

Reviving the mass organization for social movements? The meaning of membership in the Democratic Socialists of America

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Abstract

What does membership mean in a mass organization today? Work in the sociology of social movements and civic organizations indicates a long-term decline of movement organizations with mass memberships in the United States. Movement organizations have moved from membership to management, as professionalized advocacy organizations with "checkbox" memberships replaced formal, democratic mass organizations. Since 2016, however, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a left-wing political organization, has experienced surprising growth using the mass organization model. In this ethnographic case study of a DSA chapter, I find that recruitment in DSA has been mostly "virtual-individualistic", not occurring through bloc recruitment; that membership is bifurcated between "paper" and "activist-cadre" groups; and that while the structure of the organization theoretically permits a third type of "effective but non-intensive" membership, this is not realized in practice. I conclude with some comments on the generalizability of the new mass organization form for social movements today.

Keywords: social movements, organizations, mass parties, democratic socialist movement, civil society, DSA

Introduction

What does membership mean in a mass organization today? In the United States and Europe, sociological research on civil society—the social space existing between the state and the economy—indicates that patterns of voluntary organization and group-formation have changed significantly over time. In the United States, voluntary civic associations have moved from "membership to management" (Skocpol 2003). Large organizations which once brought Americans together across local communities, with common ideologies, thick collective identities, and democratic practices, have given way to lean, nationally-centered, and professionalized organizations, which relate to their members more as clients than as constituents. In the realm of politics and social movements, mass parties with large and democratically-empowered memberships were once powerful vehicles for expanding political and social citizenship in liberal democracies (Abbott and Guastella 2019). But mass-membership political parties never took root in the United States, and throughout Europe they have been in steep decline (Mair 2013, van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

However, the obituary for the democratic mass organization may have been written too soon. Since 2016, just such an organization has reemerged in the United States: the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). DSA has the formal structure of a mass-member, federated civic organization or mass party. The organization is built around a membership that pays dues and exercises democratic decision-making powers at both local and national levels. Between 2014 and 2021, DSA's membership grew explosively from around 6,500 to 95,000, an increase of over 1300% (Schwartz 2017, DSA 2021b). Its local chapters and organizing committees have multiplied from around 20 in 2012 to over 320 today, spanning all 50 states, while organizational decision-making is conducted through representative processes similar to those once employed by federated membership organizations (DSA 2023a, YDSA 2023). DSA is the largest socialist political organization in the U.S. since the Communist Party's implosion in the mid-1950s (Schwartz 2017).¹

In addition to its organizational innovations, DSA has also made remarkable political inroads for an anticapitalist organization. It now claims over 100 elected officials as members, including five members of Congress (Dreier 2020), with socialist elected officials organized into over a dozen state legislative caucuses, and a "win rate" of 59% (DSA 2022).² Though not legally registered as such, DSA expresses certain features of political parties, such as candidate recruitment, fundraising, and competition on Democratic Party ballot lines, and the organization is formally committed to building a "party-like organization" that is "independent of the Democratic and Republican Parties" in the medium-term future (DSA 2023b). Official political education courses for members in DSA emphasize the importance of building a "mass organization", and the organization's rapid growth and confident aspirations have led observers in the mainstream media to describe DSA as representing a "true movement, and of some mass" (Tracy 2019). In addition, DSA seems to be part of a generational cohort of left-populist "movement parties" in Europe and Latin America, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and Morena in Mexico—and, more broadly, a movement "from protest to politics" on the left (Della Porta et al. 2017, Panitch and Gindin 2017; Temocin 2021). Theoretically, studying this case of mass social movement organization (SMO) revival also responds to a call among social movement scholars for a turn back towards the study of formal organizations, after a long period of emphasizing informal networks, institutions, and online activism (Soule 2014; Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021).

This article presents findings from three years of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in a large urban DSA chapter in the period 2018-21. First, I discuss empirical changes in the forms of civic and social movement organization and

¹ Reliable membership figures for other U.S. socialist organizations are hard to come by, but one informed commentator estimates that the second-largest socialist organization is the Communist Party USA, thought to have around 8,000 members in 2021 (SocDoneLeft 2023).

² A dynamic list collecting information on DSA members holding elected office is available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Democratic_Socialists_of_America_public_officeholders.

theories explaining these shifts. Second, I discuss the method and data of this ethnographic case study, which was carried out with the aim of producing "movement-relevant theory" (Bevington and Dixon 2005) for the democratic socialist movement and other social movements. Third, I present my empirical findings on the meaning and practice of membership in DSA. Three key ideas are discussed: DSA's "virtual-individual" pattern of membership recruitment, the division between "paper" and "activist-cadre" members, and the unrealized structural potential of an intermediate, "effective but non-intensive" model of membership.

DSA, I argue, represents a departure from the modal forms of organization among American left social movements and in civil society more broadly. In its formal embrace of membership, a federated and constitutional structure, representative (not professional) leadership, and a self-funding model, DSA differs from managerial advocacy organizations and networked, horizontal movement organizations. However, my research indicates that, in practice, a layer of activist members tends to dominate chapter life. Until DSA organizers can institutionalize practices to accommodate less-intensive forms of member participation, DSA's aspirations to become a "mass organization" may go unrealized. Indeed, in 2022-23 DSA has experienced a sharp decline in its membership to a current level of 57,000, making this problem an urgent one for its activist layer (zZz and K 2023). And yet, DSA's historic success in electing socialist politicians and raising the political profile of socialism may still encourage imitators in the larger organizational fields of left social movements and, perhaps, civil society more broadly.

The decline of mass-membership organizations in civic and political life

Why is it sociologically significant that DSA has emerged as a formal organization with a large membership, local-national linkages, and an emphasis on democratic decision-making? In short, because this kind of organization was once very important for extending the interests of non-elite social groups, but has been in decline for generations. In the mid-twentieth century, groups which once involved millions of Americans in socially-thick and intensive forms of participation began transitioning "from membership to management", in Theda Skocpol's phrase (Skocpol 2003). These *classical mass organizations* were replaced by two different kinds of organization: professionalized, nationalized, and clientelist *advocacy groups*, and loosely-structured, localistic *horizontalist groups* of the radical left. A similar process of erosion and fragmentation has affected *mass parties*: political parties with large memberships, programmatic ideologies, and constituencies that are "externally-mobilized" from outside elite milieus (Abbott and Guastella 2019, Shefter 1994). Though mass parties have not historically been central to American politics, they were vital to achieving extensions in political and social citizenship in European countries. Over recent decades, they too have been in steep decline (Mair 2013, van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

In its structure and strategy, DSA resembles both civic mass-member voluntary organizations and mass parties—or, at least, comes much closer to resembling these forms of mass organization than other contemporary left-wing social movement organizations in the United States. In addition, as I show, intellectuals associated with DSA, and representatives of the organization itself, consciously seek to emulate the historic mass parties. Understanding these two related types of organization and what has happened to them is therefore important for understanding DSA's own significance and pattern of development. In turn, DSA's successful renovation of the mass organization model could react back upon other social movements and civil society, encouraging other groups to adopt a similar form of organization.

From membership to management: the thinning of mass civic organizations

Prior to the 1960s, American civic life was dominated by a type of organization that involved millions of people in translocal networks of interaction, with frequent face-to-face meetings, distinctive rituals of solidarity, and democratic self-government. These organizations were both vertical and horizontal: their federal structure tied together local branches across an expanding nation, and a common set of cultural practices connected members laterally between cities, states, and regions. Beginning in the struggles for national independence and unity around the Revolutionary War, fraternal and voluntary associations like the Odd Fellows, Masons, and the American Temperance Society proliferated and modeled themselves on the new constitutional federalism of their country. New communication infrastructures supported by the federal state, especially the postal service, enabled "joiners" on the frontier to connect with national organizers. Overall, between 1810 and the 1990s, American organization-builders constructed 58 voluntary associations that enrolled 1% or more of U.S. adults as members (Skocpol 2003:27).³

Skocpol and her colleagues find that, contrary to conventional wisdom that assumes civic organizations emerged from the "bottom-up" in thousands of small towns and cities, civic associations were nearly always founded by a core group of organizational leaders, then seeded "from above" as members diffused outwards with the expanding nation. America was indeed a "nation of joiners", in Arthur Schlesinger Sr.'s phrase, but it was led by a "nation of organizers" (Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson 2000). Most major voluntary associations were founded before local chapters and the development of large memberships. This was so because this "translocal", federal model could simultaneously support "intimate solidarities" among local groups of war veterans, Shriners, and teetotalers and a national, extensive collective identity. Skocpol writes that "multiple tiered national federations were the key institutional supports of American voluntarism,"

³ This figure excludes political parties and religious denominations. For associations that recruited members based on gender, 1% of the population of American adult men or women is the benchmark.

because of their success in combining these intensive and extensive social identities (Skocpol 2003:89-97).

Membership in these organizations was intensive, ritualized, and emotional. Members attended frequent local meetings, accepted positions of responsibility as officers, and developed skills as speakers and organizers, record-keepers and facilitators. Though groups did sometimes offer instrumental benefits to their dues-paying members, like old-age insurance, Skocpol notes that "the appeal of America's most successful membership federations went far beyond individual economic calculation." (2003:84) The appeal of the largest federations was moral and ideological—though their micro-scale benefits to social capital were also important (Putnam 2020).

Membership also frequently cut across class lines. These were "segmental" power organizations (Mann 2012) that bound together individuals across divisions of occupation, status, and, less often, religion and ethnicity (racially-integrated associations were very rare). But by and large, civic associations were not bourgeois-led organizations. Douglas Rae argues that "a majority of all civic organizations were headed by regular folks for whom high office was not the routine expectation in life" (quoted in Skocpol 2003:107). And though popular associationalism was hardly a guarantee of popular liberalism (Riley 2019), this historical phase of civil society genuinely did nurture the "great free schools" of democracy described by Alexis de Tocqueville (2003). For example, cross-denominational mass associations of Christian reformers were the institutional bases of temperance and abolitionism, the first national social movements in the United States (Young 2002).

This format of organization began declining steeply in the 1960s for multiple reasons, including the declining social acceptability of racial and gender segregation and the mass entry of women into the workforce. The organizations that emerged to replace traditional civic groups were nationally-centered (not translocal) nonprofit associations run by professionals. Groups like Common Cause, the National Organization for Women, and the Children's Defense Fund exploited new institutional levers to influence public policy in Washington, D.C. Innovations in direct-mail solicitation allowed for the new advocacy organizations to interact with "members" solely as individuals—face-to-face meetings were less necessary for raising funds or making decisions.

Skocpol identifies the broad process as a withdrawal of elites: a rising professional-managerial class endowed with new techniques of strategic action had less need to mobilize ordinary people (Skocpol 2003:178). While some of these new "tertiary associations" retained formal memberships, the meaning of this membership was redefined away from face-to-face participation, democracy, and "thick" collective identity, and towards a desocialized, "thin" model of service provision, with members rendered more like clients. Matthew Painter and Pamela Paxton (2014) report declines between 1994 and 2004 in the percentages

of voluntary association members who participate actively, and increases in the proportions of "checkbook members" who donate but never attend meetings.⁴

How is this history relevant to understanding DSA? Though DSA enrolls far fewer members than the mass organizations profiled by Skocpol—currently, around 0.02% of the American population, not 1%—its model of organization is unusual in how it departs from the professionalized advocacy model typical since the 1960s. Organizational policies are determined by representative-democratic institutions similar to those of classic voluntary groups with bylaws and constitutions. While there is a staff bureaucracy in the organization, it remains small in proportion to the growth in membership: just 32 full-time staffers in an organization with 95,000 members in 2021 (DSA 2021b). Local DSA chapters have autonomy to develop their own campaigns and strategies within parameters set by the national organization, and there is no professional board of directors supervening over elected leadership.

Antipathy towards the conventions and limitations of the nonprofit "third sector" is, of course, also a characteristic of more radical, "horizontalist" social movement organizations (Fong and Naschek 2021; den Hond, de Bakker, and Smith 2015; INCITE! 2017). However, DSA is also distinct from this latter type of organization. Like both classic voluntary associations and professional advocacy organizations, and unlike horizontal movement groups, DSA manages to retain both extensive coordination and intensive authority without sacrificing membership democracy. At least in the history of American civil society, DSA's closest analogue is probably the federated voluntary organization. However, in terms of ideology and aspiration, DSA is undoubtedly more inspired by a different kind of organization: the mass party.

Weapons of the working class: the mass party

In a recent review, Jared Abbott and Dustin Guastella define the mass party as an "externally-mobilized" political organization which differs in structure, ideology, strategy, and social base from "internally-mobilized" parties. The spatial metaphor is adapted from Martin Shefter and refers to the historic concentration of political power in the hands of old regime and bourgeois insiders in courts, legislatures, and capitols. As excluded outsiders, the working-class movements formed during the Industrial Revolution (as well as movements of national and religious minorities) found it necessary to, in Shefter's words, "bludgeon their

⁴ The question of whether associational social capital (i.e. membership in formal organizations like civic, faith, or local community groups) is actually declining in quantitative terms has been contentious in the literature, owing in part to data limitations. The General Social Survey (GSS) stopped asking respondents about voluntary association participation in 2004. Using an alternative survey source, Weiss, Paxton, Velasco, and Ressler (2019) found that total associational social capital appeared to be stable, not declining, during the years 2008-13. However, their data does not address qualitative changes in the *meaning* of this associational social capital, i.e. the shift from active to passive membership in civic associations found by Painter and Paxton (2014) for the years 1994-2004. For evidence pointing to declining overall U.S. social capital in the 21st century, see Putnam and Garrett (2021).

way into the political system by mobilizing a mass constituency" (Abbott and Guastella 2019, Shefter 1994).

The nascent mass parties, located predominantly in European countries, lacked the economic resources for patronage or the connections to broker agreements with elites, and so were forced to involve ordinary people much more intensively, and find novel ways of binding them together in a common project. Most obviously, mass parties needed to substitute membership dues for donations from capitalists and agrarian elites, and the mobilizing labor of party members for the institutionalized electoral advantages of elites under conditions of limited suffrage. Beyond their dues obligations, members were socialized into a distinct identity as partisans and organization-builders—an identity which was reinforced by the "encapsulation" of party electorates in relatively homogeneous communities (Mair 2013:77-82). These parties were also compelled to develop party programs to hold candidates accountable and provide a means of assessing the performance of party leaders. The opportunistic drift of politicians in office was checked by the need to maintain the mobilization machine of party members and preserve the party's identity in the electorate. Rather than being "catchall" parties, then, mass parties of political outsiders became ideological, centralized, and relatively democratic (Kirchheimer 1966).

The mass party was an effective structure for counteracting ruling-class efforts at conciliation and repression. Indeed, these parties, write Abbott and Guastella, were "the single greatest weapons the working class has ever produced" (2019:15). From the 1860s onwards, they played a key role in winning extensions in civil, political and, later, social citizenship, though these gains would not be stably institutionalized until after the Second World War (Eley 2002). The democratizing pressure of mass-movement parties forced significant concessions from elites and gave rise to what Mair calls the "golden age of party democracy" (2013:81). However, this "golden age" has now passed. Mair, along with his colleagues Ingrid van Biezen and Thomas Poguntke, argue that parties have been losing their capacity to effectively organize society and carry out democratic representation through party government. Their data show steep secular declines, beginning in the 1980s but accelerating dramatically in the 1990s, in electoral turnout, the consistency and stability of partisan preferences in the electorate, and, most dramatically, rates of party membership. As a general explanation of these trends, Mair points to the effect of economic globalization reducing the scope for state-directed economic management, and the declining coherence of social "cleavage structures" over the neoliberal period (2013:55-59; van Biezen and Poguntke 2014).

These remarks apply mainly to European party systems. In the United States, a mass party of labor never cohered. Most explanations for this emphasize some combination of the deep ethnic and racial fragmentation of the American labor movement during the Second Industrial Revolution; intense state repression; the two-party bias created by plurality-voting, single-member electoral districts and a strong, nationally-elected presidency; and the strategic efforts of the Democratic Party in the New Deal-era to "articulate" a new constituency by

incorporating key sectors of organized labor (Foner 1984, Mann 2012, Domhoff 2013, Eidlin 2016). The "safety valve" effect of the settler-colonial frontier also played a role (Grandin 2019). The effect has been to produce an American party system in which the two major parties are decentralized and internally-mobilized. The Democratic and Republican parties rely on donor funding, not dues, and their supporters are registered party voters, not members with rights and obligations. Both parties are dominated by their officeholders: party leaders are elected by other elected politicians, not rank-and-file supporters (Abbott and Guastella 2019:22-23). Finally, the two establishment parties are embedded more in the state than in civil society—what Katz and Mair call "cartel parties." Voters register as party supporters through government institutions, party primaries and internal officer elections are regulated by the state, and state-regulated ballot access rules conspire against third parties (Katz and Mair 1995, Ackerman 2016).

How is the theory of the mass party relevant to DSA? First, DSA already bears some resemblance to the ideal-typical mass party sketched by Abbott and Guastella, and debate within the organization seems to be converging on the goal of forming an independent working-class party (Brower Brown and Reade 2023). The organization is externally-mobilized, having been founded in 1982 as a merger of two small left-wing networks of labor socialists and New Left activists, not elite insiders (Aronowitz 2010). Its resources are generated internally: in the first half of 2021, 89.6% of DSA's budget was funded through membership dues (DSA 2021b). Members are also endowed with formal democratic rights and are, to a degree, expected to participate in the organization's internal activities and culture. In comparison to the mainstream parties, DSA's formal structure is centralized and representative-democratic, with local chapter organizations electing delegates to a biennial convention that in turn constructs a national program and elects an executive to implement it.

The organization is ideological not "catchall", with a universalistic political worldview of democratic socialism. DSA also embraces a mass-mobilization strategy, instead of an "inside" strategy that relies on elected officials or labor leaders to bargain with elites over policy. For instance, in 2019 the organization's national convention passed a resolution endorsing a "class-struggle elections" strategy, which directed DSA candidates and elected officials to

see mobilizing and fighting alongside working people as one of their primary responsibilities... [and] [c]ommit to using their campaigns and elected offices to help build and unite socialist, union, and other worker organizations and militancy independent of candidates' campaigns and of the Democratic Party (DSA 2019).

This same resolution also states that "in the longer term", DSA aims to form an "independent working-class party," a position reaffirmed at the organization's 2023 convention (DSA 2023b).

In both the voluntary mass organization described by Skocpol and the mass party described by Abbott and Guastella, the ability of members to self-organize, elect a representative leadership, and construct an intensive collective identity is necessary for the overall success of the organization. For the federated voluntary organization, this group solidarity is more an end than a means, while in the mass party it is a necessary step towards external political goals. For both types of SMO, however, the task of cultivating a self-conscious and committed mass membership is fundamental. But after decades of decline for mass movement organizations, what does membership mean today in an organization like DSA? This is the question addressed by the rest of this paper.

Data and methods

This research employs an ethnographic method involving participant observation in the field with a DSA chapter and in-depth interviews with DSA members. My ethnographic approach consisted of 11 weeks of continuous participant observation fieldwork with the Portland, OR chapter of DSA in the summer of 2018. For three years after the conclusion of primary fieldwork, I continued to intermittently travel to Portland and conduct observations and interviews. My participant observation in Portland DSA during the intensive research period involved attending work meetings where campaigns would be planned and chapter business conducted; externally-oriented political events where DSA members would engage in a demonstration or direct action to accomplish some strategic goal; and social gatherings where members and interested newcomers would deepen personal relationships, as well as debate politics and strategy. Jottings were produced in the field and then elaborated as fieldnotes for later analysis using a grounded theory method (Charmaz 2014).

In total, I conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with chapter members.⁵ Interview subjects were selected to help trace Portland DSA's history and structure as a supplement to my direct participant observation. For my interviews, I used a theoretic sampling method (Warren and Karner 2015), and sought out chapter members in leadership and cadre positions within the organization (often described by members as the chapter's "core"). These positions provided a vantage point from which to narrate a wide variety of chapter processes. They included, for example, developing the chapter's merchandise operation, organizing a "socialist day school" with DSA speakers, or carrying out a contentious revision of chapter bylaws at the end of the organization's first year.

Interviews with these core organizers helped me analytically reconstruct chapter processes that I may have missed as a direct participant-observer. By the time of my involvement in the summer of 2018, the chapter's division of labor was already highly varied (and growing rapidly), with at least 19 formal or quasi-formal subgroups to carry out different organizational functions, such as communications, fundraising, planning social events, and so on. My participation

⁵ For participant privacy, interviewees are identified by randomized initials.

strategy was to attend as many of these different chapter happenings as possible, with site visits selected randomly by means of the chapter's online public event calendar. This gave me a wide-angle view of life in Portland DSA, but mostly prevented close involvement with any single group or program, which would have allowed me to follow its development over time. I compensated for this weakness with my process-tracing interview strategy, and also by following along with the activities of unfamiliar working groups and projects using the chapter's internal communications platform, Slack.

This research was conceived from the start as an exercise in producing "movement-relevant theory" (Bevington and Dixon 2005)—that is, to develop concepts from the categories and dilemmas articulated by movement participants themselves. The aim is to "[put] the thoughts and concerns of the movement participants at the center of the research agenda and [show] a commitment to producing accurate and potentially useful information about the issues that are important to these activists." (ibid., 200) I am myself a member of DSA, and my participation in the organization's activities was (and is) a product of sincere commitment to DSA's program and ideas. This commitment, I feel, facilitated closer ethnographic engagement with DSA participants, but it also imposed a critical control on my theory-building: attachment to the success of a social movement should *incentivize* both accuracy in research and the willingness to criticize one's research subject, in the interest of solving real organizational and strategic problems within a movement. In Bevington and Dixon's words, "[t]his engagement not only informs the scholarship but also provides an accountability for theory that improves the quality of theory." (ibid, 190)

Case selection

Why choose Portland DSA? And can findings from this single-chapter case study be generalized to say something about DSA as a whole? I believe that they can. Case selection was determined first by research site accessibility: Portland DSA was the nearest large DSA chapter to my university. While DSA chapters vary widely in size and some do exist in rural areas, I wanted to examine a large urban DSA chapter because DSA has had its greatest political impact in major cities like New York City, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Portland DSA was also one of the largest chapters formed during the period of DSA's explosive growth from 2016-20. Prior to 2016, active DSA chapters existed in only a handful of large cities: Atlanta, Detroit, Chicago, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. In late 2016 and 2017, spurred by the moral shock of Donald Trump's election as president, a wave of new chapters were founded across the country, and by the end of 2017 there were already around 300 local groups (Heyward 2017). In addition to being a large urban chapter, Portland DSA struck me as a clear case of the "new DSA" (Meyer 2019) because it was founded in this new wave, and lacked a consolidated "old guard" of pre-2016 DSA members. At the end of its first year in December 2017, Portland DSA had around 800 members. In 2023, the chapter has around 1,700 members, making it the sixth largest DSA chapter in the country.

How did the sociology of that new chapter compare to that of the organization as a whole? Fortunately, some quantitative data exists to answer this question. Four nationwide membership surveys have been conducted in DSA's history, in 1991, 2013, 2017, and 2021 (DSA 2021a). These surveys asked respondents questions about demographics, engagement with DSA, and their ideological identity and issue priorities. Taken together, the surveys capture the dramatic social and political transformation in the organization that occurred in the second half of the 2010s. A similar survey, billed as a "chapter census," was conducted in Portland DSA in 2019, one year after my period of active fieldwork (Portland DSA 2019).⁶ Comparing these surveys indicates that the Portland DSA membership in 2019 was basically similar in its social and political formation to the larger national membership in 2017 and 2021. The average Portland DSA member, like the average DSA member, was a white, male, young professional with an annual household income of around \$70,000, whose issue priorities were climate change, health care reform, solidarity with workers, and racial justice.

A plurality (42%) of Portland DSA respondents were between the ages 25-34, while the median age of all DSA respondents in both 2017 and 2021 was 33. Nine in ten Portland DSA respondents were white; in DSA in 2021, 85% of respondents were white. 67% of Portland respondents were male, compared to 75% (2017) and 64% (2021) of DSA respondents.⁷ A plurality of Portland DSA respondents (26%) had household income between \$25,000-\$50,000, while a plurality of DSA respondents (35%) in 2021 reported household incomes between \$20,000-\$60,000. The Portland survey did not ask about educational attainment, but in 2021 41% of DSA members had a bachelor's degree, and 35% had a masters or doctoral degree. 21% of DSA respondents in 2021 were union members, while 22% of Portland members were employed in a unionized workplace.

Politically, Portland members reflected the priorities of the national membership, prioritizing (in descending order) ecology, healthcare, labor solidarity, and racial justice. In 2021, all DSA members reported prioritizing the same set of issues in the same order. In terms of engagement, 66% of Portland DSA respondents reported being "active", and 40% of respondents spent three or more hours per week engaged in DSA activities. 66% of DSA respondents in 2021 reported that they "had attended a DSA meeting or engaged in DSA activism," while similar proportions of Portland DSA members (14.9%) and all DSA members (13%) reported never attending DSA meetings (of course, inactive "paper members" were underrepresented in all of these surveys). Taken together, these figures

⁶ The 2017 survey had a response rate of 3,240 DSA members, or 16% of the 20,000 DSA members at that time. The 2019 Portland DSA survey received responses from 428 members, or 29% of the ~1,475 chapter members. The 2021 survey, conducted at DSA's membership peak, received 12,971 responses for a response rate of 14% of the 95,000 members at that time. Data from these surveys are available upon request to the author.

⁷ The skewed gender ratio in DSA precedes its 2016 "rebirth": 76% of members in 2013 and 70% in 1991 were male. Note that the overall figures obscure significant recent growth in LGBTQIA+ membership, from 18% in 2017 to 32% in 2021. Between 40-55% of DSA members under the age of 30 self-identify as LGBTQIA+.

indicate a basic similarity of background, outlook, and engagement between Portland DSA members and the overall population of DSA members in the years 2017–21, and provide a basis for making some measured generalizations about the organization as a whole.⁸

Empirical findings and discussion: the meaning of membership in a DSA chapter

In this section, I present empirical findings on DSA and interpret these data. Here, I concentrate on the meaning of membership. I find that membership in the organization is bifurcated in a *participation fork*. One group, the *paper membership*, includes approximately 75% of chapter members, and is defined by its lack of participation in internal chapter work, its atomization (the lack of connective networks between individual "paper" members), and its invisibility to a second, smaller group of activists. This second group, which I term the *activist-cadre*, meanwhile, carries on most of the labor of organizational reproduction through a *voluntarist* method of action. I discuss structural, political, and cultural forces in DSA that may contribute to the phenomenon of participation inequality. Then, I discuss a possible solution: a latent structural potential of DSA to sustain an *effective but non-intensive* form of membership, which I argue has been unavailable in advocacy and horizontalist-type movement organizations of the recent past.

The participation fork: paper and activist-cadre

Membership in DSA comes in two basic varieties: "paper" and "activist-cadre". The great majority of DSA's explosive membership growth has been of the first type. Painter and Paxton (2014) report increases in the share of "checkbox" members in American voluntary associations—members who pay dues or donations, but do not involve themselves directly in face-to-face settings with other members.⁹ Active DSA members use a similar term for this population: "paper members". Though members report different feelings about the term "paper membership", its basic meaning is widely understood: paper members are individuals who pay dues to the organization, appear on local membership rolls dispatched to DSA chapters by the national office, and receive communications from both the national office and their local chapter affiliate, but who do not appear at DSA events. In particular, paper members do not attend internal gatherings where chapter policies are discussed and work is organized. They are, by definition, not present.

⁸ The interviews with DSA members presented in Freeman (2019) paint a broadly similar picture of the social and political base of the organization.

⁹ Painter and Paxton note that "the increase in checkbox memberships is smaller than the decline in active memberships", implying that tertiary associations have not succeeded in replacing active memberships even in quantitative terms (2014:421).

The proportions of the activist and paper membership layers in Portland DSA can be determined by looking at rates of participation at general membership meetings and usage statistics for the chapter's internal communications platform, Slack. The monthly general meetings are the decision-making assemblies for Portland DSA, and the "internal" events that draw the largest number of chapter members ("external" political events—a protest, door-canvassing event, etc.—may on occasion draw larger numbers). However, attendance at general meetings has rarely included more than 10% of total membership. Similarly, on Slack, active users on the platform (those who log onto the system at least once a week) only slightly exceed the monthly averages for general meeting attendance, and are again dwarfed by the overall membership figures. The graph below, shared with me by Portland DSA's Membership Working Group, shows the overall pattern between 2017 and 2020 (fig. 1).

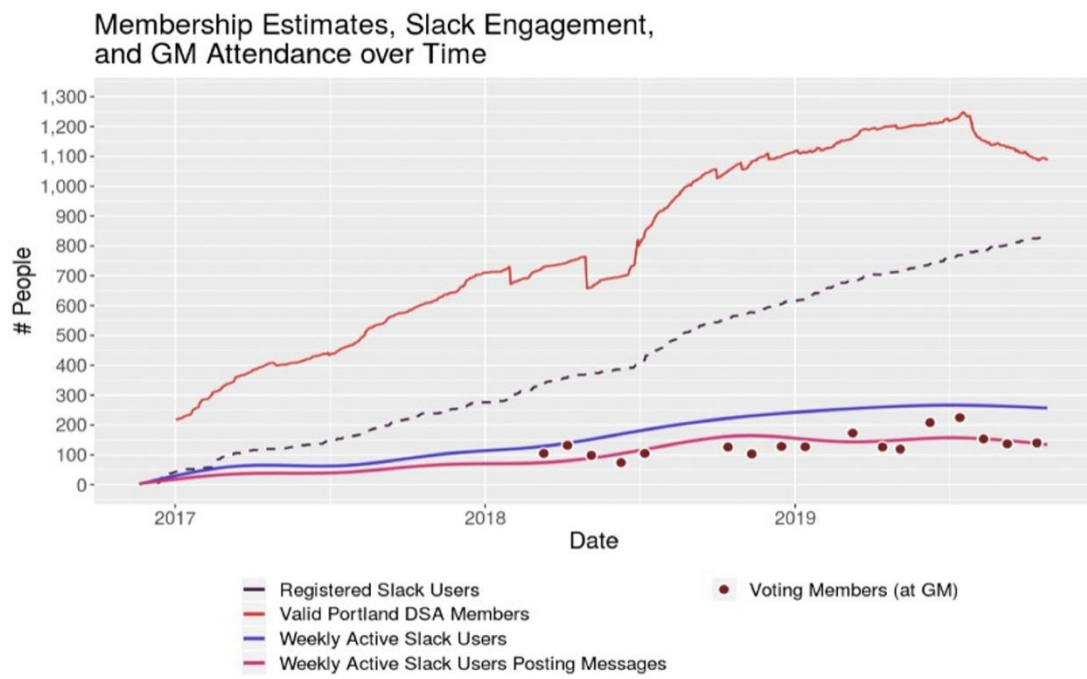


Fig. 1: Membership, Slack usage, and GM attendance

My participant-observation experiences support the overall trends shown in this data. External political events, internal meetings for decision-making and strategizing, and social events for building camaraderie are all disproportionately places for a core of activist members. While nearly every meeting would feature some quantity of new recruits—at each monthly general chapter meeting during my period of observation, never less than one-fifth of the 100-150 attendees were new or first-time participants (and sometimes as high as one-half)—overall rates of participation were still always much lower than the on-paper membership. In addition, the high proportion of inactive members seems related to problems in

retaining members from year-to-year. In late 2019, the chapter had an annual member retention rate of around 67%.

This gap in participation is a puzzle. In both its formal structure and aspirations, DSA resembles the mass organizations of the early 20th century, and the politics of socialism has traditionally been associated with very strong intensive identities and high levels of commitment.¹⁰ But the participation pattern among DSA members is more similar to the disembedded advocacy organizations described by Skocpol and Robert Putnam. What can explain this participation fork, by which some members recruited to the organization follow a path of intensive involvement, and others of diffused, passive membership?

"What are we not providing?": explaining the participation fork

One highly-involved DSA member, PM, spent three years in the chapter organizing a system to manage membership data and on-board new members. She describes the work of the chapter's membership team as "primarily [revolving] around new people who are sort-of regularly visible people"—those who attend meetings and can, therefore, receive membership services: being credentialed as voters, connected to particular areas of internal chapter work, introduced to social gatherings, and so on. PM's mention of "visibility" points to a key dilemma for volunteer organizers in the chapter: those who aren't visible are far more difficult to reach, and because they are difficult to reach, it is difficult to know much about this population. PM comments that "because they're inactive, it's really hard to figure out why they're inactive."

A mid-2019 survey of chapter membership attempted to gather data on this population, and was initially branded as a "census" intended to reach every member—around 1,250 people at the time. Unfortunately, the "census" only elicited 423 responses. The paper membership remained opaque, and organizers interested in nurturing more participation remained frustrated. Reflecting on the issue, PM remarks that "it's definitely on us [chapter organizers]. Like, what are we doing wrong? You know, what are we not providing?" Nevertheless, PM's close involvement with the chapter and familiarity with the membership rolls gives her some leverage to make inferences about these invisible socialists. She notes that the term is a "shorthand" that actually refers to three groups, who, she thinks, are each "on paper" for different reasons:

PM: ...those are three categories, right? The people who don't want to be involved, but want to support us [1], the people who do want to be involved, but can't figure out how [2], the people who were involved but you know, things have shifted, and either their life has changed, or perhaps DSA has changed,

¹⁰ See, for example, Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (New York, NY: Verso, 2020).

and they don't want to be, or their perception of DSA has changed and they don't want to be involved anymore. Or they're just taking a break. [3]

How should this phenomenon of participation inequality be explained? Researchers have long observed a relationship between movement mobilization and political opportunities (McAdam 1999). My research indicates that the quantity and quality of DSA's membership involvement is influenced strongly by external events. Since 2015, DSA's growth has been consistently associated with political events outside of the organization's direct control. In his study of DSA, Nathan J. Robinson (2022:224) notes that "national politics heavily drive local recruitment." In Portland DSA, surges of overall membership growth connected to national political events would yield predictable increases in rates of participation for both external chapter campaigns and internal administrative labor and predictable decreases in participation after the galvanizing moment had passed (fig. 2). For example, a large spike in membership occurred in summer 2018, when the surprising primary victories of Rashida Tlaib in Michigan and, especially, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York put DSA members into Congress for the first time since the 1990s. This unanticipated surge wasn't limited to Portland: national DSA membership increased from around 30,000 in October 2017 to 40,000, just after Ocasio-Cortez's primary victory on June 26, 2018 (DSA 2017, Resnick 2018). Only two weeks later, national membership had leaped up to 45,000 (DSA 2018).

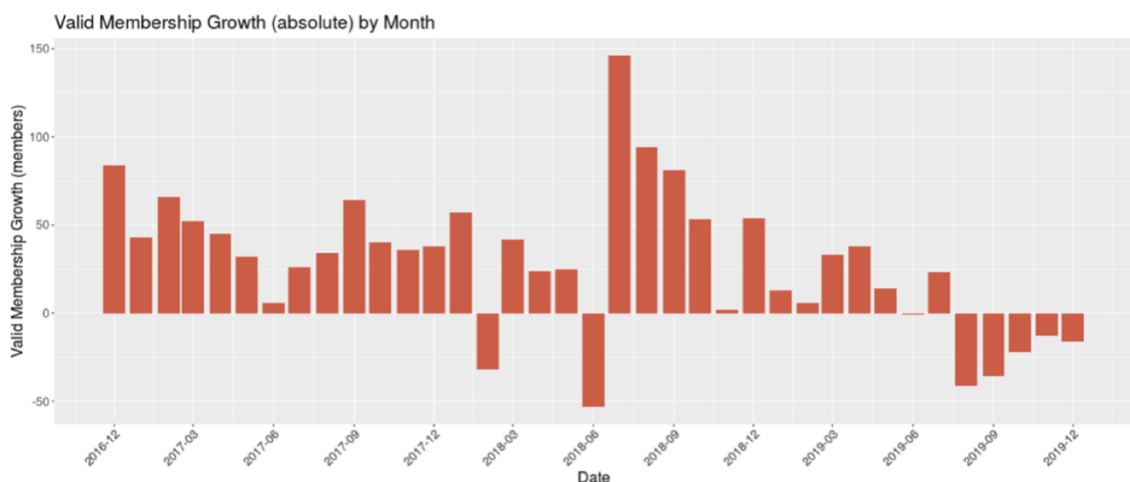


Fig. 2: Portland DSA membership growth, Dec. 2016-Dec. 2019

This is a general structural dynamic affecting any movement organization. However, in the case of DSA, some additional, non-structural factors may help explain the paper membership issue. The first is political. Antonio Gramsci wrote of party members criticizing their leaders "realistically", by dispersing or remaining passive before certain initiatives" (1971:150-51). Viewed this way, mass

disengagement may be a kind of uncoordinated vote of disapproval at the actions of organizational leaders. Rather than a technical problem, of too few opportunities to "plug-in" or too few mentors for new recruits, the issue may be that paper members perceive political differences between themselves and activists, but lack collective organization to contest their leadership.

This may have been the case in Portland DSA in winter 2021, when a reform slate of candidates promising changes to the chapter's political direction won a plurality of seats on the chapter's leadership committee in an unusually high-turnout general meeting—perhaps the largest in the organization's history, according to PM. Significantly, this group's strategy involved targeting members in the second and third categories of paper member: those who "do want to be involved, but can't figure out how", and disillusioned individuals who were once involved, but whose "perception of DSA has changed." The incumbent faction in the election, by contrast, seemed to rely on its superior networking within the activist core. By politicizing the issue of participation hierarchy, the opposition group was able to win a (partial) mandate to "build a mass movement" through "widespread participation in campaigns," according to its election platform.

The second relates to the particular form that recruitment takes in DSA. Supporters become DSA members through a process that is virtual, taking place online, not through face-to-face interactions, and individual, taking the form of a decision made by a single person filling out a form. This is different from "bloc recruitment", in which pre-structured networks of people are brought as a collective unit into a social movement organization (Tilly 1978). From its inception, Portland DSA has attracted members in ones and twos. At the first meeting of the organization, on November 19, 2016, 18 people attended, but "everyone at that meeting were strangers, basically, except for like three people", according to one attendee, SC.

The role of networks, especially those formed through face-to-face interactions, is understood by DSA organizers. A recent national training call conducted by the organization emphasized the distinction between "structure-based" and "self-selecting" organizations, and the staff leaders of this call were candid with the fact that DSA is a self-selecting organization that relies on recruits pushing their way in, rather than joining through networks.¹¹ The absence of pre-structured networks of interaction between members means that the organization itself is the primary site through which membership networks can develop. Face-to-face mobilization ties cannot be formed for members who never set foot in the social space of DSA. Direct mobilization ties also seem more likely to increase new recruits' ambitions. One interviewee who had joined through the "virtual-individual" pathway explained that he had joined DSA simply to feel that the organization had grown: "I just want[ed] to be one more number to add to that list" [of members].

¹¹ The distinction between "structure-based" and "self-selecting" organization is drawn from Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

The third factor affecting participation is cultural, and seems specific to a period in which civil society and social movements have been dominated by two competing logics of organization: "advocacy" and "horizontalism". The first is best represented by nationally-centered nonprofit lobbying groups with extensive bases of supporters who give regular dues but usually possess few means of participating more actively or influencing the policies of the organization. The second is exemplified by loose associations that come together during protest movements and are structured mainly as networks, not formal organizations with clear boundaries and leaderships (Kauffman 2017, Tufekci 2017). Participation in these latter groups is often very intensive, with status and authority allocated on the basis of commitment. For the first type of organization, membership is *clientelistic*, and for the second, it is *voluntaristic*. DSA's novelty lies in the way that it combines in one structure the politics of an antisystemic movement association with the mass base of supporters characteristic of advocacy nonprofits.

But despite the formal conjunction of these elements in DSA, ideas about the meaning of membership seem mostly to remain in the advocacy/spontaneist binary. This is apparent in the responses my informants gave when asked about how the participation issue could be ameliorated. Most often, the answer is to find better ways to turn paper members into activists. PM, after narrating to me the process of "mobilizing" a new member, accepted that the idea of mobilization was to produce a member regularly engaged in the internal meeting labor of activists:

David: And so the people who are, let's say, effectively mobilized, maybe they get a phone call—I guess the idea then is that they then become a regular sort of, like attendee of a meeting, of a particular working group or campaign, and then they're contributing to that work in that way.

PM: I mean, that would be what we hope.

Frequently, the figure of the "organizer" is offered as an alternative to producing activists. Another informant, EV—a fierce critic of what he calls "activist-ism"—suggests that DSA insiders should seek "to get [paper members] activated, like, as *organizers*... that is our duty." (emphasis added) This may not be an effective alternative for paper members, however. The "organizer" role may differ from the activist role in its method of building power—by developing the motivations and capacities of ordinary people, rather than by mobilizing the most committed volunteers (Han 2014)—but it is not necessarily different in the demands it makes on an individual's time, intensity of involvement, specialized knowledge, and so on.

I refer to the "organizers" described by EV as an "activist-cadre." These members are the visible face of DSA. They are individuals who, voluntarily and without the aid of very many preexisting organizational "structures of socialization," participate intensively in the life of the organization. They are "activists" because they devote a large part of their free-time and energy into building DSA and

carrying out its activities, and fuse their identities and personal networks into those of the organization. And they are "cadre" because they are, in a way unlike activists in most new social movements, "framed" into the functional scaffolding of a structured organization (in French, *encadrement*). But despite being formally framed into a division of labor, the actions and strategies of these members are mostly "voluntaristic"; for the most part, they are not determined by organizational inducements or sanctions, though some of these inducements and sanctions do exist. This activist-cadre is larger and expresses a more developed division of labor than that which could be supported by looser, network-type movement associations, but their methods remain characteristic of activism.

One interviewee, JX, describes the activist-cadre method of organization as a kind of "voluntarism." JX was an early chapter joiner, and very early in 2017 he attended a general chapter meeting. There, he was "struck by the fact that there appeared to be nothing for new members to do. So I was like, 'okay [claps for emphasis], I can solve this problem.' So, basically by myself, [I] went and started a canvassing program for single-payer healthcare." It was a relatively successful program, according to JX, but it was driven by the energy of a few volunteers like him, not by any decisions or sanctions coming from the organization:

JX: During that entire process, the leadership never asked me about what I was doing, or the decisions that I was making. I was basically figuring things out on the fly. I only ever had to justify myself to the chapter once, at a general meeting. And my motion to start a campaign passed unanimously, basically.

After leaving the chapter for a year and then returning again, he began to realize that "it seemed like everything else that the chapter had done kind of followed the same model," where volunteers drive a particular project or campaign that is never "explained or justified to the membership how that [campaign] fit[s] into any broader strategy."

My data support JX's claim: chapter projects and campaigns are rarely initiated by organizational leadership and ratified democratically by the membership. Instead, they are usually begun through the self-directed effort of a few intensively-involved members, who develop a project, gather a group of supporters around themselves, and then simply begin doing the work under the banner of Portland DSA. Another member, FS, who was at the time a co-chair of the chapter's Membership Working Group, describes the effect of the "voluntarism" identified by JX on the structure of the organization. In his opinion, voluntarism contributes to a conception of DSA as an "activist hub," a place where members share their autonomously-initiated projects with each other and try to recruit support for them. This produces an eclectic organization—FS calls it "scattered"—with little centralized identity. FS instead favors what he calls an "organizing model" that involves building chapter capacities: "anything

that is not in the service of growing the chapter and its influence and resources should be deprioritized."

Effective but non-intensive membership

The voluntarist model of organization plausibly contributes to the participation fork issue. The structural reliance on voluntarism in DSA means that ordinary members without the capacity to commit intensively will feel disempowered. But DSA's configuration as a (proto-) mass movement organization, I believe, makes possible a third type of membership, what might be called "effective but non-intensive" membership. Effective but non-intensive membership would entail conversion of the dichotomous paper member/activist-cadre participation structure into a smoother, gradational pattern, with a substantially larger layer of intermediate participants between the paper membership and activist-cadre. These moderately-engaged members would be defined more by their *possession of organizational skill* than by their actual level of involvement. Though they may not be consistently present in internal work, these members would have the practical knowledge necessary to monitor the activist-cadre and understand factional disputes. This bloc would be most visible in the organization as rank-and-file volunteers for external campaigns, and as an informed and self-confident electorate in chapter democracy.

There are, I believe, three missing conditions for activating this structural potential in a contemporary mass movement organization: (1) effective and visible political tendencies within the organization; (2) internal media, bulletins, and communications to explain intra-organizational processes and politics; and (3) consistent, structured external political campaigns that provide meaningful but *limited* involvement for rank-and-file members. First, the DSA experience shows the importance for mass organizations of visible, stable political formations rooted inside the structure of the larger organization. DSA has now passed beyond a threshold of size in which political divisions (and organizational processes) are difficult to comprehend for any individual member, even one in the activist-cadre. Observers of intra-DSA politics have noted that this is true for the national organization (Sernatinger 2021), but it now also seems to be a reality in larger urban chapters (Portland DSA now has around 1,700 members). Mass organizations seeking to involve their rank-and-file members need to ensure that those members can form and participate in defined caucuses, which can clarify the stakes of conflict and articulate clear programs.

Second, and related, effective but non-intensive members can only become "informed citizens" in a mass organization by means of centralized, accessible media to report on happenings in the organization. In DSA, activist-cadre can learn about developments in the organization firsthand from members initiating new organizational or political projects, or they can use their superior networking in the online "socialist public sphere" on Twitter, but these channels are not accessible to less active members (Barnes 2020). News of political developments in DSA can be gleaned from Twitter, but only by following the right accounts—a

time-consuming and opaque process. Mass movement organizations of the past frequently had a robust set of internal publications that could meet this need. Some of these media do exist for DSA, but are fragmented across many communication networks (e.g. DSA's official website, its two in-house publications, an internal DSA web-forum, and various caucus and chapter-based publications). Future mass organizations could provide resources for a range of internal media to support an informed membership base.

Third, effective but non-intensive members need regular, structured external political campaigns that they can participate in. The key characteristic of this form of participation is that it does not involve the mundane (though very important) "infrastructural" labor of attending meetings, preparing lists of contacts, and concentrating resources. In DSA, this kind of work, which is the specialty of the activist-cadre layer, can be discouraging for new members who are most interested in making a concrete difference in the world outside DSA. The best kind of work for involving new members sustainably seems to be tasks like phone-banking, canvassing, and solidarity protests, with clear on-site leadership, instructions, and time-windows. Mass organizations need to offer a range of continuous and low-intensity forms of participation that can involve non-activist members, and help them feel collective self-efficacy as members.

The case of DSA shows the importance of ensuring the rights of internal tendencies and caucuses, supporting intra-organizational media and communications infrastructures, and establishing routine, low-intensity forms of participation for members. By institutionalizing these practices, nascent mass movement organizations can nurture a role for "effective but non-intensive" membership, and break free of both the top-down advocacy model and the horizontal network model of social movement organization.

Conclusion: from management to membership?

This paper has applied arguments about changing patterns of civic and political organization to analyze the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America. DSA, I argue, is potentially reinventing the mass organization model for social movements in the United States. It is similar in certain respects to both mass-member voluntary organizations in American civic life and the mass parties of European social democracy. However, participant observation and interviews in a DSA chapter qualify this comparison. Though it incorporates a larger and more active membership than many left-leaning advocacy organizations, and sustains a more even pattern of participation than "horizontalist" movement organizations, the meaning of membership in DSA doesn't match up to the mass organizations of the early 20th century.

Membership in DSA bifurcates in a participation fork between a small core of intensively-involved activist-cadre and a much larger group of paper members. I discussed structural, political, and cultural reasons why this may be the case. Then, I theorized an intermediate type of membership, which is potentially available but not realized in practice: the effective but non-intensive member,

who does not involve themselves with infrastructural work but still possesses enough organizational skill to participate in democratic processes and feel emotionally attached to the organization. Finally, I discussed some necessary preconditions for creating this intermediate type of membership, which I argue will itself be a precondition for sustainably reinventing the mass organization model.

This work could be extended in several ways. Future research could try to examine the meaning of DSA membership for paper members themselves. Comparative-historical research could also examine how "self-selecting" movement organizations become "structure-based" over time through processes of bloc recruitment, encapsulation, and political articulation, and how these processes may or may not be applicable to DSA (Mair 2013, Eidlin 2016, McAlevey 2016). Finally, research could explore whether and how DSA's re-formation as a mass organization spreads to other groups in a process of mimetic isomorphism (Powell and DiMaggio 1983). While DSA's larger base of members has given it a mobilization edge that contributes to its political successes, the organization's democratic socialist ideology and identification with the working class may make it difficult or impossible for established advocacy-type organizations to adopt its practices. In particular, DSA's ideological subordination of a professional staff to an empowered membership may be simply unacceptable for organization-builders in the professional class. If this is the case, DSA's partial advance from "management to membership" may remain unique in the landscape of American civic and political organizations.

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FS, phone interview with author, Portland, Oregon, December 5, 2019

JX, phone interview with author, Portland, Oregon, January 29, 2021

EV, phone interview with author, Portland, Oregon, February 2, 2021

PM, phone interview with author, Portland, Oregon, May 10, 2021

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