



JOE TODD

BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND CONTROL

COMPARING THE BELGIAN WORKERS' PARTY AND THE
DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA





ROSA LUXEMBURG FOUNDATION

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JOE TODD

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Joe Todd is the former Head of Communications at Momentum and co-founder of The World Transformed, Common Knowledge and The Movement Research Unit. He blogs at New Party, Old Problems and co-hosts the Life of the Party podcast.

COVER IMAGES

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KEY FINDINGS

■ **The Belgian Workers' Party (PTB) and Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) are very different organisations.** The PTB is a disciplined and ideologically coherent Marxist party built around a highly dedicated, militant cadre that is tightly bound to the leadership. It prioritises coherence, continuity and top-down direction, at the cost of looser movement-style experimentation. The DSA is a broad, multi-tendency socialist organisation with autonomous chapters, powerful ideological caucuses and distributed centres of power. It maximises openness, plurality and transparency, at the cost of uneven capacity, factionalism and a limited ability to direct a national strategy and programme. Despite being cited in tandem on the UK left, they are very different organisations, and to be more like the PTB is often to be less like the DSA, and vice versa.

■ **Both are adaptations to specific historical and political contexts.** The disciplined cadre and shared line of the PTB is directly linked to its decades-long history as a Maoist cadre organisation. Its centralised and unitary character work well in a small, densely urbanised country of around ten million people. The autonomy and pluralism of the DSA are rooted in its historic anti-stalinism, the weakness of the American left and the sheer scale of the USA. The generational

remaking of the DSA – with 97% of its current membership joining after 2016 – is an accident of history. In his first presidential campaign Bernie Sanders popularised the phrase democratic socialism, and tens of thousands of people went looking for an organisation.

■ **PTB maximises control and unity, DSA maximises autonomy and pluralism.** The PTB is a democratic centralist organisation with a strong leadership and a collectively agreed line. Disagreement is processed through internal debate at congress, after that members are expected to follow the line. The organisation is highly knowable to the leadership with efficient vertical information flows, a relatively unitary structure and ideologically trained cadre spread across the organisation. The DSA is a pluralist socialist organisation with a weak leadership and no collectively agreed line. Disagreement is continuous and sometimes public, entrenched by the 12 ideological caucuses who, alongside the chapters, are the real source of power in the organisation. DSA is better thought of as an energetic organism, constantly evolving and changing in experimental and ad hoc ways, to the extent that nobody can fully grasp it in its totality.

■ **PTB base groups are small units of accountability, DSA chapters are sprawling organisations unto themselves.** Base groups in the PTB are no larger than six – 13 people, members are expected to attend each meeting and contribute, branches can be neighbourhood or workplace based and members are assigned to base groups by the leadership. Each base group follows the same formula, like a cog in a larger machine. They aim to build accountability and consistent relationships over time. Chapters in the DSA can have thousands of members across an entire city or state, there are no formal obligations for members, chapters are always geographically based and members decide themselves how to get involved. Each chapter has its own structure, by-laws and culture, and can often be thought of as an organisation unto itself. They prize autonomy and self-initiation rather than consistency over time.

■ **PTB has a dedicated militant layer, the DSA is a single-layer voluntocracy.** The PTB has three membership layers: consultative members who pay a small fee and receive communications, base group members who pay dues and attend local meetings and highly dedicated militants who give large amounts of time and money to the party, voluntarily donating their wages above €2,400 a month to the party.

Graduating through the membership involves meeting with party representatives as well as undergoing political education and training to ensure alignment. The DSA has a flat membership where new members can get involved very quickly and assume roles and responsibility, as long as they have the time to give. All members can become delegates to convention and can vote on the organisation's local and national leadership.

■ **PTB struggles to recruit younger people, the DSA is dominated by millennials. Both struggle with blue collar non-graduates.** The PTB has been shaped by its founding cadre and the slow accumulation of an experienced, highly committed militant layer. This makes generational turnover difficult even when the leadership prioritises it. The DSA was completely remade by the post-2016 Bernie Sanders surge, which flooded the organisation with millennials who were able to take initiative and get involved very quickly because of the DSA's openness and emphasis on autonomy. Both organisations struggle to attract blue collar non-graduates, in line with broader patterns of political polarisation in the UK, France, Germany, the USA, Belgium and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

IT IS STILL COMMON FOR PEOPLE ON THE BRITISH LEFT TO CITE THE PTB AND DSA IN TANDEM. THIS IS A PROBLEM. AS THIS REPORT WILL SHOW, TO BE MORE LIKE THE PTB IS OFTEN TO BE LESS LIKE THE DSA, AND VICE VERSA.

The Belgian Workers Party (PTB) and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) are regularly cited as sources of inspiration for a new left party and the Green Party in the UK. There are good reasons for this. They're both socialist organisations that have enjoyed considerable membership growth and electoral success in recent years, including the election of DSA member Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York,^[1] and 15 PTB members winning parliamentary seats in Belgium's 2024 federal election.^[2]

Particularly interesting is how they've achieved success while maintaining their distinct identities and practices as socialist organisations. This includes an emphasis on building ideological and committed cadres, pursuing non-electoral forms of power and taking socialist transition seriously.

However, the two organisations are very different in structure, culture and context. The PTB is a disciplined and ideologically coherent Marxist party built around a highly dedicated, militant cadre that is tightly bound to the leadership. It prioritises coherence, continuity and top-down direction, at the cost of looser movement-style experimentation.



The DSA is a broad, multi-tendency socialist organisation with autonomous chapters, powerful ideological caucuses and distributed centres of power. It maximises openness, plurality and transparency, at the cost of uneven capacity, factionalism and limited ability to direct a national strategy and programme.

The key characteristics of each organisation can be summarised as in Figure 1.

Despite these differences, it is still common for people on the British left to cite the PTB and DSA in tandem. This is a problem. As this report will show, to be *more like* the PTB is often to be *less like* the DSA, and vice versa. It's also the case that each organisation is historically and contextually specific, and it isn't possible to copy and paste them into the UK.

This report attempts to slow the conversation down and introduce some detail. It compares the DSA and PTB as real, lived organisations with specific histories, architectures and strategic dilemmas. With an emphasis on structure, it asks what kinds of political work each is capable of doing, and what, if anything, might usefully be adapted for a left party project in the UK.

FIGURE 1: A summary table of key differences between the PTB and DSA

	 PTB	 DSA
HISTORY	Maoist cadre	Broad left, anti-stalinist
POWER	Centralised in the militants and leadership	Informally distributed between chapters and caucuses
TRANSPARENCY	Opaque	Transparent
PLURALISM	More homogenous	Highly pluralistic
STRUCTURE	Tiered membership	Flat membership
DEMOCRACY	Emphasis on outcome	Emphasis on process
LEADERSHIP	Strong	Weak
INFORMATION FLOWS	Structured vertical	Informal horizontal
TYPE	Political party	Socialist organisation
BRANCHES	Small, geographic or workplace and party-assigned	Large, geographic and self-selecting
POLITICAL EDUCATION	Centralised in party	Mostly decentralised to caucuses
COMPOSITION	An older cadre, more diverse supporter base	Downwardly mobile, white millennial graduates

METHODOLOGY

The report is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with organisers and leaders in both organisations, as well as a close reading of various internal and publicly available organisational documents, including each organisation's most recent congress and convention reports. This includes DSA chapter leaders, caucus organisers, members of the Democracy Commission, and staff members; PTB militants, base-group presidents and new members.

Both organisations, in different ways, were challenging to study. The DSA's culture of transparency and pluralism meant that interviewees were openly critical of the organisation and this helped in identifying the organisation's weaknesses. However, its sprawling and ever-changing nature made it hard to properly grasp and summarise.

The PTB is easily described in structural terms, with a single, unitary organisation and clear lines of accountability and power. However, its strong democratic centralist culture meant interviewees were less likely to criticise the organisation, sometimes referring to leadership approved congress documents rather than giving their own opinion. I hope I have accounted for these differences in what follows.

The report draws on scholarship on the populist moment of the 2010s (Borriello & Jäger), analyses of the PTB as a contemporary radical-left workers' party (Delwit), Paulo Gerbaudo's work on platform parties, and Maurice Duverger's classic distinction between mass and cadre parties.

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1. ORIGINS AND CONDITIONS

WHY PARTY CONTEXT MATTERS

WHAT I THINK IS DISTINCTIVE IS THIS KIND OF PRAGMATISM. WE ARE NOT AFRAID OF CHANGING ROUTES, CHANGING PATHS IF WE SEE THAT SOMETHING DOESN'T WORK, AND WE HAVE THIS TRADITION OF SELF-CRITICISM WHERE AFTER EVERY CAMPAIGN WE ASK WHAT WE DID WRONG.

Base group member, PTB

WHEN I JOINED DSA, WE HAD MAYBE A HUNDRED ACTIVISTS MAX NATIONALLY. THE NEW YORK CHAPTER HAD BASICALLY DISAPPEARED AND HAD TO BE REBUILT FROM SCRATCH IN 2015.

Neal Meyer, DSA member

From Maoist cadre to mass party

The PTB was formed in 1979 as a small Maoist cadre organisation rooted in student circles who went to work in the shipyards and ports of Antwerp. For decades it was, in the words of one long-standing cadre, a “little party with a very big head”: a highly centralised cadre leadership with limited embeddedness in working-class life. Internal discussions were dominated by a sectarian posture: “we’re right, and if others don’t agree it’s because they’re not smart enough”, as one staffer summarised.

Two forces led them to reorientation. The first was failure. The party remained small, its electoral performance negligible, its presence in the unions limited. The second was the cautionary tale across the border. The Dutch Socialist Party, itself formed from Maoist currents, had grown and then “liquidated” much of its previous politics in order to become a conventional social-democratic party. PTB leaders were determined to avoid that trajectory.

The response was the 2008 “Congress of Renewal”. Over a period of 4 years, militants debated draft documents that critically assessed the party’s history and proposed a new strategic orientation. A PTB staffer

explains that they aimed for “a very serious balance”, and that the congress “totally changed” the party’s self-understanding: “We totally changed from a little party with a very big head and very few ties with the people, to a party whose central activity is in the base groups.”

The PTB relaunched as a “principled, flexible” party of the working class. Principled in their maintenance of a Marxist core and class orientation; flexible in their willingness to adopt new tactics, rhetoric and organisational forms to reach a broader audience.

This meant a new, populist orientation focussed on the day to day concerns of the Belgian working class, as well as a tiered membership system that encouraged more casual engagement with the party. Combine these innovations with a focus on elections, and the party achieved a significant increase in membership and parliamentary representation since 2008.

Belgium’s institutional context made this strategic reorientation both necessary and feasible. It is a relatively small country of around ten million people, characterised by dense urbanisation and historically strong “pillars” in which social democratic and Christian democratic parties – together with the trade unions – organised working-class life “from cradle to grave.” Unions routinely distribute public funds, including unemployment benefits, to a majority of Belgian workers.

As neoliberal reforms weakened the pillars of social democracy, the PTB identified an

opportunity to “replace social democracy from the left.” It would do this by building a highly centralised yet mass-based workers’ party, well suited to operating within a compact national territory and fighting for control of highly centralised trade-union structures.

A pluralist socialist organisation renewed by Bernie Sanders

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) has almost a mirror-image trajectory. It emerged in 1982 from the merger of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) and the New American Movement (NAM).

From the outset, the organisation was anti-stalinist but otherwise pluralist. It brought together social democrats, Marxists, trade unionists, feminists and civil-rights veterans in a single structure, but without a tightly enforced line. Rather than an electoral party that runs DSA branded candidates, it is a socialist membership organisation that endorses and campaigns for candidates, most of whom run in Democratic Party primaries. As one contemporary interviewee puts it, the DSA is “a socialist organisation, not a registered political party” with all the ambiguity that entails. It has members and candidates, but the latter are not bound by a classic party discipline in the way European socialists might expect.

The US electoral context is important. A first-past-the-post, two-party presidential system dominated by huge spending, big amorphous parties and severe barriers to

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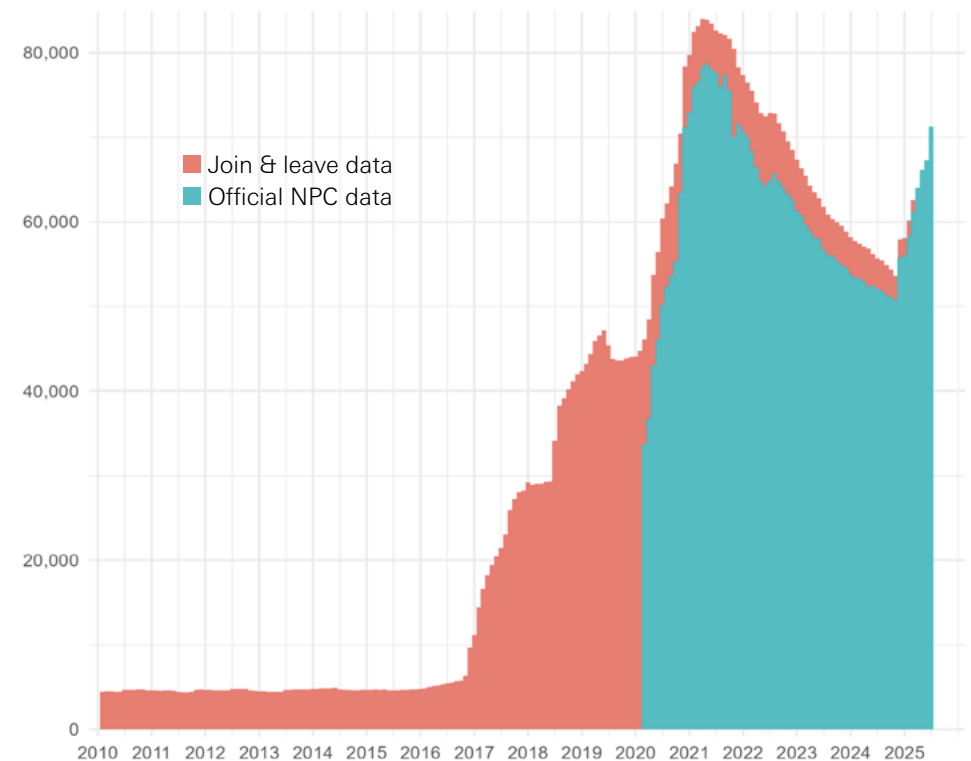
competing in elections makes independent socialist parties difficult to sustain. The DSA’s structure is an adaptation to this hostile environment. It is an organisation that locates itself “in and against” the Democratic Party rather than fully outside it.

The timing of DSA’s explosive growth is also important. For three decades the DSA remained marginal, with a few thousand members at most. One interviewee who joined in the early 2010s recalls that “there were a hundred or so activists nationally”. The 2008 financial crisis, Occupy, and the radicalisation of a generation saddled with debt and insecure work transformed the organisation.

There have been four DSA membership surges since 2010. The first Bernie Sanders’ campaign in 2015 and the subsequent election of Donald Trump, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez’s primary win in 2018, Bernie Sanders’ second campaign in 2020 and finally Zohran Mamdani’s campaign in 2025. From 2015 chapters in New York, Chicago and elsewhere were effectively built from scratch by new organisers in their twenties and thirties. Local organising and structures

were improvised under conditions of rapid growth. That period of improvisation, and the fact that it was driven by volunteers rather than a pre-existing apparatus, is a large reason for the heterogeneous and amorphous character of the DSA, explored in more detail below.

FIGURE 2: DSA members in good standing by month 2010 – 2025, State of DSA Report 2025



Note: Join-leave estimates differ from DSA/NPC estimates. Join-leave data treats rejoiners as if they never left.

2. ORGANISING

HOW DO MEMBERS TAKE ACTION?

IF A BASE GROUP HAS MORE THAN TEN MEMBERS, WE TRY TO SPLIT IT, BECAUSE OTHERWISE IT'S REALLY DIFFICULT TO HAVE A GOOD DISCUSSION WITH EVERYBODY.

Staff member, PTB

THE CHAPTER IS THE LOGISTICAL UNIT OF THE ORGANISATION. ESSENTIALLY ALL OF DSA'S ACTIVITY, WITHIN THE MARGIN OF ERROR, HAPPENS IN CHAPTERS.

Ramsin Canon, Chicago DSA

Small, nationally directed base groups

PTB's base groups are deliberately small, usually six to thirteen people. If a group grows beyond that, it is expected to split. As one base-group president in Brussels puts it, "if a base group has more than ten members, we try to split it up because otherwise it's really difficult to have a good discussion with everybody." This is to ensure members build relationships with each other, and accountability is developed between base group members.

Base groups are organised by territory (a neighbourhood, a small town) or by workplace. Base groups are standardised across the party. They meet monthly, typically for around two hours, with one hour of political education, usually determined by the national leadership, and one hour of planning and evaluating local work.

Membership in a base group is highly structured. New sympathisers first become consultative members, paying a small annual fee and receiving communications and invitations to events. At this point, they don't attend a base group meeting. To become a base member, a consultative member is interviewed by a base group president,

MECHANISMS SUCH AS COLLECTING MEMBERSHIP DUES AT BASE GROUP MEETINGS ENSURE THAT MEMBERS ACTUALLY TURN UP.

CRUCIALLY, PEOPLE ARE ASSIGNED TO BASE GROUPS RATHER THAN CHOOSING THEIR OWN. THIS IS BECAUSE THE PARTY AIMS FOR "A KIND OF EQUILIBRIUM" BETWEEN DIFFERENT AGES, BACKGROUNDS AND LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE IN BASE GROUPS, AND TO ENSURE THAT ALL NEIGHBOURHOODS ARE COVERED.

introduced to the base group and the group itself is involved in deciding whether the consultative member should join.

Members pay dues and are expected to attend base-group meetings and take part in local activity. "We're meeting once a month, every month" a relatively new member explains. He emphasises that membership is not simply a matter of paying but "being present in the base groups" and in local campaigns. Mechanisms such as collecting membership dues at base group meetings ensure that members actually turn up.

Crucially, people are assigned to base groups rather than choosing their own. This is because the party aims for "a kind of equilibrium" between different ages, backgrounds and levels of experience in base groups, and to ensure that all neighbourhoods are covered. There is some room for flexibility, for example if a member's workplace is in a different municipality than their home, but the default is assignment by territory or workplace. You organise where you live or work, in a group of members that reflect broader society.

The base groups are embedded in a multi-level structure. Several base groups in a locality form a section. Sections are grouped into regional commissions. Base-group presidents meet regularly with each other and with section organisers; they in turn participate in provincial meetings. Information about attendance, local campaigns, and recruitment flows upwards to the national leadership; campaign priorities and educational materials flow downwards from the national leadership to the base group. Electoral work is organised through this structure. In the run-up to municipal elections, base groups conduct structured surveys on what issues matter most in their neighbourhood, and the results are aggregated to shape both local and national programmes.

This hyper-local base group model – as opposed to city or borough wide – attempts to root the PTB in "the daily life of normal people". At the same time, base groups are tightly integrated into the party's hierarchy. They do not have independent finances, they do not decide their own basic priorities, they operate within a directed national

strategic frame. They are designed to be largely interchangeable units in a national machine.

Alongside this structured base-group system, the PTB operates an ecosystem of associated organisations that extend the party's presence into different social fields. COMAC, the PTB student organisation, and Medicine for the People, the PTB-linked network of free healthcare clinics, play a particularly important role in this ecology, providing entry points for politicisation, training and long-term engagement for members beyond the base group, allowing people to encounter the party through concrete activity tailored to specific groups of people.

Other organisations in this ecosystem such as Intal, the international solidarity network, and ManiFiesta, the annual mass festival co-organised with trade-union and movement actors, are more heterogeneous environments. They involve non-members, partner organisations and looser forms of participation, and their day-to-day activity is less tightly supervised than that of COMAC or the base groups.

Taken together, this graduated structure allows the party to combine a disciplined centre with a broad, socially embedded periphery – using different organisational forms to manage different levels of commitment without relinquishing overall strategic control.

FIGURE 3: A visual representation of how members and base groups interact with the wider organisation.

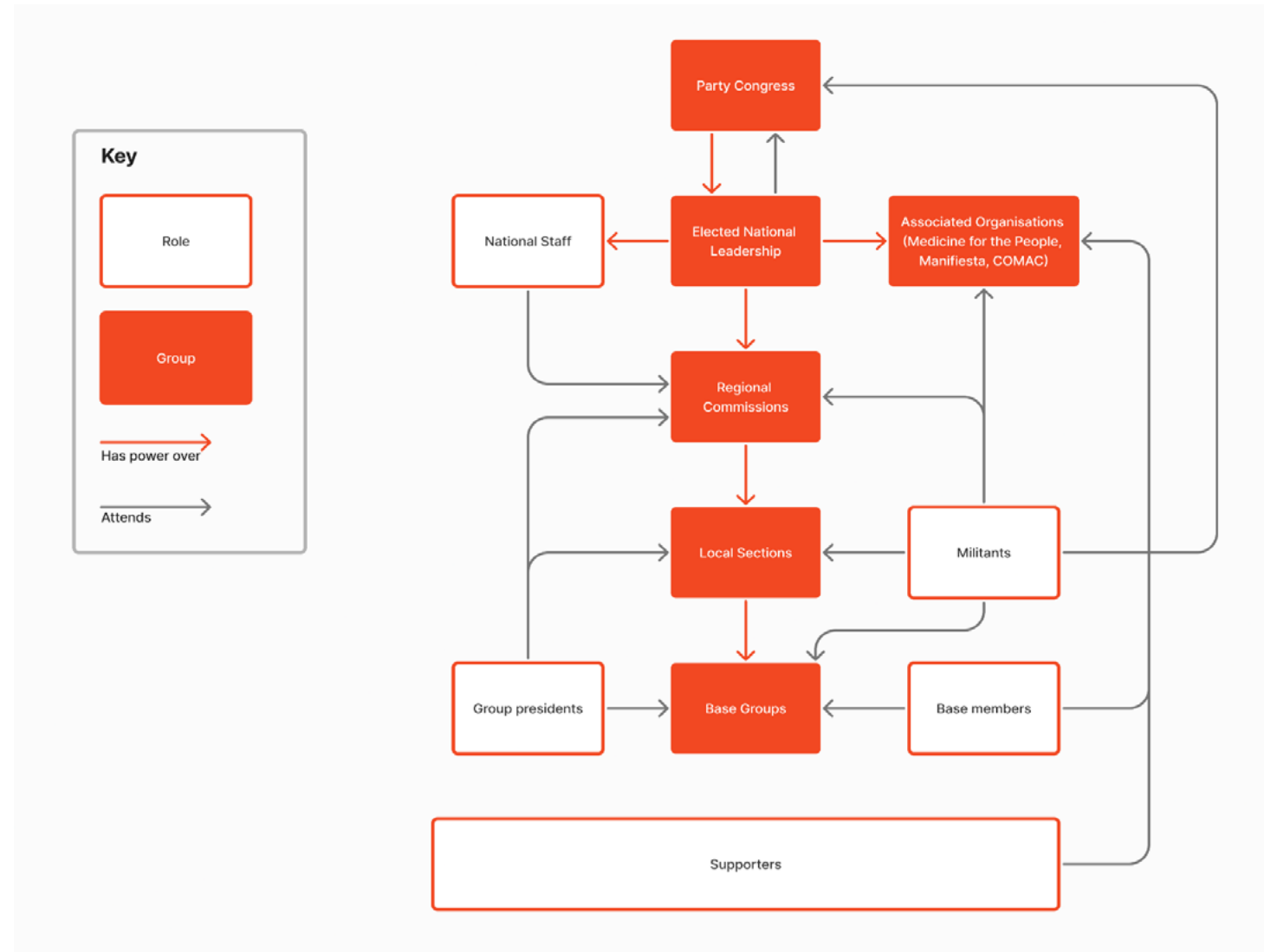
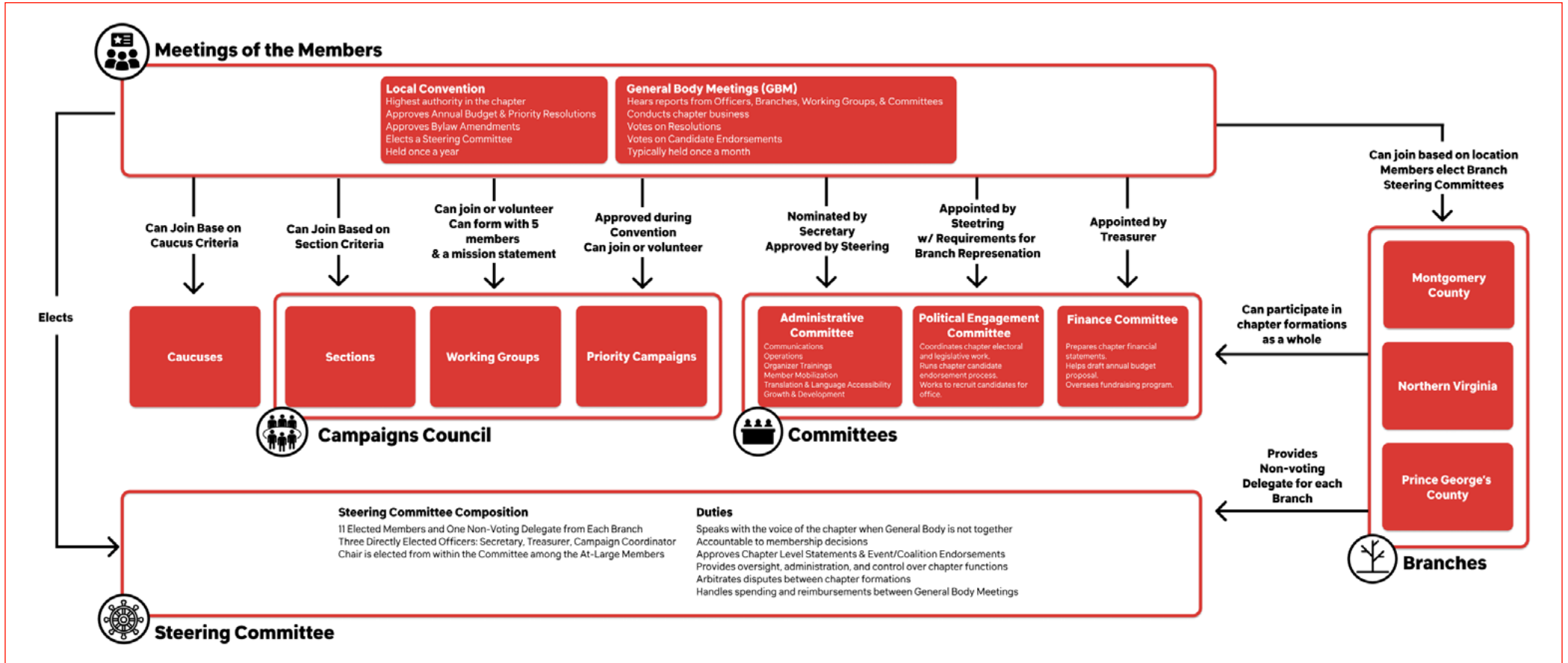


FIGURE 4: A diagram showing how Metro DC DSA operates



DSA CHAPTERS HAVE NEAR TOTAL AUTONOMY. CHAPTERS WRITE AND AMEND THEIR OWN BYLAWS, DEVELOP THEIR OWN POLITICAL CULTURES, AND OFTEN THINK OF THEMSELVES AS ORGANISATIONS INDEPENDENT FROM NATIONAL DSA LEADERSHIP. THIS IS ONLY REINFORCED BY THE WEAKNESS OF REGIONAL AND NATIONAL STRUCTURES

Large, diverse chapters with autonomy

DSA has 191 chapters[3] across the USA that are organised at the city, region or state level. They vary enormously in size, capacity and structure. New York and Chicago have thousands of members, dozens of committees, and their own internal institutional memory. Most others are small and fragile formations kept alive by a handful of activists.

In 2024, more than 70% of DSA chapters had fewer than 250 members. By contrast, the ten largest chapters each had between 1,200 and 7,000 members, and together they accounted for almost 40% of the organisation's total membership.^[4]

While chapters vary in their size, complexity and focus, they often include a mix of standard components. These include:

Steering Committees

Elected committees that oversee the operations and strategic direction of a chapter.

Branches

Geographic sub-units of a chapter that organise members locally and coordinate neighborhood level activity.

Issue-based committees

Standing groups that manage ongoing work in a particular policy or organising area (e.g labor, housing, Palestine).

Working groups

More flexible or project-focused bodies that carry out specific campaigns, initiatives, or research within a defined scope.

Electoral committees

Committees that recruit candidates, run endorsement processes, and coordinate field operations and campaign strategy.

Identity caucuses

Affinity groups and organising spaces for those with shared identity or experiences (e.g BAME, queer, disability).

Other formations

Additional member formations such as campaign committees, coalitions, task forces, or ad-hoc project teams created to meet particular organising needs.

However, there is no standardisation of by-laws or structure and, as the chapter diagrams Metro DC DSA and DSA Los Angeles show below, each chapter will operate slightly differently.

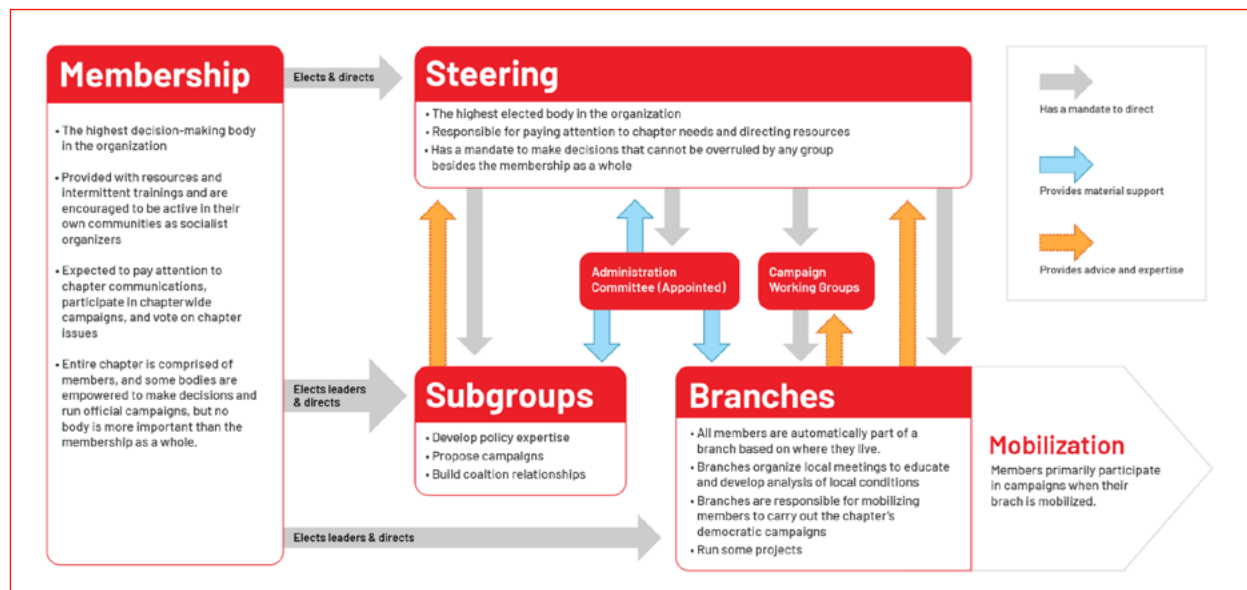
Members tend to self-select into groups within chapters depending on their interests, skills and experience, with the exception of steering committees which are elected by members. There is no obligation to belong to a geographically defined branch; indeed, many chapters do not have functioning territorial branches at all, and where they exist they can play a more formal role, such as electing delegates to convention, than a substantive or social one.

The focus of larger chapters is often heavily influenced by the ideological caucus that controls it. The dominance of Socialist Majority Caucus and Groundwork in New York DSA has meant the chapter concentrates resources on elections, whereas in East Bay DSA, where the Communist Caucus is strong, there is a stronger emphasis on tenant organising.

DSA chapters have near total autonomy. Chapters write and amend their own bylaws, develop their own political cultures, and often think of themselves as organisations independent from national DSA leadership. This is only reinforced by the weakness of regional and national structures, explored in more detail below.

This autonomy creates unevenness. Some chapters become highly competent organising machines while others stagnate

FIGURE 5: A diagram showing how DSA Los Angeles operates



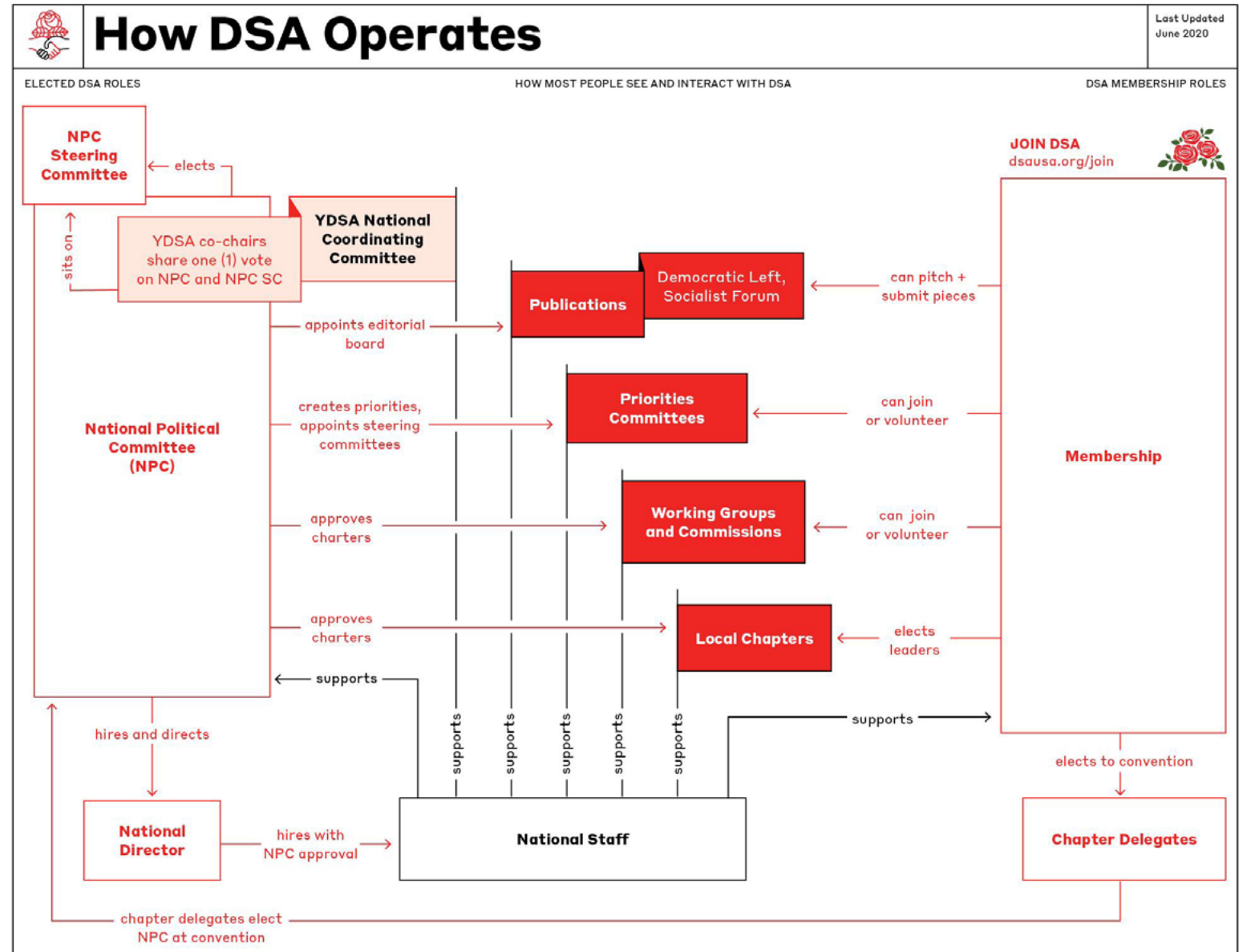
and collapse. Much depends on local leadership and conditions. With no national training pipeline, chapters are responsible for developing members, from canvassing and facilitation to labour and tenant organising. Where a strong leadership team exists, chapters can flourish; where leadership is inexperienced, burnt out, or internally divided, capacity quickly evaporates.

Similar to the PTB, chapters are embedded in a multi-level structure and become the core arena for internal democracy. All chapters have annual general meetings to elect their leadership and elect delegates to national convention. As delegates to convention are proportional to chapter size, local organisational strength determines who participates in national decision-making and which factions can gain influence.

Dues are collected at the national level, and chapters receive about 20% of members' monthly dues through DSA's dues-share program,^[5] with the exact share varying by chapter size. Many chapters also ask members for additional voluntary contributions that go directly to the chapter, and larger chapters in particular are able to raise significant funds this way.

Some chapters – most notably NYC-DSA – went a step further and experimented with a local dues system. This allowed members to pay dues directly to the chapter

FIGURE 6: A diagram showing how DSA operates



and receive local membership privileges without also being members of the national organisation. Unsurprisingly, this became a major point of contention in debates over chapter autonomy. After sustained pressure from the national organization and others in the organization, NYC-DSA ultimately agreed to wind down the experiment and return to the standard national dues model.

While the dues sharing system is calculated progressively to support smaller chapters, there are still inequalities: large or well-run chapters accumulate resources and expand their influence, while smaller or weaker ones struggle to sustain activity.

Reliability vs autonomy

The PTB's branches emphasise rootedness and reliability, as part of a hierarchical political party. Interviews emphasise how this structure emphasises continuity: meetings happen monthly without fail, responsibilities are formally allocated, and political education runs on a unified national rhythm. Branches are the local eyes and ears of the party. They are all governed by the same by-laws, and have the same sets of expectations. The effect is a system designed to reduce drift, turnover and volatility – prioritising reliability over looseness, depth over range.

DSA's chapters, by contrast, emphasise experimentation and autonomous action, the heart of the organisation rather than a subordinated unit of the national structure. Chapters are expansive spaces where much of the real activity happens in looser formations – issue committees, electoral or labour campaigns, ad-hoc caucus initiatives, working groups that appear and disappear. The ecological character of DSA branches allows experimentation and rapid mobilisation, but it is inherently shaped by ebb and flow of campaigns, external stimulus and the competence of leadership teams, rather than a stable organisational backbone. As one interviewee notes, “the velocity of change is very fast. A leadership turnover can happen because of burn out .. resolutions are passed, a factional war will wipe out an entire segment of a chapter”.

Both models produce competent organisers, but through different mechanisms. The PTB's produces discipline and continuity

through embedded collective practice; DSA's produces organisers through autonomy and self-initiation. Both have significant tradeoffs.

The PTB's model risks over-weighting the forms of action that fit easily into a structured, hierarchical apparatus – electoral pushes, national campaigns – while giving less space to looser social movements, cultural organising or self-activity that do not map neatly onto national priorities or neighbourhood/workplace units.

The DSA's model creates space for creativity and grassroots initiative but, as one interviewee noted, “it's essentially like a bootstrapping project, where if you're particularly motivated your chapter .. can succeed. And if you're not experienced, it's going to suffer.” Chapters can become a collection of semi-autonomous silos, with limited coordination or shared strategy. Projects collapse when key organisers burn out and move on.

3. CONTROL WHO HAS POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY?

OBVIOUSLY THE PTB IS QUITE A CENTRALISED PARTY... WHAT WE ARE ABLE TO DECIDE AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL IS VERY LIMITED IN THIS SENSE. ABSOLUTELY.

Base group member, PTB

DSA HAS A VERY EVOLVED CAUCUS SYSTEM... THE POLITICAL CAUCUSES ARE THE ONLY PEOPLE REALLY ORGANISED ACROSS THE WHOLE ORGANISATION.

Neal Meyer, DSA member

A top-down but flexible party

The PTB exercises control through a traditional but carefully revised democratic centralist structure. The party holds a congress every five years. Over the preceding year, militants – a section of the membership, explained in detail below – debate political and organisational documents that analyse the moment, assess the party’s performance and propose changes. At congress, militants and delegates from base groups vote on these texts and elect a national leadership.

Membership is tiered explicitly to underpin this structure. Consultative members pay a small annual fee, receive communications and are invited to public events, but do not take part in the democratic life of the

organisation. Base group members pay annual dues, belong to base groups, receive some political education and training, participate in local decision-making, but do not elect the national leadership or attend congress. Militants constitute a smaller layer of highly committed organisers who have undergone political education, accepted high levels of obligations and who attend congress.

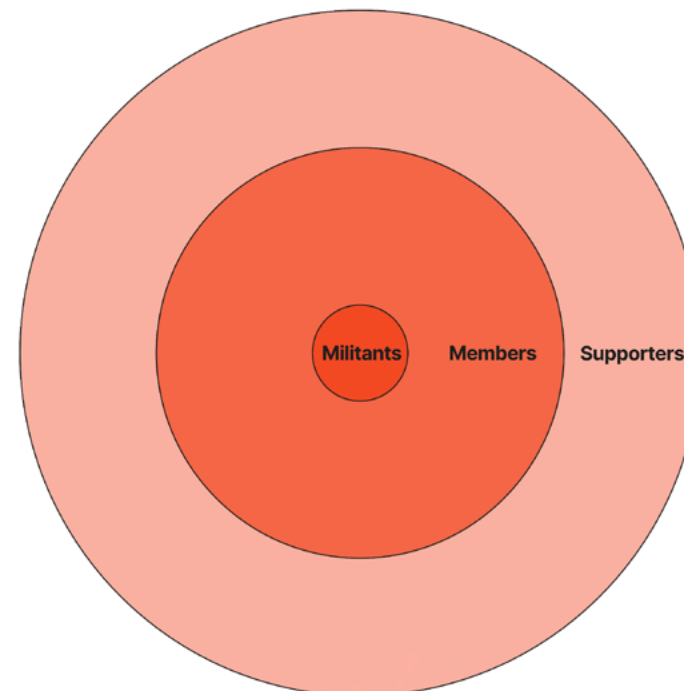
Those obligations are clearly spelled out. Militants are subject to wage caps, living on a fixed amount and paying the rest of their income to the party or associated organisations. One interviewee notes that for “intellectual jobs” the cap is around €2,400 a month, with a higher cap for blue collar jobs so as not to punish workers for doing well in their trade. Militants are

expected to dedicate their lives to the party: leading base-groups, campaigns, joining national working groups and adhering to strategic and tactical decisions even when they might privately disagree. When a line has been decided “you have to support it”, as one member puts it. There is room for internal debate before decisions are taken, much less afterwards.

The national leadership has authority to allocate staff and resources. The PTB’s electoral successes have brought significant public funding, which is channelled into a central apparatus of researchers, organisers

and communications staff. Local structures do not raise and spend their own money independently; they receive budgets and staff support from the centre according to strategic priorities. Election candidates are chosen by regional leadership in collaboration with the national leadership, not by base groups or sections. And while base groups have some autonomy to engage in local campaigns of their own initiation – anything from “Palestine solidarity to organising around parking spaces” as one member put it – it will always be within a national framework decided at congress.

FIGURE 7: The membership structure of the PTB. The PTB does not release data for each of its membership categories.



With this strong vertical control comes some flexibility in its implementation. “If someone has a friend in a group they wouldn’t otherwise join, there might be some flexibility” one base group member notes. Similarly when a member is considering becoming a militant “a negotiation will happen ... you will have to do five or six hours [of party work] a week .. but that’s a negotiation, depending on your situation”.

A bottom-up organisation, with competing centres of power

DSA’s control structures are much looser. On paper, the National Political Committee (NPC), elected by delegates at convention, is the sovereign body between conventions. It hires and supervises national staff, sets national priorities and represents the organisation externally. In practice, the NPC has frequently been overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the organisation, and by the fact that chapters, working groups – and the caucuses who run them – are jealously protective of their autonomy. Their decisions only matter insofar as they can mobilise three other centres of gravity: the big, well-resourced chapters; the organised caucus system that recruits, trains and slates leaders; and the national staff who control information, infrastructure and much of the day-to-day agenda-setting.

The most powerful of these are the ideological caucuses. They exert serious influence across the DSA as they are the only actors that consistently organise *across* its otherwise fragmented structures. While

chapters dominate day-to-day activity, caucuses dominate elections and agenda-setting. They recruit and train leaders, write programmes, and run disciplined slates for the NPC and key national committees. Their influence is reinforced by voting practices. Proportional multi-member elections reward coherent slates over isolated independents. Despite their power, caucuses are tiny in terms of the membership at large. Estimates vary but perhaps 2 – 5% of the organisation are part of a caucus, although this increases to 10 – 25% of active members.¹⁶¹

“They are effectively cartels... that basically run the organisation” said David Duhalde, a former DSA deputy director and a member of the Socialist Majority Caucus. Sydney Ghazarian, founder of the DSA ecosocialist working group, argues that caucuses are a real barrier to structural reform. When central decisions go against them, they throw their weight around or even threaten to walk, always a possibility because they have the networks and infrastructure to function as organisations in their own right.

Despite the DSA’s focus on transparency and democracy, caucus leaderships are often private and some don’t run elections for leadership. This is in part because of their informal role in the organisation. Caucuses are not mentioned in the national DSA statutes or constitution. More on caucuses in the next section.

It makes more sense to treat DSA as a living organism rather than a neatly charted organisation. Instead of a chain of command, you have a dense tangle of groups and feedback loops: chapters,

working groups, national committees, caucuses, staff, electeds, and a churn of campaigns and group chats binding them together. Things grow, mutate and die off all the time – an issue committee that once felt central can wither in a year, while a new campaign or caucus suddenly becomes central to the organisation.

Staff occupy a particularly awkward position in this ecology. They are the national administration that are meant to carry out the will of an organism with multiple centres of overlapping power. They are also unionised, which means they can’t be treated in their most simple form, as direct instruments of whichever slate currently controls the NPC.

Neal Meyer, who helped build the New York branch and is heavily involved in the Bread and Roses caucus, reflected on this dilemma, asking how one can “create a full-time paid staff that is responsive to the political leadership... in a way that doesn’t require a complete turnover of staff every time the leadership changes”. When there have been disputes over layoffs or staff discipline, they have tended to become proxy battles between caucuses, because there are so few hard levers of control at the national level.

Obligations for DSA members are minimal in formal terms. Paying dues confers membership, which entitles one to vote in chapter elections, to stand for internal office and to participate in working groups. There is no defined militant layer with additional rights and obligations. In practice, there are informal gradations. Chapters often

distinguish between “paper members”, active organisers and leaders, but these categories are informal. Expectations are negotiated within chapters and committees rather than set nationally.

The Democracy Commission’s reforms were, in part, an attempt to reinforce control in a limited way without abandoning DSA’s emphasis on chapter autonomy. It introduced “democratic minimums” for chapters: basic standards on elections, minutes and internal accountability that chapters had to meet to remain in good standing. It created mechanisms for the NPC to intervene in chapters in crisis, for example by sending delegations to investigate and recommend solutions. It started building a national archive of chapter bylaws, resolutions and

election results. Yet these remain weak instruments compared to PTB's congress-centred, militant-driven control structure.

Top-down vs distributed control

Taken together, PTB and DSA present almost opposite answers to the question of control. PTB relies on a strongly integrated chain linking congress, national leadership, provincial structures and base groups, with a clearly demarcated militant layer at its core. Once a line is decided "you have to support it", even if you disagreed in the preceding debate. It aims to have a powerful leadership that can know the whole organisation, allocate resources and enforce decisions. The unitary nature of this power means that once decisions at congress are taken, they can be implemented and their implementation can be tracked. However, such a centralised system depends on having a highly strategic and coherent leadership, a source of huge power but also serious vulnerability. If the PTB leadership is corrupted or discredited in some way, the organisation will suffer from its centralisation.

The DSA distributes control across a set of partially overlapping centres rather than through a single ladder of authority. Formally, convention and the National Political Committee are supreme, but in reality power is located in the competing caucuses and the patronage networks they house, that vie for control of chapters, campaign committees, the National Political Committee, staff appointments

and national working groups. Within this loose architecture, caucuses convert formal democracy into effective control, despite only numbering a few thousand members across the country. This maximises openness and member control in one sense, but leaves the organisation with fewer tools to implement decisions and to ensure that base-level practice corresponds to national strategy.

4. CULTURE AND PLURALISM FACTIONS OR UNITY?

THERE IS ONE LINE, AND I WOULD SAY IT'S NOT ENCOURAGED TO BRING YOUR OWN PARTICULAR BRAND OF MARXISM INTO THAT. YOUR OWN POLITICAL ORIENTATION IS LESS RELEVANT THAN WHAT THE PARTY IS AS A COLLECTIVE.

PTB member

THE CAUCUSES ARE SUCH A SMALL SEGMENT OF THE ORGANISATION THAT'S ABLE TO MAKE THESE BIG DECISIONS.

Kristian Steffany, Texas DSA and co-chair of Socialist Majority Caucus

Single tendency, disciplined and united

PTB has no formal caucuses and no public tendencies. Internal political differences exist, but they are neither recognised as semi-permanent factions nor given external organisational expression beyond some reference in congress documents. In-line with a democratic centralist approach, there is some internal debate in the run up to and at congress, but after the strategy is decided your individual views are expected to take a backseat. "There is one line, there is one direction and that's actually what you need to be supporting" one base group member said.

However, democratic centralism is implemented more through persuasion and selection than coercion. Militants are not conscripted; they are identified, courted and then sat down for a frank discussion about the expectations that come with the role and what they can commit. At each stage of party involvement – becoming a base group member, a base group president, a militant – one will undergo training and political education and be made aware of a clear set of expectations that will select out those that don't agree or can't commit. People who are attracted to factional debates and strongly expressed minority positions are less likely to find PTB an attractive home.

BEING A PTB MILITANT MEANS ACCEPTING THAT YOUR TIME, INCOME AND PUBLIC VOICE ARE, TO A SIGNIFICANT EXTENT, MEDIATED THROUGH THE ORGANISATION.

Those who value cohesion, discipline and a clear external message are more likely to join and to rise.

The net effect is a system where many sharp conflicts are filtered out before they would ever require formal discipline: people who dislike this culture simply never become militants, and self-select out along the way.

Unity, accordingly, is treated less as a procedural norm and more as an ethical ideal. The PTB congress texts and leaders stress unity in their titles and framing, and it is central to the party's self-understanding. Unity is valued for instrumental reasons – a fragmented left is seen as incapable of uniting the working class – but also as a way of giving militants a clear sense of purpose and avoiding the permanent low-level factional war that characterises organisations like the DSA.

Underlying all of this is a strong emphasis on discipline, expectation and responsibility that makes PTB membership – especially militant status – a thick identity rather than a light affiliation. Being a PTB militant means accepting that your time, income and public voice are, to a significant extent, mediated through the organisation. Combined with the cultural filters described above, this produces an organisation whose internal

pluralism is tightly canalised: there are differences of view and emphasis, but they are expressed within a shared framework of commitment, restraint and unity, rather than as open and enduring factional blocs. The PTB's culture, as well as its strategic approach, is best understood as "principled but flexible" – a conscious departure from its earlier, more sectarian Maoist phase. Several interviewees point to the 2008 reorientation as a decisive break. The party set out to shed what one staffer calls its "old sectarianism", when it "didn't take into account any tactics" and simply assumed others were "not smart enough to understand" the line.

Since 2008, the organisation has tried to combine elements of a Maoist cadre organisation with a mass base by adopting more populist communications. As the political theorist Sai Englert puts it, they present a "United Colors of Benetton" image of a diverse, ordinary working class that could plausibly replace social democracy from the left. This shift went hand-in-hand with building broad fronts like their yearly festival ManiFiesta and their various youth formations, and with the creation of a very loose consultative membership as a wide funnel around a still-disciplined core.

Caucuses, pluralism and autonomy

DSA is proudly multi-tendency. It contains at least 12 organised caucuses that structure and sustain political differences: Bread & Roses, Socialist Majority, Groundwork, Communist Caucus and others. These caucuses recruit members, educate them, develop strategic perspectives and run slates for leadership elections. The best available estimates suggest that even the largest caucuses – Bread & Roses and Socialist Majority – only organise a few hundred members each, while mid-sized caucuses like Red Star, Marxist Unity Group, Reform & Revolution and Groundwork are smaller still; most others are tiny formations rooted in one or a handful of chapters.

Open conflict is a normal operating condition inside DSA rather than a sign of breakdown. Caucuses fight for control of the NPC, national working groups, chapters and even sections of chapters. They regularly issue public statements criticising each other's positions. These fights often "spill onto Twitter", as one member observes, with hyper-engaged members having public debates which only a handful of high-information insiders can

OPEN CONFLICT IS A NORMAL OPERATING CONDITION INSIDE DSA RATHER THAN A SIGN OF BREAKDOWN.

understand. As a current NPC member points out, this can have negative effects for issue specific campaigning. "If you want to do eco-socialist organising and you're not in Groundwork, you don't really have anywhere to go"

Faction fights even extend to seemingly innocuous and bureaucratic committees. In 2025, the Socialist Majority Caucus published a 5000 word essay criticising the Red Star caucus for a hostile takeover of the National Growth and Development Committee.^[7] According to Maria Svart, a former national director of DSA, this fits with a trend where caucuses "try to control projects because it becomes a conveyor belt to power". "If you can prove that you ran a project, you get your people into leadership ... you get access to resources and then use those resources to train your people and make political decisions".

In theory, caucuses are solely ideological groupings. In practice, they also operate as social and patronage networks, shaped by pre-existing relationships and reinforced by the mutual benefits of coordination inside the organisation. This dual character helps explain why caucuses persist even as their original political projects are achieved, and why it is hard to describe the ideological differences between some caucuses, most notably Socialist Majority Caucus and Groundwork.

Abdullah Farooq, a former member of Bread and Roses and a member of the National Political Committee, and David Duhalde, a member of Socialist Majority Caucus, point to Bread and Roses as a caucus

that initially had a coherent rank-and-file labour strategy and a maximalist "Bernie + democratic socialism" perspective, but after it won the broader organisation over to their position, has struggled to define itself but nevertheless persisted. Neal Meyer, a member of Bread and Roses, disputes the characterisation but agrees that "all caucuses have a high incentive to keep going even as members' develop political and diverge on debates".

Pluralism is also visible in the organisation's pedagogy. Unlike the PTB, where political education is designed and delivered by the party centre, interviewees describe DSA's education as "caucus-run": different tendencies, chapters and working groups maintain their own reading groups and training programmes. One member may be educated through labour-movement history, another through abolitionist and queer theory spaces, a third through ecosocialist or anti-imperialist texts. National bodies sometimes provide materials or host webinars, but there is no single curriculum and no agreed "DSA line" on many theoretical questions.

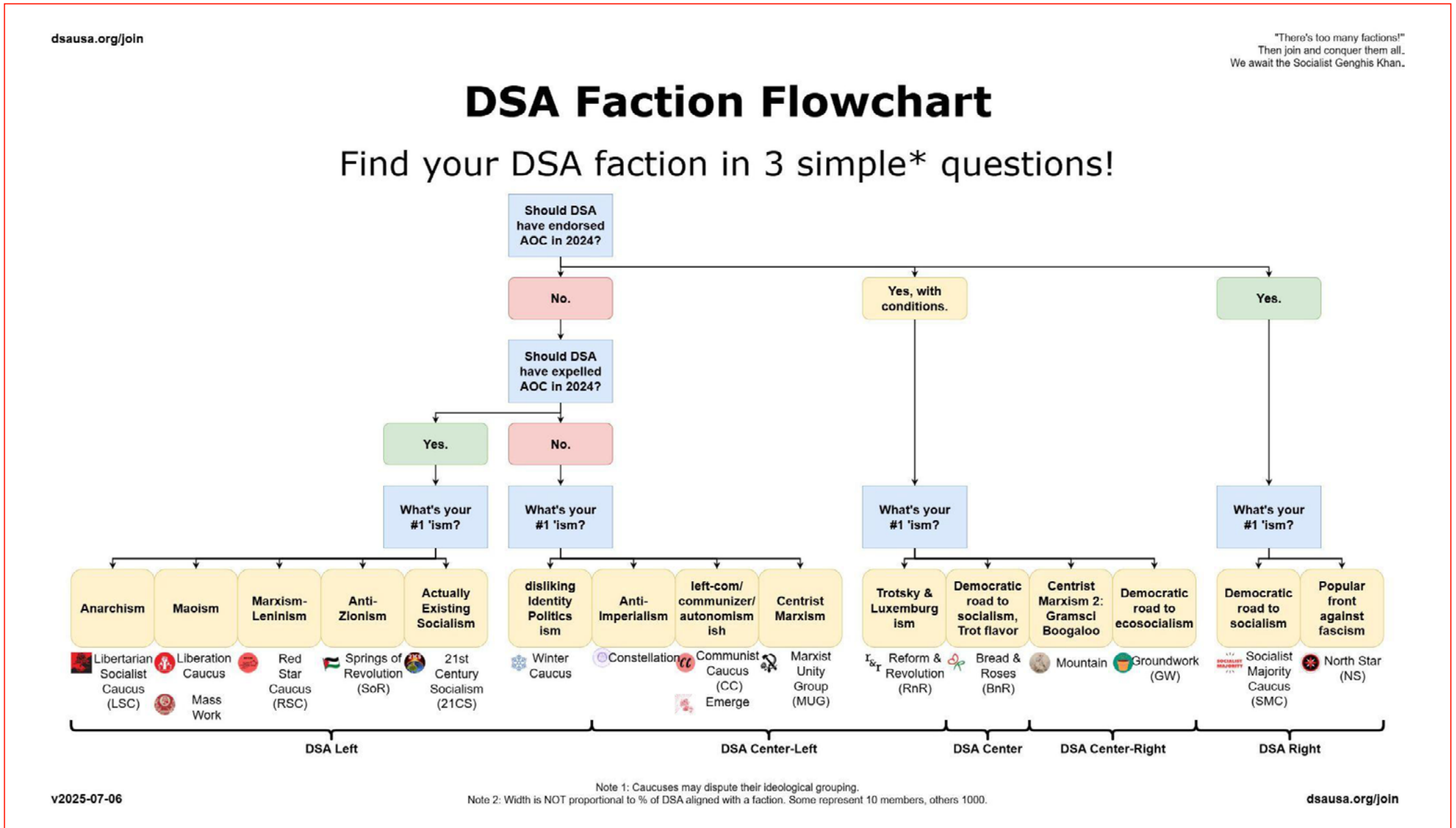
The DSA's caucus system and pluralism is tied to the fact that the DSA has never tried to be a unified political party. It is a socialist organisation that endorses candidates rather than running its own, and has no single visible leader who is running for high office. Its form allows for pluralism. No single national programme in an election will discipline or unify every layer, and there is a far greater acceptance that people will attach themselves to particular campaigns, committees and caucuses as they see fit.

IN THEORY, CAUCUSES ARE SOLELY IDEOLOGICAL GROUPINGS. IN PRACTICE, THEY ALSO OPERATE AS SOCIAL AND PATRONAGE NETWORKS, SHAPED BY PRE-EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS AND REINFORCED BY THE MUTUAL BENEFITS OF COORDINATION INSIDE THE ORGANISATION.

Geography intensifies this diversity. The United States is continent-sized, and interviewees are clear that DSA in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago feel like different organisations altogether. A member who has only ever known New York DSA's disciplined electoral machines, for instance, will have a very different experience of "what the DSA is" than someone in the Communist Caucus controlled East-Bay chapter in California. And as caucuses fight for control of chapters, caucus membership becomes geographical as well as ideological.

The upside of this pluralist landscape is a real intellectual and strategic energy. Members are constantly exposed to new arguments, factions compete to develop sharper analyses, and chapters experiment with different organisational forms. The downside is sometimes a sense of exhaustion and frustration, and a lack of unity and focus.

FIGURE 8: A satirical but widely circulated flow chart attempting to explain differences between DSA factions



THE TWO ORGANISATIONS START FROM ALMOST OPPOSITE INSTINCTS ABOUT DISAGREEMENT. DSA TREATS OPEN CONFLICT AS A NORMAL AND NECESSARY PART OF POLITICAL LIFE, WHILE THE PTB TREATS CONFLICT AS SOMETHING TO BE AVOIDED.

Pluralism vs unity

Culturally, the two organisations start from almost opposite instincts about disagreement. DSA treats open conflict as a normal and necessary part of political life, while the PTB treats conflict as something to be avoided. DSA's culture says: if you have a minority line, organise, caucus and argue for it. PTB's culture says: if you have a minority line, fight for it internally before congress, then live with the outcome.

Unity is not just a moral imperative for the PTB, it is a practical solution to the problem of acting as a party in public. It protects message discipline and makes collective action easier. Open conflict is costly and exhausting, but it is also part of how the DSA renews itself, and creates an ideologically fertile and intellectually rich culture.

An emphasis on pluralism or unity also creates different types of identifications. In DSA, formal obligations are light: paying dues, turning up, maybe taking on a role in a chapter or working group. Caucus or chapter identity is thick – people are Bread

& Roses or Groundwork or Communist Caucus; they are “a New York DSA person” or “from East Bay” – but identification with DSA as a whole is far thinner. In the PTB, the relationship is reversed. There are no formal factions to identify with, and ideological shades are kept under the surface, but organisational belonging is thick and layered.

Finally, both cultures are responses to their environments as much as to doctrine. In a vast, federal, hyper-mediated country, with a strong sense of individual freedom and liberty, the DSA's culture of openness, multiplicity and public conflict makes it porous and attractive to successive waves of radicals, and allows different strands of a historically weak left to coexist under one loose umbrella. In a small, highly pillarised country with powerful unions and a long social-democratic shadow, PTB's culture of unity, privacy and cadre discipline lets it present a stable, serious face to workers and institutions and convert electoral breakthroughs into a durable party project.

5. COORDINATION HOW SHOULD INFORMATION FLOW?

WE ARE A CENTRALISED PARTY, AND THERE'S A CALCULATION THAT IF WE PUT TOO MUCH INFORMATION PUBLICLY, PEOPLE OUTSIDE WILL USE IT AGAINST US. IT'S DIFFICULT, BECAUSE WE WANT TO BE MORE TRANSPARENT TO OUR OWN CONSULTATIVE MEMBERS. THOSE MEMBERS DON'T REALLY HAVE DECISION-MAKING POWER, AND WE DON'T HAVE A CLEAR STRUCTURE TO INVOLVE THEM IN THE PARTY.

Staff member, PTB

IN THE ABSENCE OF TIMELY INFORMATION SHARING, GOSSIP IS THE BIGGEST CURRENCY IN DSA

Maria Svart, former DSA director

A shared analysis, well structured information flows

PTB has structured flows of information between the bottom and top of the party. Reports on attendance, local actions, recruitment, and local issues all come from the base groups and are transmitted upwards. Base-group surveys provide fine-grained data on local concerns. Campaign materials, educational texts and tactical guidance all flow downwards from the leadership.

Information also flows sideways, albeit more informally. There are WhatsApp groups for base-group presidents, section-level gatherings, and social events such as New Year parties that bring militants from different areas together. One member notes that base-group presidents in his municipality meet regularly, and that "we see where we're at, what we can do better," sharing experiences of what has worked or failed in their groups.

This said, the primary design is vertical. Base groups are expected to report; higher bodies are expected to synthesise and direct. As a result, "the limits of knowledge" for the PTB leadership are "far further" than in most comparable organisations. The leadership has a much clearer picture of where the party is strong or weak than DSA's leadership does.

However, this high degree of centralised knowledge is only possible because standardisation limits base groups autonomy. If base groups were allowed to initiate and experiment in how they organise, in the way DSA chapters do, the PTB's vertical information flows would be far more challenging to maintain.

For PTB, the principal intelligence mechanism is the congress cycle. The aim of congress is not to pass disparate resolutions, but to come to a shared and collective analysis across the entire party. Draft documents analysing the economic and political situation, the balance of class forces, and the party's own performance are circulated to and edited by militants. These texts draw on a combination of Marxist theory, electoral data, union experience and feedback from base groups. They are debated intensively over a period of months. Amendments are proposed and incorporated. The resulting congress documents set the party's strategic line for the coming period.

Between congress, a National Executive Committee alongside a staff team drawn from the militant layer, form the central intelligence function of the PTB. They benefit from reliable and ordered flows of information that are embedded in its organising practices.

The PTB benefits from high levels of self-knowledge because of its unitary nature. They know at any one time how many base groups exist, how many members each base group has and the status of each base group's activities, in part

because it can impose strong mechanisms of accountability and measurement on its base groups and other bodies.

A chaotic ecology of information

DSA's coordination is far looser, with no strong central leadership and an ecology of chapters, caucuses, working groups and campaign committees spread across a wide geographic area. Chapters are only weakly integrated into a national framework. There are no consistent requirements to report data on membership, attendance, elections or campaigns until recently. National working groups and committees exist, but they often lack clear mandates or formal links to chapter structures.

This lack of information and connection has created misunderstanding and mistrust between the national and chapter level. Staff field organisers employed by national to support local chapters have often become the chapter's primary source of information. National campaigns often end up being the main point of engagement between conventions, but these are hard to get off the ground and sustain because the national organisation lacks resources and legitimacy.

The Democracy Commission sought to increase the NPC's understanding of the organisation's functioning. Ramsin Canon describes how their work revealed "huge sort of democratic blind spots," including that the national organisation was "essentially completely blind" to much of

what chapters were doing. “The very simple question of how many people attended a ... decision-making DSA meeting in the last year was an unanswerable question”.

In this context, caucuses and informal networks play an outsized coordinating role. If you want to know how a particular strategy is working in another chapter, the easiest route is through caucus channels: Whatsapp groups, email lists, personal contacts. Maria Svart notes that caucuses “really do help the members of the caucus in sharing information” and it’s one reason caucuses “are so powerful”.

Despite the lack of coordination, the DSA does produce a lot of information. It has a number of caucus-run publications, a live feed that catalogues chapter work, member-only forums and lots of exchanges on Twitter and Discord. But unlike the PTB, the information comes from competing sources and, as it has few formal channels to flow through within the organisation, ends up out in the open where the members and the public alike can read it.

DSA’s formal intelligence moments are its national conventions, at which delegates debate and adopt resolutions on programme and strategy. These resolutions cover questions such as whether to endorse a Democratic presidential candidate; what position to take on major foreign-policy issues; how to orient towards unions, electoral campaigns, housing struggles and so on. They emerge from a preparatory process in which delegates and the caucuses they belong to draft and discuss texts, usually months ahead of convention.

However, the pluralist and decentralised character of DSA makes it difficult to consolidate these resolutions into a coherent and stable strategic line. Resolutions can be numerous and often contradictory. Some are effectively aspirational, insofar as there is no realistic plan or capacity to implement them. As Sydney Ghazarian observes, the DSA “hasn’t really had a real strategic orientation towards resource allocation” resulting in a situation where many formal commitments exist on paper without corresponding organisational projects. Maria Svart notes that one of the “tensions in the organization is mandates from convention that are impossible. And then the NPC has to break the news or else just not do something and then get blamed for it.”

This underlines the DSA’s lack of ability to coordinate as a national organisation or focus its energies. Power is held in caucuses, no structure forces them to compromise and each caucus has its own analysis and strategy.

Vertical vs horizontal information flows

The differences are stark. The PTB’s intelligence system is centralised and coherent, tied to a regular congress cycle and a strong leadership that is explicitly tasked with synthesising information into a single strategic line. Local and company base groups, intermediate bodies and regional structures report upwards; congress then distills this information into a relatively unified assessment of the national

situation and a clear set of priorities. In this model, information flows are designed to be cumulative and convergent: the point of the system is not just to hear many voices, but to fuse them into a single orientation that can be rolled back out through the organisation.

The DSA’s regime of information and coordination is almost the mirror image. Instead of a single, tightly integrated intelligence system, it has a dense ecosystem of caucuses, chapter-level experiments and working groups that generate analysis and debate in parallel. Conventions and NPC meetings function as periodic attempts at consolidation, but they sit on top of a landscape where chapters are used to acting autonomously and caucuses produce their own strategic lines. The result is that national gatherings often leave as many questions open as they settle, with multiple, sometimes contradictory mandates and only loose mechanisms for ensuring follow-through.

CAUCUSES AND INFORMAL NETWORKS PLAY AN OUTSIZED COORDINATING ROLE. IF YOU WANT TO KNOW HOW A PARTICULAR STRATEGY IS WORKING IN ANOTHER CHAPTER, THE EASIEST ROUTE IS THROUGH CAUCUS CHANNELS: WHATSAPP GROUPS, EMAIL LISTS, PERSONAL CONTACTS.

POWER IS HELD IN CAUCUSES, NO STRUCTURE FORCES THEM TO COMPROMISE AND EACH CAUCUS HAS ITS OWN ANALYSIS AND STRATEGY

6. COMPOSITION WHO TURNS UP AND WHY?

IT'S NOT EASY. AMONG THE GROUP PRESIDENTS WE DON'T HAVE A LOT OF WORKERS, PEOPLE OF WORKING-CLASS EXTRACTION. HANDING LEADERSHIP TO THEM IS A STEP WE'RE TRYING TO TAKE, BUT IT'S QUITE DIFFICULT

Base group president, PTB

THE PEOPLE WHO END UP IN DSA TEND TO BE THIS SORT OF DOWNWARDLY MOBILE, SORT OF MIDDLE-CLASS, PROFESSIONAL MANAGERIAL CLASS.

Yari Greaney, DSA Communist Caucus

A broader supporter base with an older militant layer

Since the 2008 renewal congress the PTB has pursued a deliberate mass-party strategy. Published figures and press reports suggest that membership grew from roughly 8,000 in 2014 to 20,000 by 2020 and at least 26,000 by 2023, with further growth to 28,000 claimed in 2025.^[8] The distribution across militants, base group and consultative members is unclear.

The PTB consistently defines itself as, and aspires to be, a party of the working class which also organises the “independent middle class” and “young people, students, intellectuals and artists.” Founded as a party of student intellectuals animated by the Maoist desire to “go to the workers,” this orientation has persisted through its transformation into a mass party with a cadrised core.

Yet the PTB is frank that its composition is not where it needs to be. Successive congress texts emphasise the need to make the party “more working class, more young”, while early renewal-period documents foreground a persistent under-representation of women in leadership and call for “more women in the first rank” of the organisation.

These tensions appear clearly at the level of day-to-day leadership. One

THE PTB IS FRANK THAT ITS COMPOSITION IS NOT WHERE IT NEEDS TO BE. SUCCESSIVE CONGRESS TEXTS EMPHASISE THE NEED TO MAKE THE PARTY “MORE WORKING CLASS, MORE YOUNG

base-group president notes that in the monthly meetings of group presidents in his municipality “we don’t have a lot of workers”, and describes the process of consciously handing leadership to someone from such a background as “a step we are trying to take” but “quite difficult”.

The composition changes depending on the level you analyse. Company base groups in industry and blue collar workplaces will present as more “classically working-class”; the national leadership, media-facing cadre and authors of congress documents include a significant number of professionals, intellectuals and politically experienced organisers who emerged from the original student milieu.

The party is focussed on increasing working class representation and has programmes to achieve this. It has developed separate cadre schools for blue collar workers, created mechanisms that allow them to take a slightly higher wage as militants, and placed particular emphasis on selecting blue collar candidates for parliament – most notably Ivan Heyligen, a port worker from Antwerp.

The party also grapples with generational gaps. COMAC and Red Fox, two PTB youth organisations, as well as the PTB’s yearly ManiFiesta festival, have visibly rejuvenated the party’s periphery; one cadre describes

the last four years as “really good in improving” the age profile of audiences and new sympathisers. At the same time, the core militant layer – those who carry the main organisational responsibilities – remains older, a product of earlier cycles of student radicalisation and the long life of the party’s pre-renewal structures.

Young, urban, male, downwardly mobile graduates

DSA’s composition is best understood as the product of the post-2016 wave, when the organisation flipped from a small, ageing membership into a mass of mostly millennial socialists clustered in big cities. Between the 2013 and 2017 membership surveys the median age fell from 68 to 33, the overall membership expanded from roughly 5-6,000 in 2016 to close to 80,000 by 2022.^[9]

Over 97% of current members joined after 2016, with a majority joining after 2019,^[10] and the organisation’s membership is now more than ten times what it was a decade ago. This created what is, by US civic-organisation standards, a “shockingly young” organisation in the words of one interviewee.

The DSA is often described as being an organisation of “urban white graduates”.

Ramsin Canon describes it as “white collar ... people with college educations, very predominantly white” but he emphasises people “are not affluent” and tend to be “on the edge of the working class” and work in “pink collar professions”.

DSA’s own survey data backs this up. While black membership has doubled between 2017 and 2021, it still remains at only 4%. The percentage of white members has fallen, but still dominates at 85%. This is especially surprising considering DSA branches are predominantly in racially diverse urban areas and the USA is only 70% white.

Several interviewees stress that in many US cities there already exists a dense ecosystem of Black, brown and migrant-led organisations, so racialised activists in those communities often already have a political home. They may view DSA positively, but do not necessarily commit their time to it.

DSA surveys indicate indebted graduates working in coffee shops and grocery stores, teachers, non-profit staff, media and tech workers, and public-sector employees tend to make up the membership. The *State of DSA* report explicitly describes chapters struggling to break out of a core of “downwardly mobile professional whites”, in part because recruitment is heavily driven by members’ immediate social circles.

The organisation is still dominated by men. The 2021 survey finds 64% of respondents identifying as male, 27% as female and 10% as non-binary or other, with LGBTQIA+

identification rising from 10% in earlier surveys to 32% in 2021. Interviewees note that after “all these years” the membership still feels around “70% male, mostly downwardly mobile middle class”.

Internal arguments over chapter priorities – for instance, whether to invest in electoral work, labour-movement implantation or student organising – are often implicitly about composition: how to shift from a base of individually-recruited, highly educated activists towards more durable implantation in multiracial working-class institutions.

Workplaces are identified as some of the least segregated spaces in US society and therefore as the most promising route to reshaping the organisation’s demographic profile, which underpins the emphasis on rank-and-file union work, cross-workplace caucuses and tenant unions as vehicles for making DSA “better rooted” in a diverse working class.

Recomposition vs reproduction

Despite their very different structures and cultures, the PTB and DSA both struggle to attract and develop blue collar workers who didn’t go to university. This difficulty reflects broader patterns of political polarisation in the UK, France, Germany, the USA and beyond, and in a sense shouldn’t come as a surprise. However it does reveal a tension between the image each organisation has of itself – a vehicle for working class power – and the reality that only a section of the working class are actively engaged.

FIGURE 9: A chart showing racial composition in the DSA

	1991	2013	2017	2021
WHITE	92%	96%	89%	85%
HISPANIC	1%	3%	7%	9%
ASIAN (E&S)	0.5%	1%	3%	5%
BLACK	1%	2%	2%	4%
MIDDLE EASTERN	-	-	2%	2%
NATIVE AMERICAN	2%	3%	1%	2%
MULTI-ETHNIC	-	6%	5%	9%
NONE/NO ANSWER	3%	4%	2%	3%

FIGURE 10: A chart showing class composition in the DSA

	2013	2017	2021
TEACHER, SCHOLAR, ACADEMIC	11%	12%	10%
WHITE-COLLAR	3%	21%	13%
TECH WORKER	-	-	9%
NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION	3%	7%	7%
PUBLIC SECTOR (FED,STATE,LOCAL)	4%	7%	7%
RETAIL/FOOD/OTHER SERVICE SECTOR	2%	5%	6%
HEALTH CARE OR SOCIAL WORK	-	3%	6%
SELF-EMPLOYED	3%	5%	5%
BLUE-COLLAR	2%	3%	4%
WRITER, PERFORMER, ARTS	3%	5%	4%
POLITICAL ORG / UNION	1%	3%	4%
UNEMPLOYED, DISABLED, RETIRED	67%	20%	15%
STUDENT	2%	9%	8%

OVER 97% OF CURRENT MEMBERS JOINED AFTER 2016, WITH A MAJORITY JOINING AFTER 2019,^[10] AND THE ORGANISATION'S MEMBERSHIP IS NOW MORE THAN TEN TIMES WHAT IT WAS A DECADE AGO. THIS CREATED WHAT IS, BY US CIVIC-ORGANISATION STANDARDS, A "SHOCKINGLY YOUNG" ORGANISATION

It is also clear that moments of growth leave long shadows. The PTB carries the imprint of its founding cadre and the slow accumulation of an experienced, highly committed militant layer; the DSA of its successive membership surges, particularly the post-2016 surge that recomposed the organisation almost overnight.

A crucial distinction is how quickly entrants into the DSA were able to assume positions of responsibility in chapters and nationally. This is a real strength of porous organisations that grant members large amounts of autonomy, and enabled the DSA to completely rejuvenate itself after the first Bernie Sanders campaign, if in an uneven and sometimes chaotic way. The PTB's stability and high barriers to taking on responsibility create a more static core of militants, staff and national leadership, which risks ossification, the embedding of patronage networks and makes generational turnover harder, even when the leadership understands the need. Finally, both organisations treat workplace organising as, at least in part, a compositional solution. In the PTB's case this is expressed through company base groups and a broader orientation towards

embedding the party in workplaces and unions as a route to building a more recognisably working-class membership and leadership. In the DSA's case, workplace-based strategies – from rank-and-file union work to tenant organising – are often framed as a way out of a socially narrow recruitment pipeline dominated by graduates and the immediate friendship networks of existing activists.

CONCLUSION BUILDING ORGANISATION BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND CONTROL

The PTB resolves the autonomy-control tension by building a strong organisational spine: small base groups with regular rhythms, standardised expectations, and upward reporting that allows the leadership to see the organisation with unusual clarity. That clarity comes with costs, however. It relies on limiting local improvisation, keeping finances centralised, and treating local structures as cogs in a larger machine rather than as flourishing organisations in their own right. The DSA resolves the same tension in the opposite direction: chapters are expansive arenas of self-initiation with committees, projects and caucus ecosystems, and the organisation becomes more an energetic organism than a neatly charted hierarchy. The payoff is dynamism and permeability; the cost is uneven capacity, rapid turnover, and a chronic difficulty translating formal mandates into sustained implementation.

Power, in each case, concentrates in different locations. In the PTB the militant layer and leadership are empowered. The system is designed to generate coherence, continuity, discipline and a directed national strategy, even if that means narrowing the space for plurality and grassroots experimentation. In the DSA power is located in the chapters and caucuses who, above all, can organise across a fragmented landscape. This ensures a lively and fertile organisation, but also results in factionalism, difficulty in implementing a national strategy and, to a certain extent, a lack of accountability.

All of this said, navigating between autonomy and control is as much an emergent organisational settlement determined by history, geography, politics and timing as it is a design choice. The PTB's tight integration was forged slowly: a party

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that spent decades as a small Maoist cadre formation, which deliberately rebuilt itself through the 2008 renewal into a unitary organisation that can hold a shared line together across the whole country. The DSA's openness, by contrast, was always an adaptation to a hostile electoral system, a continent-sized geography and the need to unite the anti-Stalinist left. It was this looseness that enabled the post-2016 surge that rebuilt chapters from scratch and pushed new people into responsibility faster than any central apparatus would allow.

Perhaps most interestingly, and despite myriad differences between the two organisations, both the PTB and DSA run into a problem common to most of the Western left: attracting blue collar non-graduate members, and suffering the adverse effects of elite-driven polarisation that divides the working class. This is a reminder that while organisational design matters, it is no panacea. Organisation can dramatically shape what is possible, but it cannot set the conditions of that possibility.

NOTES

[1] Zohran Mamdani won the 2025 New York City Democratic mayoral primary and the subsequent general election. His long-standing membership in the Democratic Socialists of America and support from DSA chapters were widely reported during the campaign. See: New York City Board of Elections, *2025 Primary and General Election Results*; reporting in *The New York Times* and *City & State New York*; and public DSA chapter endorsements issued during the 2025 mayoral race.

[2] In the 9 June 2024 Belgian federal election, the Parti du Travail de Belgique / Partij van de Arbeid van België (PTB-PVDA) won 15 seats in the Chamber of Representatives. See: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Parline Database, *Belgium: Elections for the Chamber of Representatives, 2024*.

[3] Chapter count based on the number of local chapters listed on the Democratic Socialists of America public chapter directory as of late 2025. The directory reflects formally recognised chapters but does not consistently indicate levels of activity, recent mergers, or dormant status.

[4] Membership distribution figures drawn from internal DSA Growth and Development Committee analysis, summarised in *State of DSA 2024-2025*. These figures aggregate chapter-reported members in good standing

and illustrate the high concentration of total membership in a small number of very large chapters. They should be read as indicative rather than exact.

[5] Democratic Socialists of America, *Dues Share Program Overview* (Growth and Development Committee, 2022-2024). Public chapter materials (for example, NYC-DSA membership pages) state that approximately 20% of national dues are returned to local chapters, while internal GDC documentation describes higher percentages for smaller chapters to support administrative capacity.

[6] Estimates based on interviews with national and chapter-level DSA organisers, triangulated with caucus mailing-list sizes, convention slate participation, and observed caucus presence in leadership elections. No comprehensive public or internal membership figures for caucuses exist, as caucuses are informal formations and are not recognised in DSA's constitution.

[7] Socialist Majority Caucus, "Statement on the National Growth and Development Committee," published on the Socialist Majority website and circulated internally in 2025. The document criticises Red Star Caucus organising on the NGDC and is widely referenced in internal DSA discussions as an example of factional conflict over committee control.

[8] PTB membership figures compiled from party congress documents, annual reports, press statements, and secondary analysis, including Delwit, *Le PTB-PVDA: Un parti marxiste en croissance* (Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles). Figures after 2020 reflect party-reported estimates rather than independently audited data.

[9] Democratic Socialists of America, *2017 and 2021 Membership Surveys*, Growth and Development Committee. Membership totals around 2021-2022 are drawn from internal DSA reporting on members in good standing and summarised in *State of DSA* publications.

[10] Democratic Socialists of America, *2021 Membership Survey Report*, Growth and Development Committee, section on membership tenure and cohort entry, which reports that over 97% of respondents joined after 2016.

