BETWEEN PARTY AND MOVEMENT: DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA AND MOMENTUM*

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Abstract

Social movements and political parties play pivotal roles in shaping political landscapes. Within established center-left parties, organizations often emerge that blur the lines between internal factions and independent movements. This article examines two prominent contemporary examples: the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) within the context of the US Democratic Party, and Momentum within the UK Labour Party. While such formations have historical precedents, DSA and Momentum exhibit distinct characteristics shaped by recent political shifts, digital mobilization, and their navigation of the space between formalized party structures and grassroots activism. This article aims to characterize the roles, structures, and strategies of these two organizations and analyze the implications they hold for left-wing politics within two Anglo-Saxon countries (USA and UK) where the concept of socialism has historically been marginalized. Adopting a qualitative comparative methodology drawing on organizational documents, secondary academic literature, and media analysis, the research explores how these groups attempt to influence their respective parties while maintaining grassroots energy. The comparative analysis suggests that while facing significant challenges, these hybrid organizations represent a key dynamic in contemporary Western left-wing politics, reflecting tensions between institutional engagement and movement-based mobilization in an era where traditional party models are under pressure.

Keywords: Momentum, DSA, Factions, Social movements, Political parties

Parti ve Hareket Arasında: Amerika Demokratik Sosyalistleri ve Momentum

Öz

Sosyal hareketler ve siyasi partiler, siyasi alanın şekillenmesinde kilit roller oynar. Yerleşik merkez-sol partiler içinde, parti içi fraksiyonlarla bağımsız hareketler arasındaki sınırları bulanıklaştıran örgütlenmeler ortaya çıkmaktadır. Bu makale, ABD Demokrat Partisi bağlamında Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) ile Birleşik Krallık İşçi Partisi içindeki Momentum'u inceler. Tarihsel emsalleri bulunsa da, DSA ve Momentum son dönem siyasi değişimler, dijital seferberlik olanakları ve resmî parti yapılarıyla taban aktivizmi arasında gezinme biçimleri nedeniyle özgün nitelikler sergiler. Makale, bu iki örgütün rollerini, yapılarını ve stratejilerini ortaya koymayı; ayrıca sosyalizmin tarihsel olarak ayrıksı bir konuma sahip olduğu iki Anglo-Sakson ülkede (ABD ve Birleşik Krallık) sol siyaset açısından taşıdıkları önemi incelemeyi amaçlar. Örgütsel belgeler, ikincil akademik literatür ve medya incelemesine dayalı niteliksel karşılaştırmalı metodolojiyle, bu grupların taban enerjisini koruyarak partileri üzerinde nasıl etki kurmaya çalıştıkları araştırılır. Karşılaştırmalı analiz, önemli zorluklarla karşı karşıya olsalar da bu hibrit örgütlenmelerin, kurumsal katılım ile hareket temelli seferberlik arasındaki gerilimleri yansıtarak çağdaş Batı sol siyasetinde kilit bir dinamiği temsil ettiğini göstermektedir; zira geleneksel parti modelleri baskı altındadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Momentum, DSA, Hizipler, Toplumsal hareketler, Siyasi partiler

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Between Party and Movement: Democratic Socialists of America and Momentum

Introduction

The interplay between popular movements and political parties is a key research area (Kitschelt, 2005; McAdam et al., 2001). Less explored are organizations operating *within* established parties that blend internal factionalism with independent movement traits. This article examines two significant contemporary examples: the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) linked to the US Democratic Party, and Momentum linked to the UK Labour Party, both resisting easy categorization as purely factions or movements.

These organizations challenge traditional categories. Are they merely factions pursuing internal goals (Sartori, 2005; Boucek, 2009), or closer to movements mobilizing grassroots challenges (Della Porta & Diani, 2006)? Momentum and DSA occupy a hybrid space, combining internal party politics with external grassroots campaigning, solidarity efforts, and digital mobilization (Gerbaudo, 2019a; Rhodes, 2019).

While internal factions like the Independent Labour Party (ILP) or Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) have precedents in these broad-church parties (Pelling, 1965; Kogan & Kogan, 1983; Seyd, 1987; Howell, 2002), DSA and Momentum's contemporary significance is amplified by rapid digital-fueled growth (Gerbaudo, 2019a; Deseriis, 2020), large semi-autonomous memberships, and close association with leadership figures (Corbyn/Sanders) during party realignments. Understanding these 'party-driven movements' requires analysing their distinct features and party relationships (Muldoon & Rye, 2020).

This article seeks to answer the following research question: How do Momentum and DSA navigate the complex relationship between internal party faction and independent social movement in the US and UK?

Addressing this question requires a comparative qualitative approach that situates both organisations within their historical trajectories, examines their structural and strategic adaptations, and evaluates how their hybrid positioning operates under the institutional constraints of FPTP electoral systems. This qualitative comparative research draws on organizational documents (including *The Organiser*, noting its post-Corbyn limitations), secondary literature (on factions, movements, digital politics, specific histories), and media reports. It compares origins, structures, strategies, and party relationships, focusing on the post-2015 period of significant growth while acknowledging historical roots. The FPTP electoral systems in both the UK and the USA are a crucial contextual factor, often compelling left-wing forces to operate within larger, more established parties to achieve influence (Duverger, 1954). In the UK, it is the way to elect members of parliament, while in the US, it is the method to choose the members of the Electoral College to decide the president.

By the same token, the American and British parties have tried to 'catch' as much as they can. This has led them to keep their stance in the centre and to keep their space against the left and right poles. Nevertheless, DSA and Momentum offered alternative visions for party programs like redistribution of sources/services (in favor of the working class, different races, migrants), the strengthening of public intervention, and an ecological transformation that can be perceived as 'revolution' within the relevant parties. They also have strived for the representation of younger, colorful people and women more in these parties, who are expected to refresh the policy-making via an inclusive socialist discourse. Furthermore, studying these two movements underlines a remarkable socio-political transformation in two Anglo-Saxon countries. According to one of the recent polls, 53 % of young British people (aged 18-34) view socialism as an ideal economic system (Clemens & Globerman, 2023). Another poll reveals that 44% of young Americans (aged 18-29) have a positive impression of socialism (Pew Research Center, 2022). These rates point out an emerging trend of positive views on socialism and its main policies (public ownership of fundamental means of production, equal opportunity for young generations, state ownership or intensive state support in the key sectors, and higher taxes for wealthier people) in recent years, even though they vary from time to time. Under these circumstances, the development of two movements (explicitly calling themselves socialist) is a groundbreaking fact. In addition to their unique position, this feature makes them worth analyzing.

The following sections outline theory, provide party context, and comparatively analyze the organizational structures, strategies, and party relationships of DSA and Momentum. The article argues that while not entirely unprecedented, DSA and Momentum exemplify a significant contemporary

dynamic of left organizing within established parties, highlighting ongoing tensions between institutional integration and movement autonomy.

1. Theoretical Framework: Factions, Movements, and Hybridity

The old-new division in social movement studies is the debate on the vanguard party and spontaneity (McAdam et al. 2001; Della Porta and Diani, 2006). The former is an ideologically inspired organization, which was linked to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Kautsky, 1996), while spontaneity is characterized by decentralized actions without central leadership, which was typical for the climate of the 1960s (Snow and Moss, 2014, pp. 1123-1124). On the one hand, social movements are the processes of grassroots mobilization; on the other, political parties are the institutional places for legislative activity, such as the civil rights movement in the United States. However, there are conflicts because of the structural relations of parties and the possible incorporation of radical struggles. This paradigm, therefore, depends on ideology, formalization, and political context. As a result, the understanding of the relations between party systems and social movements in conventional literature may not be very accurate. Yet, critical theorists have gone further in exploring the link between the two, especially neoliberalism, other political structures, ideology, and the struggle for the meaning of democracy (Langman, 2013; Zollner, 2019).

Despite many definitions, a political party can simply be defined as an organized institution founded by a group of people that competes in elections with the aim of acquiring national/local political power (see Huckshorn 1984). Parties, by nature, involve factions. A faction can be described as a specific interest group within a political party that can influence and control decision-making processes (Zuckerman, 1975). As political parties are not monolithic (Boucek, 2009, p. 455), factions operate within them, distinct from parliamentary groups (Ceron, 2019, pp. 5-7; Duverger, 1954, p. 24). They can foster synergy or conflict, sometimes leading to splits. Furthermore, scholars have used different terms in order to describe this intra-party phenomenon, such as 'tendencies' (Rose 1964) or 'fractions' (Sartori 2005). Sartori also states that he comes from the word 'nucleus' (Sartori 2005, 65). Zariski explains the characteristics of the factions as continuity, cohesion, scope of formal organization, and factional *raison d'être* (Zariski 1960, 34).

On the other hand, referring to Tilly, social movements are organized and self-conscious collectives acting in the public sphere (Tilly 1984). Today's social movements have a more extraordinary voice than political parties. Some parties

have even arisen from mass movements and grassroots activism (Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2020). The social movements in some countries strengthened with the help of the turbulent times of the 2007 crisis, and some of them even became the governing power. Podemos, SYRIZA, and Five Star Movements have been the most prominent examples in this manner. Moreover, some European social movements/parties have brought a new organizational culture where they use social media to create a new structure and increase the participatory systems within their organizations. These movements have been called the "digital/platform parties" (Gerbaudo, 2019a; 2019b, p.187) and the "networked parties" (Deseriis, 2020) with a new and revitalised agenda.

While not forming new parties, DSA and Momentum organize large memberships and use digital tools to influence existing parties, exhibiting 'platform party' features like social media organizing, local autonomy, participation drives, and links to charismatic leadership (Gerbaudo, 2019a). This positions them as hybrid forms. Their initial effectiveness seemed strongly tied to endorsing leaders like Corbyn and Sanders.

While literature covers party transformation (Sinwell, 2012) and platform parties (Gerbaudo, 2019a), the specific dynamics of hybrid grassroots organizations operating *within* established parties, blending movement tactics and factional goals, require further comparative study, particularly regarding their organizational models and strategic dilemmas. Momentum and DSA represent organizations developing within/alongside major parties, harnessing movement energy for internal transformation. They fit concepts like 'party-driven movements' (Muldoon & Rye, 2020) or exhibit 'movement-party' traits (Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2020), combining electoral and extra-parliamentary action.

Examining DSA and Momentum comparatively contributes to understanding contemporary hybrid organizations and political participation (see Table 1). This article analyzes their roles, structures, strategies, and implications, arguing they exemplify significant tensions between institutional integration and movement autonomy in an era challenging traditional party models. The following sections, in this regard, analyse two movements individually.

Table 1: Comparison between DSA and Momentum

	Democratic Socialists of America	Momentum
Initial Factor on Foundation	A Historical Account The Merger of DSOC and NAM: Uniting Democratic Socialists in 1970s neoliberal turn – Campaign support to Bernie Sanders	Party leadership election – J. Corbyn
Ideological tendency	Democratic socialism – new left	Democratic socialism – new left
Party Cooperation	Democratic Party	Labour Party
National Grassroots Cooperation	Left-wing organizations, trade-unions, NGOs	Left-wing organizations, trade-unions, NGOs
Campaign Strategy	National and local campaigns	Mostly national, partly local campaigns
Membership Condition	Membership to local chapters required	Membership to the Labour is required
International Cooperation	Extend (Mainly Global South, BDS, Momentum, Labour, Die Linke, Podemos)	Limited (DSA, SPD, Podemos, DIEM25)
Timeline of Progress/Decline	Started rising in 2016 No signs of decline	Rise between 2015-19 Decline after 2019
Categorical position	Vanguard party in nature but strategically social movement organization	Middle between faction and social movement

2. Context: The Labour Party's Trajectory and Momentum's Emergence

The UK Labour Party, historically left-wing but internally diverse within an FPTP system, underwent a significant 'New Labour' transformation under Tony Blair in the 1990s. This 'modernization' involved public service reform, new management techniques, and accepting market principles (Powell, 2008, p. 2), symbolized by altering the collectivist Clause IV (Jones, 1996, pp. 98-103).

Aligned with the post-Cold War 'Third Way', New Labour pursued privatization, liberalization, constrained labour power, and finance-led growth (Powell, 2008, pp. 267-268; Gamble, 2010, p. 648; Chienkgul, 2021, p. 22), taking a clear pro-market position despite later adjustments under Brown government, it retained market-friendly policies (Hay, 2007; Gamble, 2010), sometimes termed 'privatized Keynesianism' (Crouch, 2009). This prolonged centre-left positioning triggered left-wing reaction, culminating after the 2015 election defeat in a leadership contest that shifted Labour's direction.

Digitalization simultaneously provided new organizing tools. Social media enabled faster mobilization and more networked, horizontal politics (Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2020), aiding new parties (Mosca, 2020) and internal groups (Calvo, 2020). Momentum emerged in this context, heavily utilizing digital tools, but its specific trigger was the 2015 Labour leadership election and the need to support the winner, Jeremy Corbyn.

3. Momentum: Strategy and Structure

Momentum was founded following Jeremy Corbyn's unexpected victory in the 2015 Labour leadership election, held after the party's general election defeat. Corbyn, a long-standing left MP linked to factions like the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) and backed by many unions, won due to rule changes (Collins Review) and a membership surge. Momentum formed immediately after to consolidate support for Corbyn, and promoted participatory democracy, solidarity, grassroots power, and a left Labour agenda (Klug et al., 2016, p. 36).

Defining itself as socialist and anti-racist, Momentum aimed for 'a fundamental […] shift in wealth and power' (Momentum, n.d.). It sought a socialist Labour government, expressing loyalty while aiming to transform the party from the bottom up, acting as a bridge to 'extra-party politics' (Momentum, 2022). Its program focused on wealth redistribution, social equality, and nationalization. Its 'constitution' details structure and policies, reiterating aims like working for Labour, a socialist program, accessibility, and social justice. Membership required Labour affiliation.

Momentum aimed to foster active participation among Corbyn supporters within Labour (Klug et al., 2016, p. 40). Despite challenges, Labour under Corbyn, aided by Momentum, achieved synergy in the 2017 general election (less so in 2019), significantly increasing its vote share from 2015. This relative success encouraged activists. Factors included Corbyn's message resonating, effective grassroots/digital mobilization, and productive use of digital platforms

(Pickard, 2018, p. 121), fostering a more integrated, though contested, bottom-up structure.

Momentum's post-Corbyn newsletter, *The Organiser* (launched October 2020), aimed to mobilize local supporters. Its content reflected the changed context: highlighting local organizing efforts (interviews with volunteers), reporting on strikes and international solidarity (Bolivia), featuring critiques ('Class enemy of the week'), and significantly, documenting internal friction with the new Labour leadership and its 'preventing' practices against Momentum (Organiser, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c). This source, while limited to the post-Corbyn era, illustrates the group's shift towards navigating a less favourable internal environment.

In early 2021, the newsletter highlighted restructuring attempts. The section mentioning practices held included newly organized outdoor activities such as seminars and conferences (The Organiser 2021a; 2021b). It also gave information concerning the network with other grassroots groups, including environmentalist and feminist organizations and trade unions. In the section on local supporters, the newsletter welcomed volunteers from Norfolk, Southwark, South Essex, Bristol, and Chelsea (The Organiser 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d). The interviewees talked about the start of their local organization and the effects of the post-Corbyn era. Despite having different problems in their local area, they converged at one point: the demand for justice and equality. Another common point was that all these volunteers recommended getting together and contacting a Momentum local organization as a way to stand together, share opinions, and create a joint action agenda against the existing system. Focus later shifted to reorganization post-2019 defeat (The Organiser, 2021g; 2021h), with local groups reporting mixed experiences navigating relationships with Labour constituents and representatives (The Organiser, 2021e; 2021f). This reflects the ongoing negotiation of the relationship with the party structure.

The final issues in 2022 continued local/international news, covered local elections (noting around 100 Momentum-linked councilors elected despite mixed national results for Labour), and stressed solidarity ahead of the next general election, before ceasing publication (The Organiser, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c).

4. Momentum: Campaigns and Cooperation

Momentum actively networked with civil society allies. Its hybrid strategy involved strengthening Labour's left in elections while also campaigning on social inequality, housing, workplace, and environmental issues. Early campaigns included voter registration ('Democracy SOS', 2015) and anti-austerity work (food banks, 2016) (History Archives of Momentum [HAM], 2023, pp. 35-37). 'Momentum4Labour' supported local election candidates (Apr

2016), followed by the crucial 'Call for Corbyn' campaign to re-elect him leader (Summer 2016), borrowing techniques from Sanders' campaign (HAM, 2023, p. 32). The 2017 general election saw major mobilization: thousands volunteered, using tools like 'My Nearest Marginal' to target key seats (HAM, 2023, p. 27). Activity in 2018-19 included launching a councilor network, local media work, campaigning against May's Brexit deal, supporting strikes (McDonald's, Uber), and climate action ('Bankrupt Climate Change'/Green New Deal advocacy -a comprehensive policy framework aiming to address climate change through large-scale public investment in renewable energy, green jobs, and social justice measures-, joining Youth Climate Strikes), consolidating ties with other movements (HAM, 2023, pp. 13-23).

Momentum's online and physical mobilization for Labour continued until the elections. The 2019 election resulted in a major defeat for Labour, marking the end of Corbyn's leadership and the left's ascent. Momentum backed Rebecca Long-Bailey in the subsequent leadership contest, but Keir Starmer won decisively (HAM, 2023, p. 5).

Momentum has cooperated with some left-wing groups across Europe and North America. For instance, Momentum members of the NCG met German Social Democratic Party (SPD) representatives to discuss elections in Germany and share experiences (Oltermann 2018). The group's activists also conducted debates regarding the political agenda of the SPD and a left alternative. A member of both Labour and Momentum (and of SPD in Germany) discussed how new SPD programs could provide support similar to Momentum's efforts in the UK (Hudson, 2018). Another cooperation was carried out with the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25). Yannis Varoufakis, the organization's co-founder, mentioned that the Green New Deal could unite the European left (Taylor and Neslen 2019). Varoufakis stated he collaborated with other leftist, social-democratic, ecologist, social liberal parties, social movements/grassroots, and other civil society organizations. One of these institutions was Momentum. It initially supported this Green New Deal program, envisioned as a transformative socio-economic plan linking climate action with economic redistribution, and conducted its own campaign within the UK. In this context, Momentum can be considered one of the internal factors pushing for the Deal within Labour. Moreover, Momentum also cooperated closely with DSA, exchanging ideas and learning from Sanders' campaign (Proctor, 2019), maintaining contact.

Even at its peak times, Momentum always remained within Labour, reflecting FPTP constraints and its strategy of internal transformation. FPTP, in fact, ignores the votes for the candidates/parties other than the winner. For instance, the Labour Party gained almost 63% of the seats in the House of

Commons, while it gained 34% of the total votes in the 2024 General Elections (Topping, 2024). This system; leads the voters to options that are not their first preferences, excludes every vote other than the winner, canalizes the parties' attention to the 'swing regions' (and ignoring the 'safe regions' which are viewed as guarantee vote), and limits the competition just between a few candidates/parties (Sandle 2025). Hence, small parties have not been able to find a fair representation via elections. It also limits the power of social movements like Momentum. Their risk of failing is much bigger than acquiring a stable position within this election system. Nonetheless, Momentum has never preferred to

It operated as a hybrid grassroots force – part faction, part movement – focused on backing Corbyn, unlike groups forming separate parties (Deseriis, 2020). Its digital activism resembled 'platform movement' characteristics (Gerbaudo, 2019a; De Blasio & Viviani, 2020). In this way, it has distinguished itself from some other digital party counterparts like Podemos or SYRIZA, which formed independent parties. Relying on collective leadership and digital platforms, Momentum achieved notable mobilization success during the Corbyn era, mobilizing younger voters and contributing to Corbyn's initial leadership victory and 2017 election performance. Corbyn's eventual resignation after the 2019 defeat led to Momentum losing influence amid consolidation by the Starmer leadership.

Momentum's experience as a hybrid faction/movement within Labour during the Corbyn era exemplifies contemporary challenges. Comparing it with its US counterpart, DSA, offers further insight.

5. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA): Context and Hybridity

This section and the ones that follow discuss the DSA, an organization that, similar to Momentum, grew significantly, leveraging campaigns, meetings, and online presence. Like Momentum, it attempts participatory structures, enabling member input and lacks a single leader, with decisions made via its elected National Political Committee (NPC) (DSA, n.d.). However, managing internal democracy in a large, growing organization presents challenges (Lawrence, 2024).

The DSA's main approach has been to assist in the election of progressive and openly socialist candidates, often running within the Democratic Party primary system (DSA, 2016a; 2020b), in particular via the highly visible endorsement of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns. By

means of supporting strikes, demonstrations, local meetings, and digital campaigns, the DSA was able to engage young voters and significantly expand its membership, contributing to Sanders' primary performances (Ramsay-Smith, 2019). Nevertheless, like Momentum post-Corbyn, the DSA has faced challenges related to sustaining mobilization and retaining members after the peak excitement of the Sanders campaigns ended (Lawrence, 2024; Dai, 2024), a common issue for grassroots organisations reliant on specific electoral cycles or movement peaks. This section analyses the DSA's structure, approach, and issues, and compares and contrasts them with those of Momentum to further understand the nature of modern left-wing activism.

In a broader vein, the location of the DSA relative to the Democratic Party is still an issue of internal discussion and strategic debate (Ackerman, 2016; 2018). Despite its frequent tactical alignment with the Democratic Party (often termed an "inside/outside" strategy or debating a "dirty break" versus "realignment"), it maintains separate self-governing programs distinct from the party apparatus. While organizationally clear, this independence faces the constraints of operating within the US two-party system, limiting immediate prospects for creating an entirely autonomous electoral organization with national power.

DSA's growth is significant given the US anti-socialism history (Isserman, 2000). Roots include Debs/Thomas legacies and Michael Harrington's 1973 founding of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), which merged with the New American Movement (NAM) in 1982 to form DSA (Harrington, 1988). Its recent resurgence is linked to crises (e.g., the 2008 recession) and generational shifts (Judis, 2016, pp. 83-87). DSA adapts diverse traditions (European welfare models, various socialist strands, feminism, eco-socialism) to the US context, housing them in a broad ideological tent (Dorrien, 2021, pp. 110-114). DSA's role in revitalizing US socialist politics, long marginalized by anti-communism, is undeniable (Sunkara, 2019), arguably representing the most significant socialist presence since the Debsian era (cf. Isserman, 2000).

Within complex US politics linking class, identity, and neoliberalism (Fraser, 2017), DSA's primary objective is building a socialist movement rooted in the working class. This distinguishes it from liberal approaches, potentially sidelining class analysis (Dornbush & Lewis, 2018). DSA adapts socialist principles to the US, emphasizing universal social programs (Medicare for All, Green New Deal) while integrating anti-racist and feminist struggles, attempting to fuse identity politics and class struggle (DSA, 2021b; Aronoff et al., 2019). Similar to how the UK context shaped Momentum (Ward & Guglielmo, 2021),

US conditions, including Sanders' rise, enabled DSA's growth (cf. Muldoon and Rye, 2020).

6. DSA: Electoral Strategy and Structure

The DSA is a multi-tendency, democratic-socialist, and labor-oriented political organization in the US. Recent estimates place its membership around 90,000, organized into chapters across all 50 states, making it the largest socialist organization in the country in decades (DSA platform, n.d., DSA, 2021b). Its roots are in the Socialist Party of America (SPA), whose leaders included Eugene V. Debs, Norman Thomas, and Michael Harrington (Isserman, 2000; Schwartz, 2017). Michael Harrington, leading a minority faction emerging from the SPA's dissolution, founded the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) in 1973, which merged with the New American Movement (NAM) in 1982 to form DSA (Harrington, 1988).

The DSA believes that working people should run both the economy and society democratically to meet human needs, not to make profits for a few. The DSA's vision, as outlined in its platform, is a humane social order based on popular control of resources and production, economic planning, equitable distribution, feminism, racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships (DSA, 2021b). The DSA's actions include affordable housing campaigns, worker organizing (including initiatives like the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee - EWOC), environmental justice campaigns (often linked to the Green New Deal framework), immigrant rights activism, voter participation, and political education at the local level (Moody, 2021). Nationally, strategic focus encompasses grassroots organizing, electoral strategies, coalition building with other social movements, and advancing democratic socialism (Schwartz, 2017; Ackerman, 2016; 2018).

With the capacity to organize hundreds of local networks (chapters and branches), the DSA has a governing body, the National Political Committee (NPC), and key auxiliary bodies like the Democratic Socialist Labor Commission (DSLSC) and the National Electoral Committee (NEC) (DSA, n.d.). According to the DSA's ideology of change, economic and political power must be built simultaneously (cf. DSA, 2016a). Resolutions passed at its conventions since 2017 have increasingly emphasized electoral strategies as crucial for building independent working-class power, making electoral work a high priority.

The most important reason for this strategic emphasis was the surge in interest and membership generated by Bernie Sanders' presidential campaigns; many new members joined the DSA inspired by Sanders and began to fight for

democratic socialism under the organization's banner (Ramsay-Smith, 2019; Dorrien, 2021, pp. 563-564). In 2016, after Sanders' defeat in the Democratic primary, DSA adopted a "Dump Trump" strategy, advocating for Trump's defeat while maintaining critical distance from the official Clinton campaign – a significant intervention in presidential politics navigating complex alliances (DSA, 2016a). In this way, the DSA conducted a power analysis—using a form of critical non-endorsement—to build multicultural coalitions and electoral campaigns locally, aiming to fight against neoliberal Democrats and Trumpism simultaneously. This illustrates their attempt to develop strategies enhancing capacity within social movements while achieving political impact, often in key swing states. However, the lack of a unifying national figure like Bernie Sanders since the 2020 primaries has posed challenges for maintaining momentum and strategic coherence nationally (Lawrence, 2024).

The electoral achievements and setbacks of both Momentum and the DSA have shaped their strategies and the discourse around leftist politics in their respective countries. The case of Momentum during the 2017 (relative success) and 2019 (major defeat) UK general elections (Rhodes, 2019; Bale et al., 2020) and the DSA during the 2018 and 2022 US midterm elections (significant successes at state and local levels, alongside high-profile congressional wins) (Day, 2018; Svart, 2022) provides fertile ground for comparative analysis of translating grassroots enthusiasm into political victories (Muldoon & Rye, 2020; Ward & Guglielmo, 2021). Similar to how Momentum aimed to reorient Labour's policies, the DSA seeks to move the political center of gravity leftward, often through interventions within the Democratic Party. Both have grappled with the strategic dilemmas of working within established political institutions versus functioning independently (Ackerman, 2016; 2018).

After the 2016 presidential election, the DSA became significantly more active and successful in electoral politics. DSA-endorsed candidates achieved notable victories in state and local offices during the 2017 elections (DSA, 2017a). Local chapters often contributed through independent field operations, canvassing, messaging, and campaign management (Day, 2018). The DSA's electoral success continued in the 2018 midterm elections, highlighted by DSA members Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib winning seats in the US House of Representatives, alongside dozens elected to state and local positions (DSA, 2018). This trend persisted into 2022, with a high success rate among nationally endorsed candidates in state legislative races (Svart, 2022). These victories reshaped the DSA's political reputation and influenced its ongoing strategic development, including efforts to build independent chapter capacity for electoral campaigns (DSA 2019; 2021c).

Because of the structure of the US electoral system (single-member districts, plurality voting), the political landscape is dominated by two major parties (Schattschneider, 2004; Taylor, 2025). Critics argue these 'catch-all' parties often become heavily influenced by campaign finance dynamics and elite networks, potentially limiting representation (Mann & Corrado, 2014; Gilens & Page, 2014). The historically more centrist or neoliberal orientation within parts of the Democratic Party, associated with groups like the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) (From, 2013), was significantly challenged by the Sanders wing and DSA during Joe Biden's 2020 election campaign. After the election, ideological differences persisted. While DSA pursued a critical anti-Trump stance in 2016, which was coined as "socialism over barbarism" (DSA, 2016b), it did not endorse Biden in 2020, reflecting its strategic autonomy and ongoing critique of corporate influence within the Democratic Party (DSA, 2020a; 2020b). This decision navigated a complex situation where the Democratic Party faced pressure from its left flank while confronting Trumpism. Consequently, the DSA's strategy, rooted in local social movements but engaging nationally via elections, continues to face pressure from both the right and the established center of the Democratic Party, illustrating the paradoxes of operating within dominant party structures (Judis, 2016, pp. 19-20; Judis, 2020, pp. 18-19).

7. DSA: Overall Strategy and Navigating Contradictions

The main uncertainty arises: What is the DSA's overall strategy? The DSA's purpose is stated in the DSA Charter and Bylaws text as follows: "[...] we are developing a concrete strategy for achieving that vision, for building a majority movement that will make democratic socialism a reality in America. We believe that such a strategy must acknowledge the class structure of American society and that this class structure means that there is a basic conflict of interest between those sectors with enormous economic power and the vast majority of the population" (DSA Constitution & Bylaws, n.d.). The vision of an economy that benefits humanity is central to the DSA's work (Kaderbek, 2018). The objective of the DSA is twofold: first, to achieve the power to halt production, which can only be accomplished through the workers' movement; second, to devise an electoral strategy that will allow socialists to emerge from the voting booth with increased power, ideally as the ruling party eventually. The DSA believes it will accomplish this objective through power mapping, coalition building, and cooperation with the masses through collective action in response to social, economic, political, and cultural problems within capitalist totality (DSA, 2022).

The antagonistic nature of class conflicts came to the fore in the period beginning with the Occupy movement, and the radical discourse changed in the period leading up to Black Lives Matter, one of the largest protests in US history. The critique of the financial system directed against the privileged rich of Wall Street has been combined with movements with new proletarian identities that have broadened the concept of the working class to include new social movements such as women, students, gender, racial justice movements, and new class representatives such as salaried workers in high-tech fields. Although the DSA has had influential support in popular movements such as the Starbucks strikes (where a small percentage of workers have voted to join the unionization process), Amazon strikes (resulting in a historic first-ever labor union victory at one facility, but also raising questions about reliance on pro-labor Democrats), the University of California strike (prompting debate about DSA's role and influence versus established unions and party actors), its desire to transcend the neoliberal Democrats in its struggle with the establishment is often at odds with the primary trends of mainstream politics (McIntosh, 2018, pp. 13-14; Kaiser, 2022; DSA, 2022; Koslowski, 2022; Sunkara, 2023).

The DSA is extremely passionate about virtually all social justice causes it supports through historical struggles. Like Momentum's 'Bankrupt Climate Change' campaign, its Ecosocialist Working Group supports environmental issues and the Green New Deal, linking climate issues to employment. More so, the DSA's Labour Commission supports workers' equity, for instance, with the demand for a $15 minimum wage and enhanced healthcare benefits, similar to the Fight for $15 (DSA, 2017b). At the same time, the DSA's Feminist Working Group supports gender equity and reproductive justice and opposes anti-abortion legislation and supports actions like the March for Women. Internationally, the DSA has been a beacon of left-wing cooperation worldwide. The DSA International Committee was founded in 2018 and focuses on solidarity, especially in Latin America, and opposes American imperialism, as seen in Venezuela (DSA International Committee, n.d.). In addition, the DSA backs such movements as the BDS in Palestine and expands its solidarity with the Kurds in Rojava against Turkish aggression (DSA 2021a). Notably, it has built ties with socialist factions globally, evidenced by its engagements with Europe's left-leaning parties like Podemos and Die Linke and its delegation to the UK's Labour Party conference (Tax, 2019, p. 8).

Class consciousness is characterized by antagonism derived from historical struggle. In the US, this dynamic unfolds more concealed through ideological aspects, especially in the context of the Democratic Party, which occasionally attempts to portray itself as friendly to labor. This usually forces left factions towards tactical alliances with the Democrats, especially when

threatened by phenomena like Trumpism. The DSA, trying to locate itself in the context of the class struggle, has potential for change and acknowledges mutual movements limited by the electoral framework. As Meyerson put it, the DSA faces two major challenges: the tension between bottom-up mobilization and electoral strategies and how it deals with labor and progressive movements (Meyerson, 2019).

As seen with Momentum's connection to the Labour Party, the DSA's relationship with the Democrats raises the question: can they form it and, at the same time, be formed by it? In general, the Democratic Party's adoption of certain liberal positions on social issues, while sometimes appearing progressive, coexists with entrenched neoliberal economic stances. While Sanders' campaign brought other socialist goals into the limelight, it was sidelined by the Trump phenomenon and the party establishment, showing the continuous struggle that socialists face. Indeed, Momentum's experience after 2019 presents the DSA with a useful lesson in how a socialist organization can manage its party affiliations and independent campaigns. Like Momentum, the DSA has not preferred to quit the party. Similar electoral limits are valid for it: the FPTP system and the established American politics do not give the small parties/organizations enough room to survive. In such a system where even independent candidates can acquire gains compared to receiving nothing as part of small parties (like the Green Party and the Libertarian Party), DSA's preference seems meaningful.

DSA employs an intra-party pressure group approach. It faces a challenge similar to historical precedents like the Debsian party stymied by internal contradictions and external repression (Howe, 1985, pp. 41-47): can the Democratic Party be pushed significantly leftward? DSA acts as a counterpoint to democratic neoliberalism via elections and social struggles. Its strategy aims to build broad working-class power, but navigating mainstream politics involves inherent dilemmas navigating mainstream politics while maintaining connection with the diverse working population. Incidents like the Railway Workers dispute highlight DSA's balancing act between labor militancy and party alliances (DSA, 2022).

Concluding Remarks

DSA and Momentum are significant actors for political configuration. Momentum, founded in the 2015 post-Corbyn election, aimed for a horizontal, participatory organization based on socialist principles. It organized its

supporters locally, built solidarity networks, and cooperated internationally. Despite limitations, its operation supporting Corbyn within Labour while using digital tools makes it a key case study of a hybrid organization in a contested position within the UK. DSA similarly seeks a socialist future via combined electoral, movement, and labor strategies. Its significant post-2016 growth made it a prominent progressive voice, focusing on diverse social justice issues (healthcare, housing, climate, labor, feminism). DSA faces challenges reconciling internal tensions while navigating US politics and the Democratic Party. Its continued influence seems likely, but ongoing debates address the effectiveness of balancing incremental gains with long-term goals. Hovering between faction and movement, DSA, like Momentum, embodies grassroots movements' contradictions in pursuing radical change via established channels.

Overall, Momentum and DSA reflect global trends of grassroots movements attempting to reshape traditional party politics, offering insights into the challenges and future of left activism within broader political ecosystems. Both appeared on the political stage in two countries where socialist thought and policies have been suffering and periodically marginalized. Even though their efforts take them to the level of a social/grassroots movement, the ties with their parties make them closer to a fractions. Yet, their behavior may be likened to platform parties since their digital ecosystem is excessively large; they make decisions and elect their sub-committees via digital elections. They also suffer from the electoral system and center-oriented politics in the USA and UK, though these countries have different socio-cultural backgrounds. They individually organize their agenda of action (press releases, election campaigns, specific actions, seminars, solidarity visits) independently of the parties they are included in. In an atmosphere where traditional left-wing parties (mostly social democratic ones) have been declining and democratic-ecological socialism begins to get 'popular', particularly among the young voters, these movements appear to undertake a transformative role. Additionally, their contradictory place includes both pluses and minuses. They cannot use large sources and legitimacy as a political party has, but can provide more contacts with local networks, other social movements and grassroots organizations. Hence, it is certain that there should be more studies which zero in on these kinds of organizations.

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