fair Democracy, Indivisible San Diego Persist, and Hillcrest Indivisible—hosted 5 democrats competing for an open congressional seat in California’s 53rd district. They were asked
specific questions on topics including, but not limited to, racism, immigration, trade wars, education, as well as balancing both Party and constituent interests. The debate was covered by the Times of San Diego (K. Stone, 2020) and the San Diego Union Tribune (Smolens, 2020).

In some cases, progressive organizations hold incumbent Party leaders and elected officials accountable by **supporting, or threatening to support, challenger candidates with positions that hold more progressive positions**. In California, the top-two primary sometimes limits the efficacy of this option, though that does not stop progressive challengers from emerging in numerous local and statewide races. For example, in central Contra Costa County, a relatively moderate, though reliability Democratic, part of the San Francisco Bay Area, several unions and progressive groups supported Marisol Rubio in a challenge to incumbent Democratic State Senator Steve Glazer. Glazer was seen by many progressives as anti-union and angered many by voting against an increase in the statewide gasoline tax. Our Revolution Contra Costa County endorsed Rubio as “an uncorrupted fighter for California’s working families” (Our Revolution Bay Area, 2020).
Figure 28: An endorsement advertisement, posted on social media, by Our Revolution Contra Costa. The group supported Marisol Rubio against incumbent Democrat Steve Glazer in the 2020 Primary.

In a conventional primary, an activist Party base could have potentially helped propel Rubio from this primary to the general election, where the County’s moderate-left leaning political demographics could quite possibly have led to her winning the seat. At minimum, her presence would have forced Glazer to the left in order to compete for the votes of progressive Democrats. In the top-two system, Rubio, Glazer, and a local Republican were competing for both Republican and Democratic voters during the
primary, with Rubio ultimately coming in third behind Glazer and the Republican. Had she made it to the general election, Republican voters with no candidate in the race would have easily put Glazer, the more centrist Democratic, over the top. Primary races often play out like this across the state. As such, **some challenges from the left are largely symbolic, or serve as political opportunities to pressure incumbents by activating their communities via both local organizing and media activism.** In many cases, challenging incumbents is part of a process of, what the president of EAPD called, “building a pipeline of well-trained leaders.” For example, Fatima Iqbal-Zubair was endorsed by Our Revolution chapters in Los Angeles and Long Beach, as well by the national Our Revolution organization. She also garnered the support of the Los Angeles-based Feel the Bern Democratic Club and other local progressive groups. While she lost to incumbent Mike Gipson in the November 2020 general election, she has subsequently raised her profile within the Democratic Party, successfully running for Vice Chair of the Progressive Caucus at the state level and working to educate potential candidates on campaign strategy. She plans to face Gipson again in the 2022 election and continue to press him on progressive issues.

Given the limited opportunities for progressive groups to defeat incumbent Democrats at the ballot box, they most often turn to **educating their communities about their elected officials using both in-person events as well as a combination of online and traditional media.** This activism can include group members reaching out in-person or online to educate constituents and other local leaders about the incumbent’s problematic priorities imploring them to share content online or contact that leader...
directly. Leaders and members of these organizations also write op-eds, and engage on social media, local radio, television, and blogs.

The initial formation of the 1100-member EAPD, now the largest Democratic Club in California, took place around a collective need to hold local Democrats accountable. The Club was founded in 2014 around a lack of representation in the East Area of Los Angeles that became apparent during the context of the political battle over the state’s ban on single-use plastic bags. In May of the previous year, State Senator Kevin de Leon, a self-proclaimed progressive Democrat, had, along with two other Los Angeles-area state senators, vetoed legislation that would have established a statewide ban on single-use plastic bags. The president of the EAPD, explained:

“The [ban] had some of its earliest roots in advocacy from the communities on the east side of Los Angeles. . . . And was more popular here even than the Los Angeles Dodgers. And it was killed [in the legislature] by three lawmakers purporting to represent this area. There was no outcry in the media or at the community level over that maneuver. . . . That was what I call the clarion wake up call that there needed to be a presence within the Democratic Party that would hold law makers accountable because they felt that they could make a decision like that with impunity, with absolutely no pushback or accountability from grassroots Democrats for whom this was a passionately held priority.”

The Club’s members saw the need to hold de Leon accountable as a Democrat, a progressive; and as a representative of a place where single-use plastic bags were causing significant environmental problems. He further explained:

“…the Los Angeles River runs through these communities…[as] one of the unifying geographical and ecological cracks…subject to a hundreds of millions of dollars revitalization effort whose chief culprit, when it comes to blight…was throw away plastic bags. How can you be killing off an effort to remove the single worst culprit in blight while the government is being asked for the bill for the revitalization of the ecosystem and members of the public and grassroots Democrats [are] fervently pushing for and wanting to enact a plastic bag ban similar to what more than a
hundred municipalities around the state of California already had implemented?”

Following the Club’s launch in May of 2014, they sought to be a vehicle for advocacy, with the plastic bag ban as their first goal. Via op-eds, posts in local blogs and social media, as well as other earned media, the Club revealed that the local lawmakers opposing the ban, including de Leon, had accepted campaign donations from out-of-state plastic bag makers. The Club wrote public letters—posted on social media and sent to local media outlets—to the Los Angeles City Council urging them to push de Leon and other local representatives to support the plastic bag ban as part of their legislative program.

In August 2014, the State Senate, with supportive votes from de Leon and other local representatives, ended up passing the first statewide ban on single use plastic bags in the nation. EAPD’s leaders saw the Club play a specific role in that victory by holding de Leon accountable to his constituents who supported the ban, to the Democratic Party’s environmental platform, and to the progressive value that policy should not be influenced by corporations to the detriment of citizens.

This skepticism about corporate financing of campaigns is an example of a value, common across progressive groups, that not only influences each group’s choice of strategies and tactics, but also contributes to the formation of that group’s collective progressive identity. The next section will explore the interplay between a group’s collective identity, how it defines progressivism, its discursive strategies for situating itself in reference to the Democratic Party, and the selection of strategies and tactics its leaders and members deploy towards political action.
Local Progressive Groups and Identity

At the University of California, Berkeley on January 11, 2020, Kacey Carpenter of Our Revolution East Bay (OREB), a local activist group spun off from Bernie Sanders’ 2016 run for president, addressed the statewide convention of the California Progressive Alliance. After telling the several-hundred audience members his personal story of political activation that began with Sanders’ first presidential campaign, he predicted that the 2020 California Presidential primary—with its 415 convention delegates—less than two months away, would be the moment when Sanders would garner an unsurmountable delegate lead and eventually become the Democratic Party’s presidential nominee. He further explained:

“What we’re doing is training everyone about how not only to support Bernie, who we’ve endorsed of course, but also down-ballot candidates including Shahid [Buttar] and Marisol [Rubio] who you heard today and many many others. . . . [The Sanders campaign] has identified over 10,000”Bernie-strong supporters” in its database that are registered as “No-Party-Preference. So, we need to do everything we can to reach out to those folks that did not #DemEnter and let them know that now is the moment for us to really elect Bernie and get this progressive movement underway.”

Carpenter’s statement is notable for several reasons. It highlights his group’s use of two of the tactics outlined in the previous section—endorsing candidates and mobilizing activists to register voters—to push a progressive agenda both within the Party and the electorate. It also exemplifies how the manner in which an organization deploys strategies and tactics serves as a means to express and maintain its collective identity.

In the case of the endorsements, Carpenter’s group had endorsed two self-identified progressives challenging incumbent Congressional Democrats. The first, Marisol Rubio, was a straightforward attempt to help mobilize support for a progressive
Democrat in a district held by a moderate incumbent, making clear that the group was not one that would vote for any Democrat regardless of policy positions. In the case of Shahid Buttar, the tactic was deployed symbolically. The seat he was competing for was occupied by Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, and was located in San Francisco proper, outside the area officially covered by OREB. As such, the endorsement did not serve to help OREB members or those in the East Bay progressive community make a decision about candidate support, but instead defined the group in opposition to the Democratic Party “establishment” via its public rebuke of Pelosi.

The voter registration efforts, focused on expanding the universe of primary voters by pursuing “No Party Preference” or “Decline to State” voters, is also typical of the current wave of anti-establishment progressive groups in California. The predilection for pursuing these voters is common among Sanders-supporting activists and the organizations they are drawn to, as many of them, including Carpenter, were similarly unaffiliated with the Party prior to being mobilized in 2016. For them, activating voters who are disillusioned with the major parties is essential to the “political revolution” Sanders called for in both his 2016 and 2020 campaigns. Indeed, many of them had decided to #DemEnter the Party, both to vote for Sanders and to support his policy priorities via activism aimed at the Democratic Party. Given their own identity as somewhat tentative Democrats, they are drawn to the strategy of pursuing potential supporters who may share a common worldview, including a similar hesitancy about the Democratic Party.
The above examples depict how organizations develop and maintain their collective identity through not only the combination of strategies and tactics they choose to deploy, but also through the discourse they use both to define themselves and to discuss these strategic and tactical choices. In this way, these groups distinguish themselves in terms of how they view themselves as progressives, what they want to achieve, and how they want to achieve it. New activists are then drawn to groups whose collective identity matches up with their own worldview and understanding of politics. This is an iterative and ongoing process of group negotiation, as the collective identity of these groups influences their political goals and the tactics they choose to deploy towards those goals, and their political goals and tactics reflect back on their collective identity.

This section digs into these dynamics, exploring how groups, through a combination of action, explicit statements, as well as via internal and public discourse, articulate their collective identity, including their relationship with the Democratic Party, and assert that identity through political action.

Next, this section introduces two typologies—Party-First and Party-Second groups—for classifying and examining progressive activist groups based on the differences in both how they define progressivism and also the selection of and discourses surrounding the tactics they employ for political action.

It begins by building on the previous section’s discussion of strategies and tactics by exploring an additional strategic practice common to progressive groups: defining progressivism. While the selection of strategies and tactics explored in the previous section all contribute to the development and maintenance of a group’s collective identity, these groups articulate and assert their collective identity through political action, and this section delves into how they do so through a combination of action, explicit statements, and discourse.
identity, the way in which a group defines progressivism is, on its own, directly related to identity. The strategies for defining progressivism differ from those discussed above in that it they are most often *implicit* strategies, as groups rarely consciously set a goal to define progressivism. And yet, the practice of doing so is endemic to progressive groups. This discussion is thus structured in parallel to the previous examination section, presenting a universal repertoire of strategies and tactics, of how organizations articulate and negotiate their conception of progressivism for its members, the Party, and the public. It then examines the distinct differences in discourse that exists between these two typologies, related to how these groups present themselves in reference to the Democratic Party and the broader progressive movement. Lastly, it explores how these differences manifest themselves in the manner and choice of tactics deployed by these groups towards progressive change.

**Party-First and Party-Second Groups**

As the previous sections have made clear, there are similarities across progressive groups both in terms of how they use the term progressive to define themselves in relation to the Democratic Party and the repertories of tactics they use for political action. Indeed, all of the local progressive groups discussed in this dissertation pursue political, societal, and policy change aimed at strengthening the progressive movement and bringing about a more progressive society. Not to mention, because of the two-party system and the big tent of the Democratic Party, there is a certain oppositional aspect to *any* group that defines itself as progressive and engages in Democratic Party politics. Members of such groups strive not only to push the Democratic Party to the left on key policy issues
through their activism, but also to modify its practices, rules, and structures towards a
more democratic institution that is accountable to grassroots activists. And yet there are
also distinctions between these groups in terms of how they relate to the Party. While one
might be tempted to categorize these groups as either “inside the Party”—the formally
chartered Democratic Clubs—or “outside the Party”—all other groups—, that duality
ignores distinct political philosophies and practices that do not map onto the inside
vs. outside duality. Alternatively, progressive groups can be better understood using two
new typologies, “Party-First” and “Party-Second” progressive groups, introduced in this
section. This conceptualization allows for examination of the differences in how these
groups construct their identity based on their relationship to the Party, how they define
progressivism, the discourses that surround their activism, their networks of movement
allies, and their choice of strategies and tactics for achieving their political goals.

**Party-First Groups**

At their core, Party-First groups are comprised of Democratic Party members
championing a progressive agenda for society and a reformist agenda for the Democratic
Party. Party-first groups are committed to the Democratic Party as the primary vehicle for
progressive political change. The president of the EAPD explained how his group aims
to:

lead and help guide the learning process of local Democrats about the
value of being involved as Democrats and being strategically, more
viscerally, involved with Democratic politics. It is the vehicle for shaping
policy and for determining the quality of governance, upward from our
communities, a phrase we often use. This is about exerting leverage
upward from our communities to shape the direction of the Democratic
Party and of capital D democratic governance (Interview Quote).
Further, these groups subscribe to an incremental theory of political change, working to change the system through electoral activism for candidates and ballot measures, community organizing, policy advocacy, and working to increase progressive representation in local and state Party structures.

Party-First groups include those “Democratic Clubs” that are officially chartered by their respective County Democratic Parties, as well as local chapters of Progressive Democrats of America (PDA). In some cases, a single group can be affiliated with multiple organizations. For example, the Progressive Democrats of the Santa Monica Mountains is chartered by both the Los Angeles County Democratic Party and PDA. This category also includes several independent local progressive groups as well as local chapters of Indivisible. Despite the fact that Indivisible chapters typically lack any mention of the Democratic Party on their websites or literature, these chapters regularly work collaboratively with leaders and members of Party-chartered clubs to pursue shared progressive goals. This synergy has increased as Indivisible groups have expanded from their initial mandate—resisting the Trump Agenda—to also include pursuing progressive goals at the local, state, and national level.

**Party-Second Groups**

Party-second groups are comprised of Democrats, as well as third-party and unaffiliated activists, seeking a more progressive society via a combination of social movement tactics combined with targeted activism at and within the Democratic Party. Members of Party-Second groups are more heterogeneous in their commitment to the Democratic Party as an institution. But they collaborate around a shared, albeit sometimes reluctant,
agreement that the Party is the playing field on which most progressive battles are currently fought. Though these groups do engage in political activism toward incremental change, they also criticize it as an insufficient means to achieve political change on its own. Their theory of change tracks well with the multi-pronged “inside-outside” strategy popularized by Michael Harrington, founder of the Democratic Socialists of America. An officer of the SF Berniecrats explained:

“I think [Democratic Party] electoralism has its part to play. I don’t think the left would be as big as it was if electoralism didn’t work. Like if Bernie didn’t run for president, DSA wouldn’t be as big as it is, the left movement wouldn’t be as big as it is . . . . I think you can have immediate impacts on things, but in the long term if we want to make real change in our country we have to recognize that electoralism can only go so far.

He further outlined the need to supplement Democratic Party politics with community-based “left movement building,” and other activities, many of which are common to a variety of progressive groups.

Included in this typology are local chapters of Our Revolution (OR) as well as certain local chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), such as Our Revolution East Bay and Our Revolution Contra Costa County. Some DSA Chapters, such as DSA East Bay, are excluded from actively “reject[s] attempts to take over the Democratic Party.” As with Party-First groups, there are some instances where Party-Second groups have multiple affiliations. For example, the Santa Clarita OR chapter is also a DSA Chapter. Party-Second groups also include local “Progressive Alliance” groups modeled after the California Progressive Alliance and Richmond Progressive Alliance, which are discussed in more detail below. Like Indivisible, Progressive Alliances often eschew mention of the Democratic Party, and their leaders even dismiss
the idea that they seek change via the Democratic Party. That said, it is my observation that many of its members use it as a vehicle for pursuing change within and via the Democratic Party. A member of the San Jose Progressive Alliance explained:

“[The Alliance] is a mixed bag just like any non-Democratic Party event. But I do know that some of the Democratic Party people running for office will show up and speak and they have many people there who are engaged and happy to have them there.”

The above examples reveal the nuances that exist in the ways progressive groups conceive of themselves in reference to the Democratic Party and point to a need to move beyond the inside-outside conception of party activism. Understanding groups as Party-First and Party-Second allows us instead to consider formal affiliation with the Party as only one of several factors that distinguish progressive groups from one another. Another feature that distinguishes Party-First groups from Party-Second groups is how they define progressivism for their members, the Party, and the public.

**Defining Progressivism**

At the local level, there are so many groups that fall under the banner of progressive, and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, they often choose from a relatively universal repertoire of strategies and tactics. And yet, there are subtle differences in how Party-First and Party-Second groups differentiate themselves from one another in the broad sphere of progressive groups. These groups engage in numerous implicit strategies and tactics that define progressivism and by extension, construct and express their collective identity for their membership, the public, and the Party. These strategies include defining progressivism via their mission, mandate and issue priorities, organizational rules, norms, and structure, media activism, and their endorsements.
Mission, Mandate, and Issue Priorities

Though progressive groups engaged in Democratic politics rarely explicitly define progressive or progressivism, their decision to identify as “progressive Democrats” or to have “progressive” as integral to their group’s mission means that how a group defines itself is by extension how they define what it means to be progressive. Groups define themselves most deliberately via their mission statements, bylaws, and profiles found on their websites, Facebook pages, and other media properties. Via these media, groups typically define progressivism as some combination of values (e.g. economic, racial, social, and environmental justice), political philosophies, as well as a skepticism of institutional and corporate power. For example, the San Diego Progressive Democratic Club, in their bylaws lays out the specific values that inform their progressive vision for society:

“We envision a society where people work together for human rights, equal economic opportunity, social justice, Party reform, and environmental restoration & justice. We work to create a government for and by the people, by getting dark money out of politics and expanding grassroots participation in the political process” (San Diego Progressive Democratic Club, 2020a).

This emphasis on grassroots participation is common across both Party-First and Party-Second groups. San Luis Obispo Progressives also include “providing a constructive role for volunteers in Democratic politics” (SLO County Progressives, n.d.) as one of the stated purposes of their club.

Groups also define progressivism by communicating specific issue priorities. Progressivism is thus defined by support for policies related to issues such as affordable housing, immigration reform, and environmental justice. That said, many issue priorities
are commonplace among the listed concerns of progressive organizations and even among broader Democratic Party organizations. For example, Indivisible SF’s stated issue priorities—strengthening democracy, healthcare for all, economic justice, climate justice, racial and gender justice, and reproductive rights—are standard fare for many Democratic groups and candidates nationwide. Likewise, it would be hard to find a left-of-center organization in California that doesn’t support two of EAPD’s priorities: women’s rights and high-quality education. However, the decision by a progressive group to highlight certain key issues can reveal where its progressive boundaries fall compared to other groups and the broader Democratic Party.

For example, the San Diego Progressive Democrats has a specific “Progressive Values” page on their website that lists twelve policy priorities, ranging from “Healthcare for All” (as opposed to Single Payer or Medicare for All) to “Money Out of Politics” to “Gender Equality” (San Diego Progressive Democratic Club, 2020b). The issue priorities of SLO Progressives reveals subtle differences that reflect its origins in the Sanders movement, including a call for open primaries, opposition to trade deals including the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and support for Single Payer Medicare for All (SLO County Progressives, n.d.) Our Revolution Kern County, a Party-Second group, presents a more radical set of priorities, calling for Single Payer Healthcare, the abolishment of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (I.C.E.), and support for a “Robin Hood Tax,” a nickname for a levy on financial transactions popularized in Europe and the United States by the Occupy Movement in the early 2010s (Our Revolution Kern County, 2020).
**Organizational Rules, Norms, and Structure**

The *formal and informal rules* of progressive organizations also serve to define progressivism by setting the boundaries of their progressive discourse. For example, the Progressive Democrats of the Santa Monica Mountains incorporated into its bylaws a requirement that candidates and elected officials requesting to address the club first publicly pledge support for single payer healthcare in the form of “Medicare for All.”

Informal rules or norms also serve similar purposes. For example, some groups prioritize debates between Democrats rather than between Democrats and Republicans, meaning that the boundary of the debates only focus on intraparty differences rather than reflecting the full list of concerns candidates face from the entire electorate. Party-Second groups are much more likely to deprioritize or eschew involvement in debates between Democrats and Republicans.

Other groups define progressivism through the crafting of their organizational structure and decision-making processes. This includes both their own internal democratic practices and the role of individual members, which range from traditional to more radically democratic, as well as their array of committees and formal partners. For example, the organizational structure of the Wellstone Democratic Renewal Club allows for individual committees to meet independently and determine future activities independent of the general membership. These communities focus on community organizing (e.g. Block by Block Organizing Committee; East Bay Communities for Action Committee) and specific policy issues (e.g. Education Committee; Racial and Criminal Justice Committee). By contrast, the SF Berniecrats committees are process-oriented (Endorsement Committee; Outreach Committee), with actions and decision-
making requiring by way of a comprehensive form of internal democracy that involves presentation and approval of actions by the general membership. Internal practices, such as these, are important for creating a collective identity for an organization’s members that aligns with the forms of democracy they desire from the broader political system.

Thus far, this section has focused on strategies and tactics for defining progressivism that have limited reach beyond that of a group’s individual membership or an interested party perusing the group’s digital presence. These groups, and their individual members, also define progressivism for broader audiences as they engage in media activism.

**Defining Progressivism via Media Activism**

As discussed in the previous section, progressive groups engage in media activism for a variety of reasons, including to publicize their endorsements, critique elected officials and Party leaders, and promote progressive activities. This activism also serves as a means for them to publicly articulate their definition of progressivism directly, and also as a function of their support or critique of political leaders or news events.

On a rare occasion, a media outlet might provide a group with the opportunity to **explicitly define progressivism**. Following the 2020 presidential election, Spectrum News 1 in Los Angeles granted an interview to Hans Johnson, president of the EAPD and captioned it “What does it mean to be progressive?” In the interview, he explained that progressive candidates “responsiveness to the urgency of the issue they prioritize, including homelessness…healthcare access…and protection of public schools.” He then went on to highlight noteworthy progressive victories by candidates and on ballot
measures. Tactics like this, including the highlighting of specific progressive activity, and critique of non-progressive activity, is the most common form of media activism by progressive groups. Similarly, the president of the Richmond Progressive Alliance, a Party-Second group, in an interview with Jacobin magazine, defined progressivism as “as anything or anyone that has a predilection for the poor, the working class, and for historically marginalized communities, and that works to actively elevate, and not further harm, these communities. This applies to issues, individuals, organizations, legislation, and overall narrative” (Socialist Forum, 2018)

**Highlighting progressive successes** is one of the ways in which local groups can use both national and local news to help them define progressivism. For example, during the 2020 primaries, numerous groups posted on social media about incumbent Senator Ed Markey’s victor over challenger Joe Kennedy III in Massachusetts. Because Markey had authored the Green New Deal, highlighting his win both allowed progressive groups to point to the Green New Deal as a progressive priority, but also to showcase a progressive win over a well-funded member of a long-standing Democratic Party political dynasty.

By the same token, groups also **critique policy positions, legislation, votes, or other activity they see as anti-progressive.** For example, the Progressive Democrats of Orange County posted on Facebook a scathing critique of local Democratic Congressman David Price’s vote in favor of the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act. Their critique not only highlighted the anti-war priorities of their Democratic club, but also highlighted other issues through a list of specific concessions Price should have sought in exchange for his vote, including a reversal of the transgender ban in the military, and
safeguards to limit Trump’s power to declare war with Iran. These critiques can extend beyond policy to other progressive values, such as the importance of communication between politicians and grassroots activists. This was apparent in early 2017 when Senator Dianne Feinstein was publicly chastized by a coalition of over 30 Party-First and Party-Second groups in the Bay Area for refusing to hold town halls with constituents. The coalition, which counted among its members two-dozen Indivisible chapters and numerous other local progressive groups, scheduled a town hall for Feinstein in February 2017. When Feinstein did not attend, they publicized the event on social media as “Feinstein Empty Chair Town Hall + Activism Fair.” Attendees heard from local progressive leaders, recorded comment and question messages for Feinstein, and were presented with mobilization information for future local activist events. The empty chair town hall was covered by media outlets including, but not limited to the Berkeley Daily Planet, the East Bay Express, Mother Jones, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Huffingtonpost. Two months later, Feinstein scheduled town halls in the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

**Public critiques are also carried out by individual group members, often via print and online op-eds or social media.** For example, in September 2018, an activist from the EAPD wrote an op-ed in the Los Angeles Daily News explaining the tactics he and other activists successfully deployed to prevent State Assemblyman Miguel Santiago from “gutting” the state’s impending net neutrality bill. In the article, he pointed to Santiago’s acceptance of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from ATT and other telecommunications companies (Chagoya, 2018). Some activist critiques are more
tongue-in-cheek, such as the online response activists had to former president Barack Obama’s November 2019 interview, in which he warned in an interview that the Democratic Party’s “activist base” could limit the Party’s success in 2020. Activists nationwide, including those from California progressive groups, engaged in a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #TooFarLeft. Activists tweeted statements embracing the accusation and pointing to their progressive priorities. An activist member of several East Bay Area progressive groups wrote “I’m #TooFarLeft [because] I believe Public Education, Healthcare, and Corrections should be not-for-profit.”

The most public way in which groups define progressivism is via their choice of endorsements. An endorsement serves not only as a statement of a group priority in a particular race, but also as an attempt to map those priorities onto candidates who often hold diverse policy positions that may not uniformly correspond with those of the endorsing group. For progressive groups, an endorsement itself communicates aspects of a group’s definition of progressivism. For example, despite both being endorsed by the Courage California progressive voter guide in the 2020 race for a San Francisco State Senate seat, incumbent Scott Wiener saw much less support from progressive groups compared to his opponent, Jackie Fielder. Fielder’s campaign highlighted the need to include more marginalized groups in policy making processes. She also criticized Wiener’s acceptance of campaign contributions from corporations and his legislative attempts to increase the housing supply in California as too rooted in market-based mechanisms that would benefit developers. That said, Wiener’s record in the State Senate was what many would classify as extremely progressive. Given their similar policy
positions, it is clear that the progressive groups that endorsed Fielder felt that her definition of progressivism resonated with their own. In its endorsement, the progressive group Bay Rising Action wrote:

“Jackie Fielder is a Latina and Native American candidate who is not afraid to challenge the corporate agenda and lead with a bold vision for California. Although she can’t match her opponent’s funding from big corporate donors, she has real progressive values and a strong ground game (Bay Rising Action, 2020).”

The endorsement process also acts to communicate the group’s definition of progressivism to candidates in two ways - explicitly via the question-and-answer period or questionnaire, but also implicitly, as any strategic candidate will do research and work to articulate progressive positions in a way that speaks to the group’s membership on its own terms. For example, at the January 2020 meeting of the Progressive Democratic Club of (central) Los Angeles, Fatima Iqbal-Zubair highlighted her work in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles and her support for the Green New Deal, both state priorities of the Club. But more importantly, she spoke to a theory of change that its members identified with:

“I’m not here for superficial change that’s gonna get incremental change, I’m here for real, systemic change. I have always spoken truth to power. I’m the only candidate here who has taken the no fossil fuel pledge and the only candidate here who has taken the homes guarantee pledge because I believe every person deserves a home.”

Some groups aim to force those seeking endorsements to make clear that they align with the group’s uncompromising political values. To that end, Our Revolution Wellstone Progressive Democrats of Sacramento, which walks a line between Party-First and Party Second, as part of their endorsement questionnaire, explicitly asks those seeking endorsement if they have “ever endorsed a Republican.” Tensions like these are common
to the discourse surrounding group endorsements, as the relationship between identity and progressive endorsements is extremely complex.

The above section has outlined the repertoire of strategies and tactics employed by progressive groups to articulate their definition of progressivism. Via these activities, individual groups construct, express, and maintain their own collective identity based in part on their ongoing discourse around what it means to be progressive. The rest of this chapter looks at group activity that more clearly reveals distinctions between Party-First and Party-Second groups. It next examines progressive groups’ internal and external discourses, and their deployment of strategies and tactics.

**Discourse: Differences in the nature of opposition**

Comparing organizational discourses across progressive groups reveals differences in how Party-First and Party-Second groups situate themselves in reference to the Democratic Party and how they view their role in party politics and the progressive movement. These differing organizational discourses of Party-First and Party-Second groups can be understood by examining them across three themes: inside vs. outside, big tent vs. ideological purism, and Party critique.

**Inside vs. Outside**

Despite their progressive agenda, Party-first groups are committed philosophically to the Democratic Party. As such, there is little discussion within these groups about how outside they have to be in order to maintain credibility. There are less explicit discourses around being Democrats because they simply are Democrats. This is clear in the
explanation given by Hans Johnson, president of the East Area Progressive Democrats, in describing the founding of their club in 2014:

“The reality is that Democrats are the party of governance here at the local level, at the County level and at the state level in California. And part of the initial framing for the value of the club was that the largest base of Democrats in Los Angeles is here on the East Side.”

Other Party First groups, including many local Indivisible chapters also signal their insider status despite not formally being inside the Party. Most often, this is simply through the use of the first-person plural pronouns—we, us, our—when referring to the Democratic Party.

By contrast, many Party-Second groups, despite engaging in electoral activism for Democratic candidates and pushing their members to pursue roles in the Party structure, refer to the Party as a separate entity. For example, Gayle McLaughlin, founder of the Richmond Progressive Alliance and later the statewide California Progressive Alliance, regularly says that her organizations “support the good fight inside the Democratic Party.” Other Party-second groups often present their members as outside insurgents, members of the “political revolution” who are coming in to “take over the Democratic Party”.

Regardless of these differences in how members of these groups discursively situate themselves in reference to the Party, they are to some degree strategically participating in the Party’s internal structure—e.g. via ADEM elections—and its public electoral processes. In doing so, these groups differentiate themselves in how they relate to others within the Democratic Party as well as how they define their adversaries.
**Big Tent vs Purists**

In the process of engaging in the Democratic Party, members of progressive groups have to determine how they understand and interact with others across the Party’s broad ideological spectrum. Examining the specific discourses within progressive groups on the topic of less progressive party members reveals differences in the degree to which Party-First and Party-Second progressive groups discursively separate themselves from others within the Party.

In terms of major political institutions, the *primary* adversary of Party-First groups is the Republican Party. For example, the Wellstone Democratic Renewal Club, centered in the Oakland/Berkeley region of the San Francisco Bay Area, lists as one of its goals as: “elect[ing] Democrats to all offices up and down the ballot to end the right-wing stranglehold of our government in Congress.” Party-Second groups regularly present two adversaries, the Republican Party and “the Democratic establishment,” or some variation thereof.

In electoral contests, fissures often exist around the candidates supported by progressive groups versus those supported by those toward the center of the Democratic Party. That said, these fissures remain more durable between elections for Party-second groups than for Party-first groups. For example, Party-first groups are more likely to celebrate when centrist Democrats defeat Republicans in electoral contests or when they pass progressive policy proposals over Republican opposition. For example, the EAPD praised Governor Gavin Newsom on Facebook, Twitter, and via its email list after he signed a bill regulating the extraction of groundwater located beneath the Mojave Desert, an issue the Club and environmental activists had long pushed for at the state level. The
Club also highlighted, early in Biden’s presidency, his executive orders on gun control and his support for an Amazon union vote in Georgia. Similarly, the Progressive Democrats of the Santa Monica Mountains commended Biden’s choice of a seasoned diplomat—rather than an adversarial hawk—to serve as the primary U.S. envoy to Iran. Despite this affable public support from Party-first groups, observing group meetings reveals disagreement and controversy about the appropriate timing and level of support for non-progressives.

By contrast, it is difficult to find a positive comment about Newsom or Biden in the social media accounts of Party-Second groups. Following Biden’s election most group’s immediately hosted discussion group’s about, or posted strategies for, holding Biden accountable to the progressive movement. In the early months of his administration, Our Revolution East Bay criticized the Biden administration on several topics, including a U.S. backed attack on Iranian Militants in Syria, and what they saw as a failure to hold the line on unemployment benefits in its negotiations with Congress over the February 2021 COVID relief package. In its public online platforms, the Democratic Socialists of America San Diego only mentioned Biden once after he received the Democratic nomination, when they made clear he would not receive their endorsement. This variation in how groups engage across the Party also manifests itself in the breadth of critiques made at the Party as an institution.

**Scope of Critique**

Party-first groups are more likely to engage in a narrower critique focused on specific bad actors or problems. In the example of Kevin de Leon’s opposition to the state plastic bag
ban discussed above, the East Area Progressive Democrats pointed specifically to De Leon and other local legislators as at odds with progressive values of environmentalism and campaign finance and highlighted those Democrats at the Los Angeles city and county levels who supported similar bans.

Party-Second groups are more apt to make systemic critiques of the Party as inherently “capitalist” or “corrupt.” Progressive failures by individual elected officials and Party leaders simply serve as additional evidence that the Party as it stands is broken and wins by progressives happen because of like-minded activists and in spite of Party leaders and elected officials. For example, the 2020 Los Angeles City Council race saw incumbent David Ryu, who had been endorsed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Hillary Clinton, and Mayor Eric Garcetti, defeated by Nathya Raman, who was endorsed by Our Revolution and the Democratic Socialists of America. Raman connected with these groups by actively avoiding seeking the endorsement of the Los Angeles Democratic Party, calling it a political machine “designed to keep incumbents in power.” These groups touted her win over those who had “received their marching orders” from the establishment.

This is not to say that Party-First groups do not make systemic critiques, but even those tend to have a narrower, reformist element to them. For example, broad, recent critiques of the Los Angeles County and State Democratic Party are often linked to former chair Eric Bauman. Party-First groups often refer to him as “Boss Bauman,” invoking the imagery of early-to-mid 20th century party bosses and the endemic corruption, including favoritism, harassment, and patronage, known to have plagued
party organizations of that era. One local leader referred to Party leaders in the post-Bauman era as “Bauman’s minions,” calling out the lack of accountability for those who enabled both his unethical political activity as well as the serial sexual harassment and assault that eventually forced his resignation.

Looking at these group discourses through the lens of Party-First and Party-Second is important because we can learn about how they conceive of progressivism and how they understand their relationship to the Party. It also allows us to explore how these identities are reflected in their choice of tactics aimed at achieving progressive change.

**Identity, Strategies and Tactics**

The preceding sections have thus far outlined the difference between Party-First and Party-Second groups based on a combination of their affiliation with the Democratic Party and how they situate themselves discursively in reference to the Party. Their collective identity, expressed via these explicit and implicit declarations, influence how these groups navigate their relationship with the party. Their collective identity also determines the strategies and tactics they choose to deploy, as well as how they deploy them, in pursuit of progressive goals. This section returns to the universal repertoire of strategies and tactics laid out at the beginning of this chapter. It outlines not only the differences in how strategies and tactics manifest in Party-First and Party-Second Groups, but also how a group’s selection of strategies and tactics reflexively contributes to and reinforces their collective identity.
Building Capacity for Progressive Action

As discussed early in this chapter, progressive groups work to build capacity for collective action and other political activity by developing and training activists. In this regard, the thematic difference between Party-First and Party-Second capacity building efforts centers on the role they see activists playing in the Democratic Party, their understanding of what the Party is, and their vision of what the Party can be. For Party-First groups, a progressive Democratic Party is the ideal. The president of the EAPD explained how “The California Democratic Party should be the catalyst for nationwide agenda setting right now and should have the paradigms for a variety of key functions, including leadership development.” To that end, the EAPD lists “service [emphasis added] by diverse, progressive Democrats in the Party structure” (Interview Quote) as one of its four “gears” of strategic engagement.

To that end, Party-First groups are more likely to host educative events about the nuance of the Party itself. For example, the San Diego Progressive Democrats in May 2018 hosted Kimberly Ellis, the former executive director of Emerge California and previous candidate for state Party chair, for an event aimed at discussion the future of progressivism in the Party. This event focused on strategies for “getting more millennials, women, and people of color…involved in the political process.” Similarly, the EAPD, in February 2021 hosted a question-and-answer panel called “Governance: Who, Me? How Democratic Delegates & E-Board Members Can Understand the Party Governance Structures, Build Bridges, and Shape Decisions in a Changing California.” This event placed in conversation progressive elected officials, assembly delegates, and Los Angeles County Central Committee Members to educate the group’s membership about both the
formal and informal complexities and power dynamics that exist in the interaction between the different State and Local Party Structures.

By contrast, Party-Second groups see the Party, often reluctantly, as the playing field on which progressive politics currently takes place. Gayle McLaughlin, one of the founders of the Richmond Progressive Alliance, explained how the “Democratic Party leadership [was and is] corporate-controlled” (Socialist Forum, 2018) and thus independent left movement building is necessary in concert with strategic Party activism. As such, these groups may run some trainings around the ADEM elections, but educative events around the Party tend to focus on critique, accountability, and public protest of the Party and its elected officials and candidates. For example, the California Progressive Alliance 2021 annual convention, attended via Zoom by many local groups statewide, hosted an event, “The Donkey in the Living Room: Progressives and the Democratic Party,” which placed in conversation progressive State Party leaders, activists, and elected officials about activist strategies and the Democratic Party. Amar Shergill, chair of the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party implored activists to:

“Take a long at the Democrats that are running in your area. . . . take a look at what kind of money they are taking and be very honest and public about the fact that that money is toxic, make sure you call them out on it. Get a consensus in your community about the fact that we’re not taking that money, and that we are going to have some really honest discussions face to face with those folks and encourage them to succeed…because we want them to succeed without that money.”

In line with the “inside-outside” strategies of many Party-Second Groups, this panel was followed by a panel entitled “Progressive Movement Outside the Democratic Party” featuring discussion by leaders of various chapters of local third parties, as well as anti-fascist and labor organizers. The panel focused on highlighting successful tactics
employed against what one panelist called “the Democratic Party’s allegiance first and foremost to continuing destructive patterns of governance that are attached to corporate control.” These included organizing around local non-partisan elections, direct action, as well as other ways to “put cracks in the system to slow down and eventual stop this destructive reproduction of the profit motive as the driver of our society” (*The Progressive Movement Outside the Democratic Party*, 2021).

These same tensions around the formal linkages between activists and parties play out in their tactics for **leadership development**. Party-First groups take a long-view of developing leaders for advancement within the broader Party structure. As discussed earlier in this section, these groups often funnel activists into formal training programs, such as candidate trainings offered by Emerge California, or activists trainings via the National Democratic Training Committee (NDTC), which partners with the state Democratic Party. Via Party-First groups, activists might start out on group committees or in service roles, or even run for assembly delegate, the process discussed early in Chapter 3. However, there are other positions in the Party structure that necessitate a long-term commitment to the Party that is recognized across communities that include tens of thousands of Democratic voters. For example, Party-First groups help long-standing leaders run for central committee, which involves running on a primary ballot that is distributed to all Democrats in a given assembly district. For example, in March 2020, the Democratic Primary ballot for central committee was part of the same ballot in which voters were choosing between Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, and numerous other presidential candidates.
To help activists compete in these contests, Party-First groups foster relationships with other progressive groups, Party clubs, constituency groups, and other organizations that can connect their leaders with broad communities as well as provide them with endorsements and legitimization. The president of the EAPD explained:

Development of leaders by Party-Second groups is unsurprisingly less focused on participation in the formal Party structure. That said, many Party-Second groups do offer trainings about assembly delegate elections. As explained in Chapter 3, these elections
are in many ways popularity contests among local activist communities that lend themselves to the networked mobilization and “take over the Party” ethos common to many party-second groups. As separate from the Party, they do not have the formal Party linkages to participate in events like those offered by the NDTC. Even if they did, their conception of politics is based more in movement building than in learning to use the Party’s database or fundraising tools, both of which are skills taught in NDTC programs. That said, some Party-Second groups encourage leaders to participate in the Emerge California candidate trainings, especially given the progressive credibility brought to the organization by its former executive director, Kimberly Ellis. For the most part, leadership development in Party-Second groups is more informal, as activists develop relationships with other leaders, take on roles leading actions, or eventually run for office.

Party-First and Party-Second groups also differ in terms of how they prioritize organizing in concert with those on the margins of the Democratic Party. For Party-First groups, network building often takes the form of coalition building around particular issues or community organizing by members running for Assembly delegate or working to build support for or against a specific issue. For example, the Harvey Milk LGBTQ Democratic Club is a regular participant in numerous organizing events and coalitions that aim to combat homelessness in San Francisco. Party-First groups are also more likely to interact with Democratic constituency groups, such as Latinx Democratic clubs, that do not identify specifically as progressive, as a means to spread ideas and engage new progressives who may identify first as part of another constituency.
By contrast, Party-Second groups more commonly discuss the concept of “leftist movement building” aiming to build linkages between long-standing silos of the American left. In some cases, this includes developing networks of similarly focused groups around a grassroots definition of progressivism. The South Bay Progressive Alliance, for example, aims to connect “corporate-free” progressive organizations. It counts the California Nurses Association, the Green Party of Santa Clara County, and the Silicon Valley DSA as partners in its mission to create “people-focused politics.” (South Bay Progressive Alliance, 9/28/2021). Party-Second groups also network via action in community-based, non-political programs, like those under the heading of “mutual aid.” For example, DSA San Francisco in June 2019 held a free “Brakelight Replacement Clinic,” in which they helped people fix broken break lights in their cars and engaged in political discussion. All of these efforts build local progressive power and allow activists to develop the relationships necessary for them to develop as leaders in both their progressive groups and the community as a whole.

**Mobilizing Effective Political Action**

It has been established earlier in this chapter that groups recruit and train activists so they can be mobilized to engage in effective political activism. Just as there are differences between Party-First and Party-Second groups in terms of training, there are also related differences in mobilization strategies and tactics. All progressive groups used their websites, email listservs, and social media to provide mobilizing information for their communities. In most cases, group websites were limited to information specific to the organization itself, such as monthly meeting times and group-sponsored actions. In
contrast, Facebook pages, across all groups, served as community calendars providing information about a broader range of activities.

The mobilizing information provided on the community calendars of Party-First groups tends toward more traditional political campaign organizing, such as door-to-door canvasses, phone-banking, and letter writing for individual candidates or ballot measures. Their mobilizing information for direct actions often highlighted those actions that serve as boundary spaces for the greater Democratic Party electorate. For example, in January 2019, almost all Party-First groups posted information about their community’s local iteration of the nationwide “Women’s March” protests that have become a common annual occurrence nationwide since they were first organized on the day after President Donald Trump’s 2017 inauguration. In most cases, these postings were limited to basic logistical information. For example, the Modesto Progressive Democrats posted the event start time, parking, and their group’s meeting location. Similar events were posted by most other Party-First groups, that included logistical information and, in some cases, broad language about women’s rights and healthcare.

By contrast, Party-Second groups either did not publicize these events or tried to use them as an opportunity for collective visibility and issue activism. For example, Our Revolution Wellstone Democrats of Sacramento, which straddles the line between Party-First and Party-Second, provided information for a “Women of Color Contingent” at the march, organized collaboratively by groups such as The Decolonization Project, and the Zapatista Solidarity Coalition. Along with logistical details, they called for both solidarity around issues specifically facing women of color and accused leaders of the Women’s
March of “silencing the voices” of Women of Color. The San Francisco Chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America encouraged its members to march together with members of the International Socialist Organization and the Trotskyist group, Workers Voice/La Voz. They provided a location where their members could pick up large red flags and signs that read “Working Women of the World Unite.” In a time where so much attention is paid to personalized political action, this focus on traditional, collective solidarity is notable.

Differences such as these were not only visible across the mobilizing information of Party-First and Party-Second groups, but also within them. Within Party-First groups, formally chartered progressive Democratic Clubs were more likely than independent groups to limit their mobilizing information to either their own events or the events of their endorsed candidates or partners. In contrast, the calendars of independent Party-First groups, such as Indivisible, provided mobilizing information for numerous other Party-First groups, campaigns, and local issue-based advocacy organizations. In most cases, these third-party events focused on relatively uncontroversial progressive priorities (e.g. climate change) or efforts to mobilize activists to oppose the Trump agenda by calling their representatives or maintaining the Democratic majority in Congress by supporting Democratic candidates, often located out of state.

Party-Second groups also maintained calendars that served as broad, accessible community calendars for many groups. For example, the various Our Revolution groups in the San Francisco Bay Area all maintain public calendars on Facebook that are setup so that other progressive candidates, issue-based citizen’s groups, and campaigns can
freely login and publish their events. Participant groups in their calendars include tenants unions, DSA groups, progressive alliances, as well as temporary groups that form around specific issues or ballot measures (e.g. No on Prop 22 - Stop Uber and Lyft). These calendars were also more likely to include information about events put on by organizations that some would consider outside the margins of the Democratic Party. For example, the Sacramento Progressive Alliance provided mobilization for the local chapter of the Party for Socialism and Liberation and Our Revolution Southern California similarly provided information about the events of the Movement for a People’s Party. These differences in priorities and partners that are visible across Party-First and Party-Second mobilizing information also play out in the actions that progressive groups choose to organize and cosponsor.

Even in the actions organized and cosponsored by Party-First groups, there is a focus, thought certainly not exclusively, on traditional volunteer mobilization and fundraising around electoral politics, especially in the months surrounding elections. To some degree, the focus of these activities varied across geographic areas, depending on both demographics and the political makeup of congressional and Assembly districts. For example, the Progressive Democrats of the Santa Monica Mountains, based in the affluent areas of Topanga Canyon and Woodland Hills, maintained a focus on fundraisers. In advance of the 2020 primaries the group co-sponsored multiple fundraisers at members’ homes to support Democratic candidates from the surrounding
areas. As their group is both a chartered Democratic Club and an affiliate group of Progressive Democrats of America (PDA), they also hosted multiple fundraisers in support of PDA’s political action committee. By contrast, groups like Our Revolution / Wellstone Democrats of Sacramento and cosponsored events that included phone banks, door-to-door canvasses, and letter-writing campaigns for progressive candidates.

While the above discussion of mobilizing information makes it clear that Party Second groups certainly recruit their members to support traditional electoral organizing campaigns, many groups were less apt to organize those events themselves. This trend was most obvious among newer groups, such as Our Revolution chapters and local progressive alliances. DSA chapters were much apt to organize electoral actions themselves. DSA of San Francisco cosponsored numerous events supporting both Jackie Fielder in her race for State Senate and Shahid Buttar in his campaign to unseat Nancy Pelosi. DSA Sacramento organized phone banks around numerous ballot propositions in support of increased rent control protections and abolishing limitations on commercial property taxes. The main electoral actions organized by all Party-Second Groups were in support of Bernie Sanders’ 2020 campaign for the Democratic nomination. Many Party-Second groups organized regularly scheduled events in cooperation with the Sanders campaign. For example, Our Revolution Southern California, which operated in Inland Orange County, and DSA Sacramento both organized weekly canvasses and phone banks in support of the Sanders campaign. Our Revolution East Bay cosponsored events with ____________________

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According to the 2010 census, residents of Topanga Canyon have an annual income of $120,711 with only 5.9% living below the poverty line. Woodland Hills residents have an average annual income of $135,260 with 8.4% of residents living below the poverty line.
the Sanders campaign to connect its members with the campaign’s volunteer opportunities. That said, these exceptions are both unsurprising given Our Revolution’s roots in the Sanders campaign and Sanders’ strong identification with the DSA.

While Party-Second groups were less likely to organize their own traditional organizing actions, they were much more focused on organizing direct actions compared to Party-First groups. For example, DSA-Los Angeles, in March 2017, organized over 100 of its members to protest outside the victory party of Mayor Eric Garcetti, who had just won the Democratic nomination, effectively securing his second term as mayor of Los Angeles. The protestors demanded that Garcetti protect local undocumented immigrants by officially declaring Los Angeles a “sanctuary city.” As his supporters entered the event, the protestors made clear their values, chanting “money for jobs and education, not for ICE and deportation.” In the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that took place nationwide in mid-2020, local chapters of both DSA and Our Revolution in Kern County partnered with a local BLM group to organize a rally outside of the Bakersfield Police Department.

Most often, the direct actions of Party-First groups were either focused on local issues, such as EAPD’s protests in opposition of a proposed power plant in Glendale or aimed at the Republican Party. The focus on the Republican Party is especially true, given their origins in the anti-Trump “resistance” movement, of Indivisible groups, which early on focused largely on protesting against local and regional Republicans, as well as Democrats that they saw as complicit in enabling Trump’s agenda. For example, Indivisible-39 in northeast Orange County organized a protest outside Republican
Congressman Ed Royce’s local office to protest his ‘yes’ vote on the 2017 Republican Tax Bill. Indivisible San Diego, in collaboration with local activists, organized protests for 65 consecutive weeks outside the Vista office of Congressman Darrell Issa, eventually resulting in weekly standoffs with counter protestors.

Party-Second groups, in areas represented by Republican politicians, did occasionally engage in similar actions aimed at the Republican Party. In the context of Covid-19, these often took the form of “car caravans,” parades of protestors driving a pre-planned route to a politicians home or office. Our Revolution / DSA Santa Clarita Valley and Our Revolution Kern County cosponsored a “caravan and socially distanced rally” in Lancaster that terminated at Republican Congressman Mike Garcia’s congressional office. In their call to action, they accused him of “standing with extremists like Donald Trump and Q Anon conspiracy theorists like [representative] Marjorie Taylor Greene” and also “ignor[ing] and refus[ing] to meet with community organizations.” These same groups, along with our Revolution Antelope Valley held a similar caravan targeting Representative Kevin McCarthy, the Republican minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives in February 21, arguing he was complicit in enabling white supremacy and they, as constituents, needed “to make [their voices heard]” since he had not held a town hall in over 11 years.

Party-First and Party-Second groups also varied in their efforts to export capacity to other regions. This variation reveals differences in the limits of Party support between the two typologies. Party-First progressive Democrats across the Los Angeles region in March 2020 were focused on exporting capacity to support Assemblywoman
Christy Smith in a special election being held in California’s 25th congressional district to replace Democrat Katie Hill, who resigned in October 2019. These groups organized carpools to Santa Clarita and Palmdale to help her campaign knock on doors across the wide geography that constituted the district. Smith, a moderate, received minimal support from Party-Second groups outside of the district. Even Party-Second groups within the congressional district, while certainly preferring Smith to her Republican opponent, maintained their focus on mobilizing support for Bernie Sanders’ nomination battle. Leading up to the November 2020 election, the candidates in the most competitive races were from more moderate areas of the state, such as Orange County, where progressive candidates either had not contested, or had been filtered out by, the earlier March primary. Efforts were made by many Party-First groups to travel or make calls to support those candidates and maintain the Democratic majority in the U.S. House. Party-Second groups limited their support to the two competitive races that featured progressive candidates, Katie Porter in Orange County, and Audrey Denney in rural Northern California. Denney had been endorsed by Bernie Sanders. Party-First groups also partnered with strategic mobilization groups, such as Sister District, to help export their capacity outside the state to support Democratic candidates in to not only support regional competitive races, but also similar races across the country.

*Increasing Public Pressure for Preferred Policies*

Examining the deployment of strategies and tactics for putting public pressure on political leaders and elected officials reveals differences both between and within Party-First and Party-Second groups. The act of *publicly taking positions on candidates,*
legislation, and ballot measures is arguably the most consistent and public way that progressive groups express and maintain their identity. In the case of candidate endorsements, groups are mapping their own values and priorities onto complex candidates whose values and priorities may not align unilaterally with those of their own. The intricacies of legislation and ballot measures may also not perfectly align with a group’s ideal solution to the societal problem the bill or proposition is aiming to manage or improve. Accordingly, decisions about endorsements require a group’s membership to consider whether a given endorsement

Party-First groups are also more likely to weigh both political experience and legislative accomplishments against ideological purity when deciding on an endorsement. Party-Second groups give more weight to ideological purity, particularly in regards to campaign finance, than Party-First groups.

These dynamics are well illustrated by the endorsements made by progressive groups in advance of state’s 2018 Democratic Senatorial primary election in May of 2018. Recall from Chapter 3 that U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, a 26-year incumbent Senator, was being challenged for re-election by Kevin de Leon, the President pro tempore of the California State Senate. De Leon was regarded in circles of Party activists and the media as the main progressive in the race. Also in the primary race were several longshot candidates, including legislative analyst David Hildebrand and former public high school teacher and organizer Alison Hartson, both Democratic Socialists. Among Party-First progressive groups throughout the state, de Leon was the clear favorite, receiving the endorsements of almost all Progressive Democratic Clubs throughout the
state. Notably, he was not endorsed by the progressive Democratic Club in his own community, the EAPD. The EAPD instead chose to endorse Feinstein. In an op-ed titled “The Progressive Case for Re-electing Dianne Feinstein,” the Club’s president and one of its members cited her role as “a woman with hard-earned authority in elected office” as well as her numerous achievements on environmental protection (Johnson & Suarez, 2018). The group simultaneously accused de Leon of blocking state environmental legislation to benefit a company that contributed to his campaign. The president of EAPD explained the need to guard against those who may try to take advantage of progressives, explaining that “you have to be cognizant of those elected officials who may try to use progressive policy proposals as a kind of song to win over reformist activists” (Interview Quote). EAPD also had other grievances with de Leon, beginning with his opposition to the statewide plastic bag ban in 2014, discussed earlier in this chapter. This decision reveals a level of flexibility within the EAPD that, despite noting the corrupting role of money in politics on their website, allowed them to endorse a candidate who has not rejected money from political action committees or corporations. That same flexibility and pragmatism was visible in the endorsements of other Party-First groups, such as Indivisible-48, which endorsed moderate Harley Rouda for Congress in 2018. Rouda, who donated to Republican John Kasich in the 2016 presidential primary and only registered as a Democrat after the 2016, was viewed with skepticism by much of the progressive community.

In the battle for Feinstein’s seat, there were also clear divisions among Party-Second groups. Unsurprisingly, none supported Feinstein. In fact, DSA-LA, in its 2018
voter guide, endorsed no specific candidate, but simply recommended “Not Dianne Feinstein.” While Kevin de Leon received the endorsement of a few Our Revolution chapters throughout the state, the bulk of the chapters opted instead to endorse either David Hildebrand or Alison Hartson, due to their emphatic rejection of corporate and PAC campaign contributions. Indeed, Hildebrand would actually introduce himself to groups as “the Democratic Socialist, Corporate-Free, Pro-Union, Working Class candidate for U.S. Senate.” These endorsements were in spite of both candidates’ significant lack of political experience. That said, this decision tracks with the tendency of Party-Second groups, discussed earlier in this chapter, to highlight and promote those who, like them, consider themselves to be new insurgents inside the Democratic Party. Two DSA chapters also endorsed Hildebrand, though the bulk of DSA chapters made no endorsement in the race. This reveals that for many Party-Second groups, the need to maintain ideological purity supercedes choosing who to endorse from the two realistically viable candidates, in this case, Feinstein and de Leon.

Across the universe of Party-Second groups, the endorsement strategies fall on a range. At one end, are groups like SF Berniecrats, the San Francisco Our Revolution Chapter, that chose to endorse candidates in most races, excluding a few races where they advised: “No Recommendation. Leave it blank. We need a candidate that reflects Berniecrats values.” At the other end, are groups like DSA of San Francisco, who found only a single candidate on their ballot who met their ideological test: Gayle McLaughlin, co-founder of the Richmond Progressive Alliance and Green Party candidate for Lieutenant Governor. In the middle, are groups like DSA Los Angeles and DSA San
Diego, that distinguish in their voter guide between their short list of *endorsed* candidates and their full list of recommendations for the actual existing electoral races. In their guide, they make clear their dissatisfaction with the available candidates, but recognize the risks in not encouraging their audience to support Democratic over Republicans. DSA Los Angeles wrote about Christy Smith’s race in Congressional District 25, which covers suburban and rural areas around Santa Clarita and Palmdale:

Mike Garcia is absolutely awful. His background includes working as an executive for Raytheon, and he campaigned as a strong Trump ally, which he has proven true during his short time in Congress. His website literally lists “socialism” as an issue he fights against. And yet, it is not easy to support Christy Smith. Her time in the State Assembly has shown her to be a corporate neoliberal who has cast plenty of bad votes. She voted against the California Tenant Protection Act of 2019. She also voted against allowing formerly incarcerated people to be on juries, against prohibiting landlords from rejecting applicants based on Section 8 status and voted in favor of eliminating oversight of telecom companies. But at the end of the day, Christy Smith is massively better than Mike Garcia, and she needs support in this extremely tight race. (DSA Los Angeles, 2020)

Differences in expectations of self-proclaimed progressive candidates was also visible in the *endorsement questionnaires* used by Party-First and Party-Second groups to garner information about and evaluate candidates. In their questionnaires, both groups asked candidates to take positions on specific issues, including, but not limited to, voting rights for the incarcerated, abortion rights, the Green New Deal, systemic racism, and marriage equality (Indivisible East Bay, 2021), though the issues raised by Party-Second groups were both more specific and farther to the left. DSA of Los Angeles asks potential candidates, “How do you believe capitalism affects your constituents and the issues in your district.” Moreover, Party-Second groups were more apt to include potentially exclusionary questions. For example, Our Revolution / Wellstone Democrats of
Sacramento asks its candidates, “Have you ever endorsed a Republican?” Holding Politicians and Leaders Accountable to Grassroots Progressives

Party-Second Groups are more likely to use the direct actions, discussed above, to hold politicians accountable to the grassroots. For example, a coalition of Party-Second groups, including DSA Long Beach, Our Revolution Long Beach, and Long Beach Gray Panthers partnered with the California Nurses Association to organize a car caravan aimed at mobilizing citizens to contact state senators and assemblypersons to push them to vote for Medicare for All. A DSA member who organized the rally said the organization had dozens planned throughout the state. She explained that “rais[ing] some hell was the only way to get Newsom all the Democrats who say one side and down that they support Medicare for All to not only talk the talk but vote what we need” (Alvarado, 2021).

While both Party-First and Party-Second groups work to get candidates on the record with the broader public, Party-First groups, especially those in moderate areas are more likely to host events that place Democrats in conversation with Republicans. For example, Indivisible of Ramona, based in a rural area northeast of San Diego, hosted a bipartisan forum with two congressional candidates that focused on the environment and deregulation. While the Republican frontrunner opted not to attend, the event placed two competing candidates, a Republican and a Democrat, in conversation around issues related to climate change and public policy in a way that forced the Democrat to articulate his positions so as to separate them from those of a moderate Republican.
Party-First groups are also more likely to use op-eds or radio interviews to get their message out. For example, the San Francisco-based Harvey Milk LGBTQ Democratic Club, along with two other community-based political groups, wrote an op-ed in the San Francisco Examiner criticizing community and business leaders in the city’s Castro Neighborhood for considering accepting and implementing throughout the neighborhood a network of 125 surveillance cameras provided for free by a billionaire tech mogul (Harvey Milk LGBTQ Club, 2021). Less than a month later, following additional community activism, the proposal was abandoned at a meeting of the Castro/Upper Market Community Business District. Also, as made clear throughout this chapter, EAPD has made numerous efforts in traditional and social media to highlight the shortcomings of State Senator, and now Los Angeles Councilperson, Kevin de Leon.

Despite successful cases of online activism, leaders of some progressive groups also noted the challenges and opportunities that social media bring to their members and the progressive movement. The leader of a Los Angeles based Democratic Club explained:

“Social media has allowed us to amplify individual messages in ways that used to require, earned media to propel outward. But I think social media has also presented a major challenge for the club and that we have had to prioritize training for club activists on fighting disinformation because social media is not a unilateral vector of truth... by virtue of having a large cohort of very informed well-trained people, we have a particular opportunity, especially given the vectors of disinformation, to use those skills to [combat disinformation].”

Party-Second groups, possibly because they have fewer relationships with media outlets, are committed to social media as a means for to hold political leaders accountable. This points to an important consideration in using this construction going forward, which is that there may be other cases where differences between Party-First and Party-Second
groups are less a function of their identity and political goals, but rather of other factors, such as their available resources and their relationships in the community.

This section depicted how Party-First and Party-Second groups can be distinguished by the manner in which they deploy strategies and tactics towards progressive goals. These discourses and actions also serve as a means through which group members negotiate and renegotiate their collective identity. The next section provides an extended case study that depicts this reflexive and ongoing process. It then discusses some contradictions in how the typologies of Party-First and Party-Second play out differently across locales, and what this means for how we understand the broader progressive movement.

**Negotiation and Renegotiation in Local Groups**

The previous section outlined different ways in which Party-First and Party-Second groups express their collective identity via tangible political action, as a means of situating themselves in opposition to the Democratic Party. Via participation in these actions, groups not only carry out actions that reflect their collective identity but are also simultaneously maintaining that identity. In many cases, the different actions that these groups choose serve to draw in new members whose own personal identity makes them motivated to act politically in the same way. For example, an activist who had been activated by the 2016 Sanders campaign and successfully ran for assembly delegate described how he was impressed with the Progressive Caucus of the CDP as “a group of punk rockers” (Interview Quote) forcing uncomfortable conversations within the Party. He found his home in a Party-Second group at the local level, the South Bay Progressive
Alliance, and found joining to be “like a vacation to be surrounded by such friendly and like-minded folks,” saying that “it felt like an ‘our tribe’ type of thing.” He was drawn to the alliances roots in the Richmond Progressive Alliance and its roots opposing the local oil industry, explaining:

They went head-to-head with the oil companies who were putting millions of dollars into electing city officials. They worked at it. They took on Chevron and took them to court and got the states largest payout up to that point. Amazing, amazing stuff. They wanted to take that model onto a statewide level which is just beautiful (Interview Quote).

It is also common for groups to pull in activists who have significant differences in their personal identities and vision of politics. This can manifest in a variety of ways. An activist from the Auburn Democratic Club explained how she finds it “important to engage with [super-progressive] folks and dialogue with those folks so they know me - they understand that I consider myself liberal even though they don’t think I’m liberal enough” (Interview Quote). There are also moments when, within a progressive group, personal identities collide and force a reckoning on the group’s identity. The next section explores such conflict, first providing a rich discussion of an intragroup conflict over an endorsement. It then discusses the fungibility inherent in the Party-First and Party-Second typologies.

**Endorsements and Accountability: The Case of Ammar Campa-Najjar**

On February 10, 2020, Ammar Campa-Najjar stood in front of the membership of the San Diego Progressive Democratic Club (SDPDC) as their endorsed candidate for the upcoming “top-two” primary election for U.S. House California District 50, a conservative district in East San Diego. The club, which had voted to endorse his candidacy months earlier, was now debating whether or not to rescind that endorsement,
with many members accusing him, in his January 12, 2020, interview with the San Diego Union Tribune, of walking back his previous support for key progressive issues, including Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. In the interview, he stated that he “[didn’t] believe in taking 160 million people off of private healthcare insurance” and would thus offer “Medicare for all who want it” combined with additional public and nonprofit healthcare options. On climate change, he highlighted the need for “a big mobilization towards combating climate change” but said he didn’t “think the Green New Deal is all that realistic.” Over the course of the next 90 minutes, Campa-Najjar and his supporters, as well as his detractors, made their cases for rescinding or maintaining the Club’s endorsement.

Campa-Najjar’s conflict with the Club was several years in the making, and had as much to do with conflicting identities within the club as it did with his behavior. The San Diego Progressive Democratic Club was launched in 2017 by self-identified Berniecrats. In the years that followed, it received such interest that it expanded to five chapters—north, south, east, and west, plus the original primary chapter—across the geography of greater San Diego. Over time, the group grew so large that its membership included activists with varied conceptions of progressivism and the Democratic Party. Further, with the exception of DSA-San Diego, the region lacked any Our Revolution chapter or other Party-Second group of that nature. For many committed Democrats, participating in DSA San Diego instead of the local progressive club would constitute a huge jump ideologically and tactically for an activist choosing how to get involved in progressive Party politics. As such, the SDPDC continues to be the primary place for
progressive activism in San Diego, and its endorsements are sought by candidates, like Campa-Najjar, seeking both the legitimacy provided by the endorsement, and the volunteer resources its Club offers to its endorsed candidates.

Two years earlier, during the 2018 election for the Congressional seat, Campa-Najjar had emerged to challenge incumbent Duncan Hunter Jr., who was embroiled in an eventually career-ending scandal over misappropriation of campaign funds. Winning the reliably Republican seat would have been a reach for any Democrat, but especially one running as a progressive. Hunter’s father, Republican Duncan Hunter Sr., had represented East County San Diego in Congress since 1981 before his son won the seat in 2012, 2014, and 2016 by 35 points, 42 points, and 27 points, respectively. National media outlets, uncharacteristically focused on the race because of Hunter’s scandal, were presenting Campa-Najjar as a “Mexican-Palestinian-American Progressive” (e.g. Golshan, 2018). His endorsements bolstered his progressive bona fides. Justice Democrats, the national progressive organization that was also supporting progressive darling Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in what would be her upset victory over a long-standing Democrat, endorsed Campa-Najjar in the same election cycle (Justice Democrats, 2017). Eric Garcetti, the Democratic mayor of Los Angeles, complimented him for “building an incredible grassroots movement” (Garcetti, 2018) and campaigned for him in the primary. Campa-Najjar was also recommended by the local Democratic Socialists of America as part of their 2018 primary voter guide (DSA San Diego, 2018b) and highlighted in their general election guide as “the only progressive Congressional candidate running in [all of San Diego] County” (DSA San Diego, 2018a). However,
despite the so-called “Blue Wave” that increased Democrats’ hold of state and federal offices in 2018, California’s 50th district proved too conservative for Campa-Najjar, who lost to the embattled Hunter by 3.4 percent of the vote.

In early 2020, following Hunter’s resignation, Campa-Najjar was again campaigning for the seat in the “top-two” primary, this time against two Republicans, former Congressman Darrell Issa and former San Diego City Council member Carl DeMaio. With less than two months until the primary, he had again secured the endorsement of the SDPDC. His position was bolstered because his Democratic opponent, realtor and affordable housing advocate Marisa Calderon, had withdrawn from the race for personal reasons (Clark, 2020). In most states, being the lone Democrat on a primary ballot would have guaranteed Campa-Najjar a slot in the general election. However, California’s “top-two” primary system meant that, with two viable Republicans on the ballot in a conservative district, Campa-Najjar could come in third place in total votes to his two Republican opponents and be excluded from the general election. In practice, this meant there was pressure on Campa-Najjar to tack toward the center, courting moderate Republicans and centrist Democrats at the same time that Bernie Sanders was unapologetically pushing progressive policies as part of his second campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Campa-Najjar’s strategic move to the Center via his interview with the Union Tribune set off alarm bells in the San Diego Progressive community, with debates immediately emerging on the listservs and Facebook groups of various progressive organizations, including the San Diego Progressive Democratic Club, the Democratic Socialist of America of San Diego, as well
as in local “Berniecrat” online communities. At the January 13 meeting of the San Diego Progressive Democrats, just one day after the Union Tribune interview, the membership, encouraged by its new president and self-described Berniecrat, passed a motion to reconsider Campa-Najjar’s endorsement at their next meeting.

At first glance, it is easy to see this conflict among Progressive Democrats as just another example of the long-standing struggle between progressive ideology and compromise discussed in the literature review of this dissertation. While that tension was certainly present, the next meeting turned out to be a debate not only over Campa-Najjar’s increasingly centrist strategy for winning a conservative district, but also over differing visions among the Club’s membership about both the role of their organization’s endorsements in the broader political system of San Diego and in the Party itself. It also revealed divisions among progressives as to the role of progressive organizations in holding Democrats accountable to progressive ideals.

**Arguments Against The Rescindment of the Endorsement**

The meeting was an incredibly tense affair, with supporters of Campa-Najjar lined up along the walls, and Club members whispering in circles in advance of the meeting. During the meeting, Campa-Najjar answered questions on his public positions for almost an hour. Throughout his defense, he repeatedly argued that his public statements were not a repudiation of progressive policies, but rather strategic communication tactics aimed at making his positions palatable to voters in a conservative district. For example, to discuss climate change with military families, he argued, highlighting statements by high ranking military officials who saw climate change as a national security threat and advocating for
a “World War II mobilization towards climate change. . . . resonate[d] more than the Green New Deal because it’s a military town.” He argued that such discursive tactics speak “the language of the district where there’s 60,000 more Republicans than Democrats.” Further, he lightly chastised those who would engage in progressive purity tests, arguing that “if you want perfection, there’s a cult [for that],” and pointed to Bernie Sanders’ recent public apology for being less than progressive on the issue of gun control as an analogue to his own flexibility on certain issues. His supporters in the membership echoed Campa-Najjar’s statement that he was “using words that resonate with people he’s talking to in his district,” arguing that those pushing to rescind the endorsement were “caught up in words” to determine who is and is not progressive. While some of his supporters admitted they were disappointed in Campa-Najjar’s recent statements, they saw his decision to explain himself at the meeting, and engage in debate, as a sign that he was accountable to the Club and its members.

Arguments For the Rescindment of the Endorsement

For Campa-Najjar’s detractors, his fungibility, discursive or otherwise, on progressive issues was indefensible. The Club’s president made her case to the membership for the rescindment of his endorsement:

Progressives have drawn the line in the sand on [Medicare for All]. We have been crystal clear on this issue, and we are not messing around anymore on this issue. We’ve had enough. We’ve had enough of the double talk; we don’t want to hear one thing one day and then another thing another day. No. We want someone who is willing to stand up every single day fighting for this cause. . . . If you are a progressive candidate that means in every room, in every interview, you are pushing this movement, you are selling the points, and you are convincing the American people that this is the time. Medicare for All.
She further explained her view of the progressive Club’s endorsement in the context of dozens of other local Democratic Clubs that choose not to fly the progressive banner:

“Every other Democratic club is going to endorse Ammar - or already has. I would like our Club’s endorsement to designate a progressive candidate.”

One of the Club’s previous presidents echoed her concerns, arguing that Campa-Najjar was “shift[ing] the overton window,” the range of ideas that are politically possible, “to the right, and actively work[ing] against the progressive movement.” “We do not need a Joe Manchin of San Diego,” he stated. Another member argued against “supporting a candidate who uses Republican talking points.”

Among those arguing for rescindment, there was disagreement as to whether doing so meant also abandoning other types of tangible support for Campa-Najjar in his fight against his Republican opponents. The Club’s president, who had made the most detailed case for rescindment, remained committed, and encouraged other members, to continue supporting Campa-Najjar with resources—money and volunteer time—in an attempt to flip the seat from red to blue. For her, there was obvious strategic value in the Democratic Party winning control of a long-standing conservative seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, but it did not outweigh the importance of reserving endorsements solely for those candidates who aligned with the Club’s values. Others argued against even such a compromise. One member argued:

If we have to vote for the least bad, I’m not going to vote for the least bad. I’m going to not vote for a compromise position. I’m going to vote to save the planet. In fact. I would not support Ammar Campa Najjar for the seat, I would support his opponent [Peace and Freedom Party Candidate] Jose Cortes who is much more progressive.
The Outcome of the Rescindment Debate

In the end, approximately half of the Club voted to rescind Campa-Najjar’s endorsement, highlighting the division amongst these progressives, but failing to meet the necessary 60% for rescindment. As such, Campa-Najjar maintained his representation on the Club’s voter guides. He came in first in the “top-two” primary in March with 36% (his Republican rivals split the vote with 23 and 20%) of the vote, and advanced to the general election. Notably, he failed to receive the recommendation of the Democratic Socialists of America in their primary voter guide, who instead recommended the local Peace and Freedom Party candidate, or the endorsements for the general election that he had received in 2018, from the national arms of Our Revolution and Justice Democrats. He also received almost no support from the SDPDC’s social media accounts following this meeting despite maintaining the endorsement.

This detailed look at the controversy surrounding Campa-Najjar’s endorsement highlights two strategic goals—defining progressivism, and holding elected officials, candidates, and Party leaders accountable—and related tactics—endorsements, and public critique—employed by activists working both to create a more progressive society and to push the Democratic Party to the left. It also highlights the challenges progressive activists face when operating in competitive or Republican-leaning districts. Those who supported rescinding Campa-Najjar’s endorsement saw the Club’s endorsements as one of its main tools for defining progressivism for the public and for the Democratic Party, a function which they believed would be undermined by maintaining Campa-Najjar’s endorsement.
As mentioned above, San Diego has a massive progressive Democrats group in SDPDC, but lacks an Our Revolution or other independent multi-issue group, and as a result Party-First versus Party-Second is playing out inside the SDPDC rather than across groups. This conflict also points to some of the ways in which Party-First and Party-Second does not map neatly on to all organizations.

For example, Bakersfield, a conservative city in the Central Valley houses an Our Revolution chapter that regularly engages in a discourse that is substantially more radical than chapters in metropolitan, liberal cities. Both Our Revolution/DSA of Santa Clarita and Our Revolution Antelope Valley have recently become chapters in the Progressive Democrats of America (PDA), which as a general rule would be considered Party-First in most locales. It remains to be seen whether PDA will change Our Revolution/DSA or the other way around, although the act of joining PDA in and of itself represent a conscious decision to merge with a less radical organization.

It is also common for activists to participate in multiple groups across typologies. Participation in multiple progressive groups allows activists to express different aspects of their identity and engage in different repertoires of action. An Our Revolution member in Contra Costa County explained to me:

Yeah, there’s a lot of overlap. I would state that anybody that I know who’s involved in Our revolution or Indivisible is involved in the party. Mostly through local chapters so that’s a big thing especially in East County. I think we have I want to say three clubs. Three Democratic clubs and they’re all very unique and I would say that everybody that I know from Indivisible or Our revolution in East County are in one of those chartered clubs.
Another activist from Auburn, in rural northern California also saw overlap between Indivisible and his local Party group, but he also posited that the distance he drove to get to Our Revolution meetings in Sacramento was likely prohibitive for most people.

This points to another factor, geography, that impacts the way in which Party First and Party Second is applied. In Los Angeles, where the ideological breadth of the spectrum of groups is so substantial, a group may go to an extreme in order to differentiate itself from others in the region. Indeed, Our Revolution Los Angeles, soon after this research was concluded, renounced any relationship with the Democratic Party after a dispute with Our Revolution National, which effectively overrode their local endorsement of a Congressional candidate. The group, and its members, voted to join Movement for A People’s Party, in one of the few cases of “exit” observed during the course of this project.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored the interplay between collective identity, strategies, and tactics across progressive organizations. I began by outlining a universal repertoire of strategies and tactics employed by progressive groups, explaining that progressive groups first aim to build local progressive capacity. To that end, I argued that groups serve as an entry point to ongoing political engagement, using in-person events and digital media to recruit and onboard activists who are expressing their first interest in progressive activism or have been initially activated by fleeting candidate and issue campaigns. Local progressive groups help these activists realize a more durable commitment to progressive activism. For activists with minimal experience, local groups provide them with tangible actions
through which they can feel engaged and develop a sense of their own political efficacy. I also showed how local groups also play an educative role, hosting events and providing resources through which new activists can understand not only the formal structure of Democratic Party politics, but also the state of longstanding battles around progressive priorities such as universal health care and criminal justice reform.

I then argued that these capacity building activities primarily serve to build a bench of political activists who can be mobilized toward effective political action. I showed how, in many cases, these activities are organized by third parties, such as candidate campaigns, with local groups acting as facilitators. Local candidates, especially those who have been endorsed by local progressive groups, use these groups as spaces through which to recruit activists to support, and in some cases lead, aspects of their campaigns. Local groups also serve as a nexus for mobilizing information about not only a variety of local candidate and issue campaigns, but also protests, demonstrations, and other actions through which activists can make their voices heard. In addition to connecting activists with third Party activities, activist groups also plan their own local political actions, as well as export their political capacity to support regional and national Party priorities.

I then focused on a third strategy of progressive groups, increasing public pressure for progressive policies. I argue that progressives pursue this goal through a combination of direct, strategic communication—publicizing endorsements, writing op-eds, organizing protests, and engaging in media activism—, and also indirect pressure,
interviewing candidates for endorsements and encouraging them to go on the record in public debates.

Following my explication of universal strategies and tactics, I then argued that activist groups also engage in the implicit strategy of defining progressivism. I outlined the different ways in which progressive groups articulate and define what their definition of “progressive” is, via a combination of value statements, issue priorities, organizational rules and structure, and media activism tactics. With these points in mind, I then argued that progressive activist groups can be understood across two new typologies —Party-First and Party-Second—for classifying progressive groups. Using these typologies, I first presented differences in how these groups negotiated, and renegotiated, their identity via both their external and internal discourses, with Party-First groups being more likely to identity discursively as “inside” the Party, placing themselves in opposition to both Republicans and non-progressive Democrats, and critiquing narrowly specific problematic Democrats or centrist policies. Party-Second groups were more likely to present themselves in opposition to “corporate Democrats,” and engage in broad structural critique of the Democratic Party and the broader two-party system. Following this discussion of discourse, I then argued that Party-First and Party-Second approaches manifest in the manner and choice of tactics they deploy toward progressive change. These discourses and actions serve as a means through which group members negotiate and renegotiate their collective identity.

Finally, beginning with the case study of Ammar Campa-Najjar and the San Diego Progressive Democratic Club, I first showed how groups negotiate and renegotiate
their collective identity as progressives via deliberation, discussion, and implementation of strategic political action. I then discussed how Party-First and Party-Second, as an emergent pattern, plays out differently across locales, depending on factors such as the development of the progressive movement in the area and the local ecosystem of progressive groups. I also discussed how a group’s categorization of Party-First and Party-Second is fungible over time, as its members learn Party politics and renegotiate their tactical repertoire.

This chapter also lays out how at the group level, there are numerous tactics—levers that its members can pull—as they carry out progressive activism and define their collective identity. At the theoretical level, this fluidity applies to the conception of Party-First and Party-Second as well. It is an emergent pattern that is not immutable. This chapter showed how, as an analytical construct, the variation in tactics helps one determine if a group is Party-First or Party-Second, but this does not map neatly onto different organizations across time or space. Whether or not a group, or loosely networked entity is Party-First or Party-Second depends on the role it is playing at that particular moment. It can vary based on factors from region to region, and also does not map neatly on to urban/rural or conservative/liberal areas of the state. In the end applying Party First and Party Second in any way other than ad hoc is quite complex and can vary by how developed the progressive movement is in that area. For example, there may be gaps that need to be filled within the broader ideological movement. In some cases, groups fracture and do not neatly fall back neatly onto a spectrum of Party-First and Party-Second, because the group’s collective identity may not have completely fractured.
These dynamics can also vary over time, as exemplified by OR/DSA of Santa Clarita’s merge with PDA. Over time, it may come to be characterized as a Party-First group, serving as a training ground for dual-membership radical Democrats who have also joined the newest Party-Second group. This implies that potentially, as activists learn Party politics, and engage in trial and error of different strategies, certain groups tend to converge on Party-First as time passes.
Conclusion

In the months following the 2016 election, there was a seemingly endless barrage of stories about “civil war” in the Democratic Party as new activists, motivated both by the contentious primary between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton and by the election of Donald Trump, entered the Democratic Party in droves. Four years later, the 2020 Democratic primary was rife with hand-wringing from pundits and Party elites over whether or not the “Sanders-wing” of the Democratic Party would revolt if he were not to win the nomination, exiting the Party and leaving the nominee without a substantial portion of the Party base necessary to win the presidency.

In many ways, such concerns should be met with skepticism by those who follow the history of Democratic Party activism over the last century. Indeed, influxes of new activists have always raised concerns about their impact on the Party and the U.S. political system. This tendency is visible at least as far back as the concerns over “amateur democrats” (J. Q. Wilson, 1962) who entered the Party following Adlai Stevenson’s failed presidential campaign or the “new breed” (Kirkpatrick, 1976) of “purists” (Polsby & Wildavsky, 1964/1976) who were ostensibly going to swing Democratic nominations to unelectable leftist candidates.

As discussed early in this dissertation, California has seen activists enter the Party to support change-focused candidate campaigns and then remain inside the Party pushing for change. Movement activists, including Tom Hayden of the New Left, entered the Party to support George McGovern in 1972, and then stayed to influence the California Democratic Party from the inside via his Campaign for Economic Democracy. Others entered via Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, and remained inside the Party as activists
Many of the Democratic Clubs in California that were a focus of Chapter 5 were formed in the mid-2000s by supporters of Howard Dean and Dennis Kucinich (Larimore-Hall, 2014). These members of the “netroots”, identifying both as Party activists and anti-war activists (Heaney & Rojas, 2015) were going to upend first the invisible primary with their small-dollar donations and then the Party structure with a surge of new Party activists engaged in hundreds of Party-adjacent voluntary associations formed nationwide. In that context, it is easy to view the influx of new activists in late 2016 and early 2017 as simply another surge of activists into the big tent that is the modern Democratic Party.

In this dissertation, I aimed understand how progressive activists engage with and conceptualize themselves in reference to the Democratic Party. I began with the premise, informed by the 2016 election, that a combination of disaffected Democrats and independent Sanders supporters were opting for voice as a means to change the Democratic Party, and taking steps to increase their involvement with the Party as a means to make their voices heard. I also posited that new technologies were potentially enabling activists to organize around and engage in public critique of political parties in new ways. To that end, I examined three pathways through which activists were attempting to influence the Democratic Party: as delegates to the 2016 and 2020 Democratic National Conventions, by involving themselves in and engaging in actions via the formal Party structure of the California Democratic Party, and by engaging in activism via local progressive groups. In each case, I looked to understand how new and long-standing activists negotiate their relationship with the Democratic Party, how new
progressive activists enter Party politics, and what voice looks like in the context of progressive Party activism.

**Horizontal Voice, Collective Identity, and the Party**

This dissertation first set out to understand how activists negotiate their relationship with the Democratic Party. I have shown that much of this negotiation is done collectively, through the use of “horizontal voice,” and other discursive means for developing collective identity. In outlining the concept of “horizontal voice” and its relationship to Hirschman’s model, O’Donnell (1986) explains how horizontal voice serves as a first, and possibly sufficient step through which activists can develop a collective identity. Across each of the empirical chapters, this dissertation revealed the central role of horizontal voice in the process through which progressive activists develop collective identity in relation to the Democratic Party.

In Chapter 3, I showed how horizontal voice played out differently in two national political conventions. I examined the 2016 and 2020 Sanders delegations to the Democratic National Conventions and argued that a self-reinforcing relationship exists between activists’ personal identities, the level of control exerted by a campaign, and the potential for horizontal voice and by extension, strong collective identity. I showed how horizontal voice, unmitigated by campaign forces and controlled interactivity, allowed the 2016 Sanders delegates to develop a collective identity in opposition to the Democratic Party. This absence of formal campaign infrastructure or guidance from the national Sanders campaign meant that the practice of digital campaigning within Democratic Party campaigns, which since the Obama era had been characterized by
“structured” (Kreiss, 2012) or “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley, 2014), expanded to include the loosely-networked organizing and personalized engagement practices more characteristic of recent “crowd-enabled” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013) and hybrid movement-activist networks. In this way, digital media was essential for the formation of progressive communities around Sanders, but few would argue that his delegates were the “managed citizens” (Howard, 2006) warned about in early literature on political consultants and digital campaigns.

I argued that the anti-institutional personal identities and limited Party loyalty of many Sanders delegates, augmented by a flexible, hybrid online and offline environment, allowed them to engage in horizontal voice and carry out many of the processes associated with collective identity formation. These included, but were not limited to, maintaining commitment and forging bonds of solidarity through shared leadership via the electing of delegate whips, organizing as they planned for the convention, constructing and expressing ideologies via discussions about their support for Sanders and critiques of Clinton, and using rituals such as attending local protests (Downton & Wehr, 1991; Hirsch, 1990; Hunt & Benford, 2008; Klandermans, 1997). They also formed collective identity through the processes of working toward a shared collective action project (Barr & Drury, 2009) in the form of the convention and via the shared antagonist of Clinton and the Democratic National Committee. The widespread anger over the DNC’s perceived favoritism toward Clinton, that was finally confirmed by Wikileaks #DNCLeaks the day before, modified the “political opportunity structure” (McAdam, 1982/1999) of the convention and created an opening for the Sanders
delegation, while also further strengthening the delegation’s political identity. This solidifying of their collective identity continued as they carried out acts collectively (Polletta & Jasper, 2001) inside the convention, as they found themselves at odds with DNC staff and Clinton supporters, as well as the discourse of the convention program.

Examining the use of horizontal voice also reveals parallels and differences between the experiences of the 2016 Sanders delegates in California and early studies of Howard Dean’s 2004 campaign for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination. Those studies praised the Dean campaign for implementing digital systems that had the opportunity to democratize political campaigns via a new kind of open-source politics (Trippi, 2004). And yet subsequent studies found that the Dean campaign employed those tools strategically, allowing tasks like fundraising and voter contact to be decentralized, while maintaining control over the big picture aspects of the campaign (Kreiss, 2012).

Like the Dean campaign, the Sanders campaign certainly was not allowing local activists to engage in decision-making about the broader campaign, and Sanders’ supporters were certainly using the campaign’s digital tools to setup phone banks and organize house parties. And yet, Sanders supporters were also using third party tools, such as Facebook, to create separate communities in parallel to the Sanders website, where they could engage in horizontal voice without the campaign’s knowledge.

Looking at the 2020 Sanders delegation four years later, I showed how numerous factors reduced the potential for horizontal voice within the Sanders delegation. The resulting absence of similar opportunities for leadership, ritual, organizing, and ideology, all of which were present in 2016, contributed to a delegation that was substantially
different from the previous one. The absence of these opportunities limited the delegation’s ability to discursively develop as a group, and by extension, its potential for action. Even in interviews, the sense of collective “we-ness,” a marker of collective identity (see e.g. Snow, 2001), that was so palpable among delegates at the 2016 convention was clearly diminished. The online organizing that took place in advance of the convention, around issues like the delegation chair and the vice-presidential selection, also became professionalized by progressive organizations under the banner of “The 2020 Bernie Delegates Network,” supplanting any potential for self-organization by delegates. With virtually no way to engage in vertical voice at the virtual convention, a minority of the delegation, led largely by still-active 2016 delegates, engaged in horizontal voice using social media, including Twitter, YouTube, and Zoom, to plan events the weekend prior to the convention that allowed activists from around the state to engage in discursive community building around progressive activism with an eye toward maintaining progressive solidarity in advance of future ideological battles within and around the Democratic Party.

In Chapter 4, activists again negotiated their identity in reference to the Party as they engaged in horizontal voice to decide collectively to run for assembly delegate, articulating, with the help of long-standing Party activists, their identity as both progressive activists and potential participants in the formal Party structure. They also engaged in horizontal voice as they reached out to like-minded activists in their networks in their attempts to turn out voters for their local elections. Reaching out to their personal networks, including online communities that formed during Sanders’ 2016 run, these
activists mobilized their networks with promises of taking over the Democratic Party. At the first state convention, many of these new delegates wore Bernie Sanders shirts, buttons, and hats in order to identify themselves to like-minded peers and to make their presence known to long-standing activists. I also argue that these served as a use of symbols through which they maintained their collective identity within the broader space of the California Democratic Party.

Adems.vote was itself a technological platform for horizontal voice between progressives. The act of posting a bio to adems.vote was not only an instance of horizontal voice but also an expression of the personal identity of each activist, many of whom had been influenced by their collective identity as Sanders delegates. Writing these bios allowed activists to articulate what, for them, it meant to be progressive. As discussed in Chapter 4, the ADEMs.vote and Progressive Caucus websites both showed how digital properties can be used to combine local activities together and create a collective sense of statewide momentum and organizing, the idea that “we”—activists from throughout the state—are taking over the Democratic Party.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I also showed how the act of joining and participating in progressive groups is a means through which progressive activists negotiate their relationship with the Party and their understanding of what it means to be progressive. In Chapter 4, this was depicted in the decision by progressives to join, or not join, the raucous CDP Progressive Caucus or to engage in progressive activism via another statewide caucus, such as the environmental caucus. In Chapter 5, I showed how collective identity formation runs through numerous aspects of local progressive
organizations, as activists regularly engage in elections of leaders, discussion of goals, planning of actions, as well as rituals such as debate watch parties, volunteer service activities such as nature clean-ups, or annual parties. In the context of these groups, I argued that a group’s collective identity influences how they define progressivism, engage in internal and external discourse, and also informs the choices of and manner in which they carry out strategies and tactics aimed at progressive change. In individual locales, the discourses and actions of these groups draw in new members whose personal identity, understanding of activism, and relationship with the Democratic Party parallels those of the group. In this way, the collective identity of progressive groups is reinforced both within and via the influx of new members.

Further, as progressives, every person engaging in this space has some kind of identity in opposition to the Party, but their negotiation of what they are opposed to, if and when they see themselves as part of the party, is fluid and ongoing. They may be aligned with the Party, carrying out critical engagement, or a combination of both. These same factors apply as well to individuals as they negotiate their identity, sometimes through participation in multiple groups carrying out very different actions. The nature of progressive activism is that at both the group and individual level, it is a negotiation of identity as part of the large and ever-changing political entity that is the Democratic Party.

**How Activists Enter the Party**

A major contribution of this dissertation is the refinement and extension of Hirschman’s theory to both add the notion of “entry” and to show the hybridity of his concepts of exit,
voice, and loyalty. Throughout this dissertation, I presented examples of activists entering Democratic Party politics in order to exercise their voices. In the context of U.S. political parties, entry should be understood as a broad and diffuse concept, in line with the nebulous nature of Party membership in the U.S. The lack of clear, traditional Party membership in the two-party system (Schudson, 1998) in the U.S. as compared to systems with card-carrying Party members, makes delineating the moment or action when someone has formally entered the Party difficult. I argue that to enter the Democratic Party thus means to enter Democratic Party politics, through engagement and action to try to bring change via, or to, the Democratic Party. That said, as this dissertation depicts, certain Party activists do formally enter the Party structure, through avenues like running to be assembly or central committee delegates. I argue below that this initial entry often leads to further engagement with and identification with the Party and Party politics.

Building on the above, I address one of the goals of this dissertation: to understand the processes through which new progressive activists get involved in Democratic Party politics. I argue that the process of entering Democratic Party politics as an activist is done via the discursive act of engaging in activism in which the Party is the vehicle for, or in the case of reformists, the subject of that activism. It is also an incremental process that at each step requires a person to negotiate and renegotiate not only their relationship to the Party but also their conception of politics and their potential role in it. At the local and state level, this dissertation showed how experienced progressive activists, in their attempts to mobilize new activists, employed rhetoric that
matched the collective identity frames (Benford & Snow, 2000) that many such activists had developed through their experience on the Sanders campaign. Experienced Party activists both at the state and local level worked to help new activists negotiate their relationships with the Party, and to facilitate their entry process through acts such as engagement, education, and community building.

This dissertation showed that activists have several paths through which to enter the Democratic Party, including by engaging with local multi-issue progressive groups. These groups serve as entry points for activists to engage in consistent progressive activism aimed at pushing the Party to the left on issues and, in some cases, reforming its processes towards more democratic ends. Campaigns also continue to facilitate the entry of new activists into Party politics (Nielsen, 2011). Just as those activists who went “Clean for Gene” in 1968, joined Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition in the 1980s, or became part of a Democracy for America group after Howard Dean’s 2004 campaign, became durable contributors to the Democratic Party (Katsiaficas, 1987; Kerbel, 2016; Rising, 1997), this dissertation revealed how many Sanders supporters did the same. This dissertation showed how new activists involved themselves in the Party structure via both the ADEMs and the joining and forming of local progressive groups. That said, for this iteration of activists, the boundaries of the Party were more diffuse than for their predecessors. Whereas the Dean-inspired Democracy for America groups in California all became chartered Democratic Clubs with tacit links to the California Democratic Party (Larimore-Hall, 2014), many groups that emerged in 2016 and 2017, such as Our Revolution, actively organized as distinctly separate from the Party.
In Chapter 3, the case of the 2016 convention delegates showed how individuals who were inactive in politics entered the Party for the first time via the decision to engage in tangible activism aimed at securing the Democratic nomination for Senator Bernie Sanders. It then saw those same activists enter further into the Party as they announced their intention to compete to be Sanders’ delegates. Their role as delegates meant they not only entered Democratic Party politics as activists working to change the Party from the metaphorical inside, they also engaged in activism from physically inside the Party’s most public of events, the Democratic National Convention. While many of these delegates considered themselves outsiders, I argue that by crossing the country, contributing to debates shaping the Party from both the convention floor and committee meetings, and acting impassionedly on behalf of a candidate’s nomination, they had inarguably, even if possibly temporarily, entered the Democratic Party. Following the convention, these delegates renegotiated their initial entry collectively, as they engaged in debates or whether to #DemEnter and “try to take over the Party” or #DemExit the Party in response to what they saw as unfair treatment of Sanders. The fact that they were deciding between “DemEntering” and “DemExiting,” is notable, as that dichotomy discursively placed them simultaneously inside and outside of the Party at that moment.

In Chapter 4, the decision to #DemEnter represented a further incremental step into the Party, this time into its formal structure via the ADEMs. After Kimberly Ellis lost the race for Party chair, many of these delegates had to again renegotiate their prior decision to enter the Party, as the avenues for a sudden overthrow of the leadership had been exhausted. Staying in the Party would thus require a strategic switch, and to enter
even further in, by committing to engaging in “institutionalized voice” (Hirschman, 1980, p. 439) by crafting and submitting resolutions and through other formal Party processes.

Vertical Voice and Progressive Activism
The final question I set out to answer in this dissertation was, what does voice look like in the context of the progressive activism and the Democratic Party. In conducting this research, I realized that horizontal voice, as discussed above, was largely related to my questions about how activists negotiate their relationship with the Democratic Party. As such, this question was largely about what vertical voice looks like in the context of progressive Party activism. Across these chapters, the unique contexts that exist for convention delegates, state Party activists, and local progressive groups meant that specific acts of vertical voice varied significantly between chapters. And yet, several strategic goals associated with the use of vertical voice remained constant. I argue that the most common aim of vertical voice by Party activists is to hold political leaders accountable to grassroots Democrats. Beyond accountability, activists also use vertical voice to increase the prominence of progressive ideas and discourse, promote candidates or issue positions, mobilize other activists to political action, and to put pressure on Party leaders and elected officials. Further, the use of social media by activists allowed them to engage in vertical voice in new and collective ways.

Technology and Vertical Voice
Throughout this dissertation, technology played a role in enabling instances of vertical voice in a variety of ways. In Chapter 2, I argue that social media allowed motivated, networked activists to subvert the long-standing media practices surrounding large-scale
political conventions. I showed how protestors used social media as a means to hold Clinton and the DNC accountable for what the activists viewed as unfair treatment of Sanders throughout the 2016 primary. I also revealed how activists at the in-person convention carried out coordinated protests around specific issues predetermined by activists in advance of the convention. Compared to the convention delegates described by Pomper (2007) as having, over several decades, “been reduced to (literally) dumb claques who (literally) applaud on cue for the show’s top banana,” the Sanders delegation engaged in numerous efforts aimed at critiquing the Clinton campaign and the Party. Using social media, the 2016 delegates were able to increase the visibility of their activism, publicizing via social media protests that took place at moments that would have previously been considered mundane, such as delegation breakfasts and rules committee meetings. Several times, activist coverage of these events was picked up by legacy media resulting in even more visibility.

Whereas planners of recent conventions have made successful attempts to coordinate delegates’ use of social media for “active spectatorship” to highlight support for the nominee (Kreiss et al., 2015, p. 3), I showed that the 2016 delegates used the real-time nature of social media (Poell & van Dijck, 2015) to turn the tables on Clinton and the Party. I showed how social media provided them the ability to coordinate carefully timed actions on the convention floor that publicly critiqued Clinton and the Party, and to provide supporters outside the convention with real-time coverage of aspects of the convention that were normally not included in convention coverage by journalists. In the process, they took advantage of the potential for crowd-enabled connective activism.
(Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), as they connected online with members of other delegations throughout the arena to carry out larger actions and help publicize their activities to a wider audience outside the convention via social media. In the context of the 2020 convention, I also showed how, in a more controlled environment with a less strong sense of collective identity, progressive groups can serve to mobilize activists via organizationally-enabled connective action.

In Chapter 4, I again showed how social media can help progressive Party activists hold leaders accountable, this time in the context of the state Party, by making instances of Party activism and Party processes more visible. At the ADEMs, activists used social media platforms to engage in real-time reporting of what they saw as problematic activities, ranging from long lines, to the arrival of large busses of supporters sponsored by elected officials, to questionable ballot-handling procedures. At state conventions, progressive activists used digital messaging platforms to summon other activists to observe, and in some cases protest, the activities of Party leaders at committee meetings and other events. Social media was also used by activists to enable more public forms of protest, such as calling out elected officials for changes in Party policy or organizing protests at events, as the Progressive and Environmental Caucuses did to criticize the DNC’s refusal to hold a presidential debate focused on climate issues. At the 2017 and 2019 CDP state conventions, activists again engaged in protest of Party leaders, this time at the state level convention. In both the ADEM elections and the 2017 race for Party chair, social media provided an avenue for activists to point to irregularities in the Party’s internal elections and demand accountability from Party leaders.
Vertical Voice and Loyalty

In Chapter 5, we saw vertical voice operationalized by local groups through a variety of activities, including endorsements; op-eds; protests and the co-sponsoring of electoral activities. Via these tactics, local progressive groups not only pursue progressive goals, but also define what it means to be progressive. I laid out how at the group level, there are numerous tactics—levers that its members can pull—as they carry out progressive activism and define their collective identity. I introduced the concept of Party-First and Party-Second to explain the underpinnings behind differences in selection of strategies and tactics that play out across progressive groups. What becomes clear in examining these groups is that exit, voice, and loyalty, as well as entry, are not as distinct as one might expect. Hirschman argues that lack of loyalty can be mitigated by confidence in one’s ability to bring about change. This could then explain a Party-Second group’s continued involvement in Democratic Party politics. But this presumes a conception of loyalty to the party that is increasingly out of sync with research on how citizens are conceiving of themselves in reference to parties and other institutions. What emerges from this research is that progressive Party activists are often loyal to the cause of progressivism or to their identity as a progressive or a progressive Democrat. As such, I also argue that identity is an equally useful moderator of exit and voice. Given the role that identity plays in the individual and collective decisions around when and how activists choose to act politically (Polletta & Jasper, 2001) including both loyalty and identity within the framework provides additional theoretical space for articulating why those who lack loyalty to the party as an institution would choose to continue to remain in the party politics and exercise their voice.
Learning Politics and Developing Partisans

This dissertation research also produced findings that extended beyond my initial research questions, contributing to our understanding of how people learn to carry out political action and adapt those actions over time through an ongoing learning process, in some cases guided by experienced leaders and in other cases through their own experience of trial and error. After activists entered the Party via the Sanders campaign, their experience in self-organizing served as a form of “practice” (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011) through which they became prepared for future political activity and developed a sense of their own political efficacy that facilitated their participation in delegate elections and their planning of and executing of actions at the convention. Their successful experiences in network mobilization during the Sanders campaign were carried by many of these activists into the ADEMs, where, at least outside of the most heavily Democratic districts, they were successful. They then brought the same tactics to the Ellis campaign, where they came up short, and had to reorient themselves to the incremental realities of intraparty activism. At this juncture, some activists decided to exit, or at least retreat to extra-Party organizations such as Our Revolution, as their personal identities and vision of their roles in politics was more in line with the more radical activity they carried out as part of the 2016 Sanders delegation. Others remained involved in a combination of ways, as ADEMs working to change the Party via more mundane insider tactics, such as resolutions, rule changes, and attempts to influence the Party platform.

Others begin their Party activist journey via local Party groups engaged in community organizing, educative activities, and electoral work. I argue that via these
processes, both groups and individual activists develop the repertoires of strategies and
tactics discussed in Chapter 4 and develop an understanding of when and how to use
them to mobilize tangible political action. This learning process, often via trial and error,
is not just about the efficacy of tactics, but also about the development of individual
activists. As activists learn what is and is not successful, and try new things in other
contexts, it helps them develop a sense of themselves as activists and an understanding of
what they want to do in the Party. The ongoing process of determining one’s position in
reference to the Party is in itself the navigating of one’s personal identity. The decision to
enter further into the Party, retreat, or exit, depends on how individuals see themselves
and their own political possibilities. The process of engaging with the Party and feeling
like one is making progress can also serve to bring them further into the Party, eventually
identifying as part of the institution and developing an identity as a partisan.

While the above outlines processes through which individual activists learn
politics, this dissertation also revealed that learning and renegotiation of practice also
takes place at the group level. In Chapter 4, I showed how recently, the discourses and
tactics of certain Party-Second groups have shifted such that they are beginning to subtly
resemble Party-First groups. Just as individual activists go through a process of trial and
error as they engage in different tactics for achieving progressive goals, the same is true
for groups. Party-Second groups may find that leaders in their membership are
collectively taking steps to “enter” further into the Democratic Party, by getting involved
in the formal Party structure. Groups that two years ago were organizing car caravans to
protest in front of a legislator’s home are now supplementing those activities with
mobilization of members to attend public meetings and engage in the Party’s get out the vote efforts.

This process of learning Party activism, as well as the fluidity through which activists negotiate their identity in reference to the Party via multiple groups and activities, can also help explain actions that to some, seem like co-optation or contradiction. For example, the recent landslide win by Governor Gavin Newsom in the 2021 California recall election included significant grassroots organizing support from progressive Democrats in California who have often complained that his policies were not sufficiently progressive (Bernstein, 2021). That said, all evidence from this dissertation makes it completely unsurprising that progressive groups would support Newsom in this context. As this dissertation has argued, progressive groups can be placed in one of two typologies, Party-First and Party-Second, both of which strategically prioritize the Democratic Party at certain times. Even Party-Second groups don’t line up opposing against Democrats all the time, they have wider goals. Some might engage in strategic protest votes, even voting for Jill Stein in 2016. But strategic is just what those votes are. In 2016 Trump was never going to win the state and a vote for Jill Stein in California had little to no risk of changing an electoral outcome. As we saw with DSA-LA in Chapter 4, some groups might walk a fine line between choosing to formally endorse in a race vs making a pragmatic recommendation. Progressives saw the recall as what it was: a blatant attempt by a minority of Republicans to leverage Newsom’s admittedly stupid personal behavior early in the pandemic towards a gubernatorial recall. Writing in LA Progressive in August 2021, Amar Shergill, chair of the CDP Progressive
Caucus called for unanimous support for Newsom in the form of organizing efforts, pointing out that unlike his opponent, Newsom would likely:

sign almost every progressive bill passed by the Democratic-controlled legislature…continue to deploy resources to limit the spread of COVID while a Republican replacement will pander to anti-vaxxers and put us all at greater risk. Should Senator Feinstein retire or fall ill, Governor Newsom will appoint another reliable Democrat to the US Senate and keep the Democratic majority intact, while a Republican replacement will bring all DC legislation to a halt by appointing a Trump-friendly train wreck. . . .It may not be as energizing as the Bernie campaign or the Nina Turner campaign, but it is definitely worth the effort. We need to get in the game (Shergill, 2021).

Similarly, though with the discursive tone expected of a Party-Second group, SF Berniecrats posted:

Let’s be honest – we’re no fans of Gavin Newsom. Yes, he’s still a corporate Dem, and No, he’s not nearly as progressive as we’d like him to be. But you know what, he has handled the COVID-19 pandemic better than most other governors in the country for a state our size. Right now the polls show that if the recall goes through, we WILL have TRUMP-SUPPORTING conversative radio host LARRY ELDER as governor. The governor proposes the state’s budget to the legislature, has veto power, and handles things like the pandemic response. Having a Republican in that seat WILL do a LOT OF DAMAGE (San Francisco Berniecrats, 10/10/2021).

These quotes exemplify how, across progressive groups, activists make strategic choices as to when to engage in activism at odds with the Party. Both of these groups would prefer a more progressive governor, but they see the strategic value in opposing the recall, and also see the opportunity to write about it as a means to express their group’s collective identity and understanding of progressivism.

Moving forward, I expect progressive activists to continue to evolve and learn, with some certainly becoming more institutionalized within the formal structures of the Democratic Party and others to maintain their staked-out position just inside the edge of
the Party, working to holds its leaders accountable to grassroots activists. As mentioned in Chapter 4, these group and personal identities are fungible and exist in the broader sociopolitical context of the state of California as well as their local communities. Groups will also be influenced by happenings at the national level. For example, the national arm of Our Revolution announced in late July that it will rebrand as “Pragmatic Progressives” as it works to move beyond its association with Bernie Sanders. From the research conducted via this dissertation, I find it unlikely that these Party-Second groups will be interested in that new name. As such, they will have to find new organizations with which to affiliate and again renegotiate their collective identity in reference to the Party, in an ongoing, reflexive process.
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