THE POLITICAL SCENE

# HOW THE D.S.A. LEARNED TO LOVE ELECTIONS

*Members of the Democratic Socialists of America believe deeply in the possibility of a class revolution. Meanwhile, they're running for office—and winning.*

**By Benjamin Wallace-Wells**

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"There's often a focus on the purity of D.S.A.," a member of the group's Los Angeles chapter said. "But it's about power." Photographs by Alex Welsh for The New Yorker

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In a loft ten floors above the street-level din of downtown Los Angeles, Rafael Jaime, a thirty-seven-year-old Ph.D. candidate studying medieval and early modern English literature at U.C.L.A., was preparing, for the fourth time in seven days, to spend an evening lobbying for votes within the Democratic Socialists of America. The loft, which he shares with two roommates and a three-legged dog, has polished concrete floors, amber lighting, and mid-century-modern furniture. It was September 1st, and Jaime, who is just under six feet tall and sturdily built, with a thick beard and piercings in both ears, was at a dining-room table, staring at a spreadsheet of five hundred and forty-one registered D.S.A. members in L.A. Each person's name was color-coded to indicate the likelihood that, by midnight, they could be persuaded to support an endorsement of Nithya Raman, a progressive city councilwoman who was seeking the D.S.A.'s backing in her mayoral campaign against the Democratic incumbent, Karen Bass. Imagine, Jaime told me, "what it would mean to the organization to have a candidate running for mayor—the amount of people that would bring in."

By the standards of national political organizations, the D.S.A., with just under a hundred and thirty thousand members, is tiny. (The National Rifle Association, by comparison, is fifty times the size.) And yet, in the year since Zohran Mamdani, a member, was elected mayor of New York, a hundred and twenty-three D.S.A.-backed candidates have won primaries at every level—including nineteen nominees for Congress and five for statewide office—a breakthrough on par with the Tea Party's in 2010. What makes this momentum so striking is that the D.S.A.'s process for endorsing candidates is largely left to local chapters. Whereas the Democratic Party employs highly paid consultants to vet office-seekers and tailor campaign messaging, the D.S.A. relies on an unusually active and internally disputatious political culture;

its members are forever arguing over which candidates to back, and under what conditions. Jaime thought that the conditions were right for a West Coast version of the Mamdani phenomenon. As in New York last year, L.A.'s sitting mayor is deeply unpopular, and the D.S.A., whose members occupy four of the fifteen seats on the Los Angeles City Council, has been slowly growing in influence. "There's often a focus on the purity of D.S.A.," Jaime said. "But it's about power."

That Jaime thought the D.S.A. should be involved in elections at all put him on one side of a division in the organization. Within the left wing of the D.S.A.—arguably the leftmost extreme of American politics—are caucuses with names like Red Star and Communist Caucus, whose members tend to be focussed more on goals like radicalizing labor unions and expounding on Marxist theory than on engaging in "mass politics." This summer, one of the D.S.A.'s two national co-chairs, Megan Romer, was widely ridiculed after appearing on Fox News and cheerfully affirming that socialists wanted to abolish ICE, national borders, and the Senate. A member of another D.S.A. caucus told me, "If you're asking me how to make sense of Megan, my answer would be that she's in Red Star and that's how people in Red Star think."

In Los Angeles, Jaime's faction, the Socialist Majority Caucus, or S.M.C., had recently come into conflict with another influential caucus in the L.A. chapter, Groundwork, which, in August, announced that it would be opposing any endorsement of Raman. Groundwork's members typically shared the S.M.C.'s enthusiasm for supporting far-left candidates. But, in a lengthy statement, they argued that Raman, an urban planner and housing advocate from Silver Lake who joined the D.S.A. in 2019, in the lead-up to her run for city council, "tends to dissemble" when asked whether she is a socialist. Raman was not "afraid of

democratic socialism as a label or a political ideology," the group noted, but, rather, "she does not believe in socialism as an ideology, method of analysis, or political movement."

This debate, which had unfolded during the summer, often in prickly essays in an online publication called *Geese*, could sound esoteric, but it contained an essential question about political identity. How much ideological compromise was the D.S.A. willing to accept for political clout? "Nithya is just not a socialist," Alejandra Quintero, a member of Groundwork who works in communications at a nonprofit, told me, noting that Raman rarely talked about the problems of billionaire influence or wealth inequality. "It's, like, can you even name the opposition?" Most people seemed to acknowledge that, if the endorsement vote was held among only the most active D.S.A. members, Raman would lose. (The chapter's bylaws require a sixty-per-cent super-majority of members to vote for an endorsement.) For Jaime and the S.M.C. organizers, the trick was to reach as many members as possible, including those who were newer or less involved. "S.M.C. is great at whipping," Quintero said. "I'll give them that."

Jaime had initially come to the D.S.A. through union organizing, where he had learned the practice of marshalling votes—one whip count after another. After moving to Los Angeles for graduate school, in 2016, he found that, even with roommates, his rent ate up about half of what he earned as a teaching assistant. Graduate students in California have a union, organized through the United Auto Workers, but at the time only about a third of those who were eligible had joined it. Jaime had worked to increase membership, and then helped launch a strike, in 2022, which won pay increases of between fifty-five and eighty per cent. He's now the president of Local 4811, which represents sixty thousand higher-education workers across the University of California system.



"We can transform politics in L.A.," a D.S.A. member in the city said. "We have the organization."

In his loft, he counted nine other U.A.W. members on a Zoom call to coördinate the final push for Raman's endorsement. Among them was Keshav Kundassery, an M.D.-Ph.D. student at U.C.L.A. who had formally introduced the resolution to endorse her. He was on vacation in Spain, but had volunteered to make some last-minute cold calls back to L.A. Jaime tends to speak about the work he is doing in practical terms; Kundassery is more interested in the big picture. "As an organization, we have very, very lofty goals," he told me. To achieve them, he thought, required not being picky about ideology. "If we want to become the kind of organization that can actually not just elect Nithya, or not just elect Zohran, but become a mass socialist party that is regularly electing people into office while also playing an outsized role in the cultural and political transformation of the United States, we are going to have to shed some

of those self-defeating habits and be ready to embrace the messy reality of what it actually means to get involved in politics."

The endorsement vote, held through an online portal, closed that evening, at 11:59 P.M. By the following afternoon, the results were in: Raman had won sixty-six per cent of the chapter's vote, and the D.S.A. had a candidate. From Spain, Kundassery expressed an incredible feeling of relief. The margin, he said, "tells me that the membership is ready to start thinking big and thinking at the scale that would actually be required to build democratic socialism in America." Jaime told me that people talked endlessly about whether Raman was another Mamdani, but that wasn't the important point. "The point is, we can transform politics in L.A.," he said. "We have the organization."

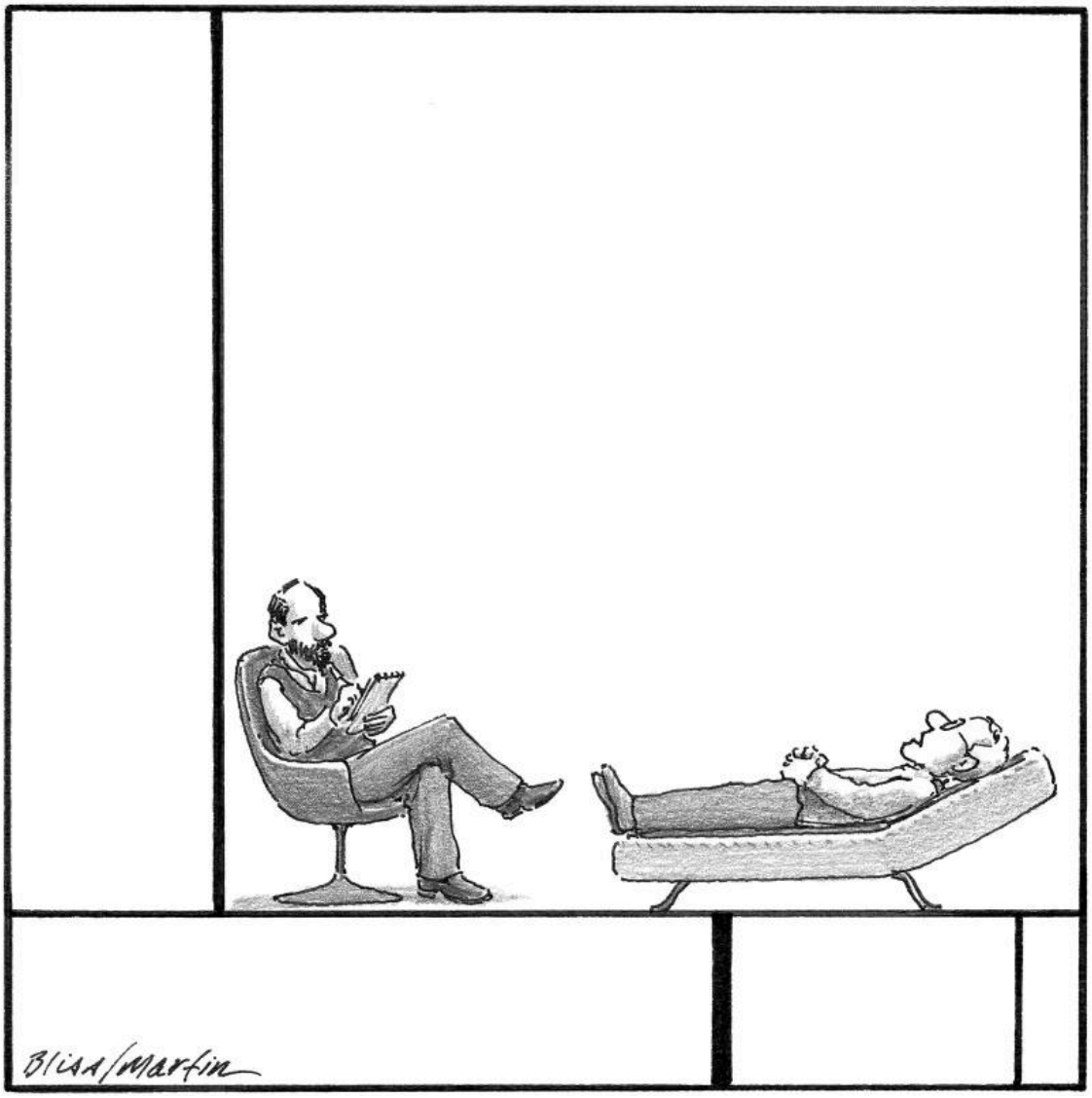
Year Zero in the modern incarnation of the Democratic Socialists of America was 2016, when Bernie Sanders first ran for President. But the organization has a modest prehistory. The D.S.A. was founded, in 1982, following the merger of the New American Movement and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. The group's most prominent member was the left-wing writer and social critic Michael Harrington, a national co-chair, whose book "The Other America" had helped inspire Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Harrington's vision for democratic socialism—that it would operate as "the left wing of the possible" within the Democratic Party—reflected an understanding that no class revolution was on the horizon in the U.S., and that a third party was not viable. In practice, socialism operated more as a moral ideal for egalitarian liberals than as a discernible electoral strategy. The former New York mayor David Dinkins was a D.S.A. member, but he also fit comfortably within the post-civil-rights-era Democratic Party. Eric Blanc, a labor scholar at Rutgers, noted that, in 1984, the group declined to endorse Jesse Jackson for President, even though he had campaigned for universal health care, Palestinian statehood, and a federal-jobs program, "because that was seen as too 'out there.' "

Socialists searching for analogues to the D.S.A. often point to the early twentieth century, when left-wing parties drew membership from industrial labor unions.

Socialists held the Milwaukee mayor's office for most of the first half of the twentieth century, and Eugene Debs, running on the Socialist Party ticket, won six per cent of the vote for President in 1912. But, even then, American socialists walked a fine line—they were considered too radical for the mainstream and a mere bourgeois affectation by committed class revolutionaries. In Leon Trotsky's autobiography, he dismissed the leaders of the American Socialist Party, whose "solidarity of ideas usually serves as a screen for business connections." He described one Party official as "the ideal socialist leader for successful dentists."

By 2016, the D.S.A.'s presence in Los Angeles was barely visible at all. "Mostly they set up folding tables explaining socialism at Bernie events," Tal Levy, a software engineer for a sports-data company who joined the organization around that time, told me. At a new-enrollment event in January, 2017, he recalled, "there were four existing members and one hundred new members."

At the time, Kundassery was a high-school debater in Fremont, California, where his parents had moved after emigrating from India on H1-B visas. He found in the Sanders campaign a vision of social change which he felt Hillary Clinton's Democratic Party lacked. "He was speaking in terms of the utopian possibility of building the kind of country where everyone feels taken care of," Kundassery said. During his junior year, he phone-banked for Sanders most days after school. After the election, some debate friends on the East Coast recommended that he check out Marx. "They were, like, If you like Bernie, this is the real deal," Kundassery said.




*"My problem is I see everything in black and white. And sometimes blue, red, and yellow."*

Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

Open cartoon gallery

In retrospect, the fact that traditional liberals were losing high-school debaters and future M.D.-Ph.D. students—the striving, idealistic children of the Obama era—to what was then still understood to be a grungy left wing ought to have been a giant warning sign for the Democratic Party. By the time Kundassery was an undergraduate, at Vanderbilt, he was reading Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and the Greek French philosopher Nicos Poulantzas, who theorized how a transition to socialism

might be achieved in democratic societies. Kundassery began to attend socialist meetings—first, Vanderbilt for Bernie Sanders, then the Middle Tennessee D.S.A., then, as a graduate student, the Chicago D.S.A. The other attendees, Kundassery said, were generally "people like me, with a lot of degrees and relatively comfortable upbringings who might be facing—I'm not saying this applies to me, but as a class—the sense that our future lives might be a little worse than our parents' were."

D.S.A. members—the overwhelming majority of whom are college-educated—are often described in terms that emphasize the precariousness of their circumstances: they are called "downwardly mobile," or, more poetically, "the precariat." But neither appellation applies to Jaime, who leads a large union, or Kundassery, who plans to be an emergency-medicine doctor, or Quintero, the daughter of a custodian, who has a graduate degree from Cornell. They are ambitious young people with interesting careers ahead of them who are often choosing something other than the most obviously lucrative lines of work.

In big cities, people like this tend to pay rent, which often puts them—to borrow some Marxist terminology—in an antagonistic relationship with the local petite bourgeoisie. When the D.S.A. first began to focus on New York politics, in the late twenty-tens, it targeted districts where Sanders had performed well and where there was a large base of renters. Few established politicians were seeking the D.S.A.'s endorsement, so the organization often found candidates from within its own ranks and among tenant organizers. "We were really intentional," Emily Lemmerman, a member of the national D.S.A.'s Socialists-in-Office Network Committee, told me. "We had particular people targeted for seats years out, and we would say, O.K., does this person need help with public speaking? Are they going to be able to get time off

work? Will they be able to handle it when the New York *Post* publishes something horrible about them?"

Mamdani worked as a foreclosure-prevention counsellor before he won a seat in the New York State Assembly, in 2020. He was also a member of a D.S.A. electoral working group, through which he gained experience on left-wing campaigns. Lemmerman, who later served as Mamdani's communications director in Albany, said that the D.S.A. had long assumed that a socialist could run in what became Mamdani's district, in Astoria, Queens, because the state assemblywoman there was seen as friendly to landlords. "There was just kind of a consensus that this was a neighborhood where it doesn't make sense that it's represented by the interests of real estate," Lemmerman said.

By then, the D.S.A. had realized that although Democratic incumbents could seem formidable—raising a lot of money and drawing on deep community connections—their reëlections depended on primaries, in which a very small number of people voted. In 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, at the time a D.S.A.-backed former bartender, upset Joseph Crowley, a ten-term congressman with a leadership position in the House. Their primary race is still regarded as a historic political earthquake, but, in the final tally, Ocasio-Cortez earned fewer than seventeen thousand votes. She and Crowley, who received fewer than thirteen thousand votes, debated just once. And that was for a seat in the U.S. Congress. In races for state legislatures or city councils—the bodies that govern tenant law—a well-organized coalition of renters could have an even more outsized impact. There are now nine socialist members of the New York State Legislature. In places like North Brooklyn and inner Queens, D.S.A. members made so much progress that some began to dream bigger. As Sam Lewis, a former co-chair of a New York D.S.A. electoral working group, put it to me, "There are renters everywhere."

On a bright Friday in September, Nithya Raman met me outside the Taschen art-book stall at the Original Farmers Market, a century-old L.A. institution that now sits next to a high-end shopping mall. It is one of the rare spots in the city where thousands of people walk by. Eight months earlier, Raman was a relatively unknown city councilwoman with a wonkish focus on housing; now she had a decent shot at being the next mayor of Los Angeles. "A couple of people have, like, looked and waved," she told an aide at one point. "They've been very nice, so it's cute."

During the lead-up to the all-party primary, in June, the main issue in the mayoral election seemed to be Bass's response to the 2025 L.A. wildfires. (Unluckily, but also indelibly, the then seventy-one-year-old mayor was in Ghana when the fires started.) The noisiest challenger was Spencer Pratt, a Republican and a former cast member on the MTV reality show "The Hills," who had lost his home in the fires and whose first ad featured images of Raman's $1.6 million home and the Getty House, where Bass, as the mayor of L.A., resides. "This is where I live," Pratt growled, standing outside of an Airstream trailer. He said that his political role model was Jesus Christ, and explored a dystopian boundary in American politics by promoting a flood of A.I.-generated ads. At the first debate, he outperformed both Bass and Raman, denouncing them as part of the same failed system, and, despite running in an overwhelmingly Democratic city, only narrowly lost out on a place in the November runoff.

Raman, who now occupies the insurgent role in the race, seemed to see the fires less as an indictment of the system than of Bass. "Just an astonishing failure of leadership," she said. In Altadena and the Pacific Palisades, the areas most affected, there were still many vacant lots. But, when I joined D.S.A. canvasses elsewhere in the city, the tragedy felt less central to the election. More people talked about homelessness and housing, the issues that brought Raman into politics and into the D.S.A. She decided to run for city council after organizing a group of residents in eastern and central L.A. who were concerned about the number of people sleeping on the streets. They were hoping to mount a progressive response, but the sitting city councilman, she said, "did not consider my volunteer group part of the constituency that elected him—we were younger, we were more diverse, many of us were renters,

and we felt that City Hall did not see the homelessness problem with anything like the urgency we did."

Two days after Raman announced her candidacy for mayor, in February, she invited three D.S.A. leaders to her home in Silver Lake. Leslie Chang, a co-chair of D.S.A.'s L.A. chapter and a member of the Socialist Majority Caucus, recalled Raman saying, "Because I'm a member, the D.S.A. is going to be linked to me now, whether you like it or not. And I'm going to be linked to you, whether I like it or not. So let's figure this out." (Raman confirmed this account.)

The group largely sat out the mayoral primary. Even still, Raman's association with the D.S.A. probably hurt her, given that it made her seem more radical than she actually is. In the runoff with Bass, where the question is more narrowly about change versus the status quo, the affiliation may help her, insofar as it suggests that she is more of an outsider than she actually is. At the Original Farmers Market, I asked Raman, the first D.S.A. member elected to the city council, what had drawn her to the group initially. "I remember they were doing brake-light clinics for people who had been pulled over and were having negative interactions with law enforcement," she said. "They were just really organized around doing things that were concrete."



The sign-in table at a D.S.A. canvassing event in Los Angeles, in October.

The first year of Trump's second term provided abundant opportunities for such local acts of resistance. That June, ICE agents began to occupy Los Angeles in S.U.V.s and unmarked Penske trucks. D.S.A. members organized patrols of Home Depot parking lots, during which volunteers—wearing safety vests and clutching walkie-talkies—observed and reported ICE activity. To Kundassery, it seemed that he was witnessing the radicalization of the yuppie class. "Wine moms who had never heard of D.S.A. were now active members who were facing off against masked ICE agents and protecting our immigrant neighbors from getting kidnapped off the streets," he said.

In Kundassery's view, the Democratic Party had made a critical mistake in the first few months of 2025. "They were sort of bending over backward to what looked like

the Trump cultural victory," he said. "You had Gavin Newsom going on Charlie Kirk's podcast." The Democrats were ceding ground on immigration and deeply divided on Israel's war in Gaza. The Party, Kundassery went on, "just completely misread where their own base, and to an extent the American people, were." In the year since Mamdani's election, the D.S.A. has gained forty thousand members nationwide. In one CBS poll this September, more than half of Democrats said that a D.S.A. endorsement would make them more likely to vote for a candidate, and only eight per cent said it would make them less likely.

The D.S.A. can be protective of this newfound clout. Mamdani is, as Kundassery put it to me, something like the "gold-standard cadre candidate," in that he came from within the organization and made an unabashed case for socialism. When Raman is asked whether she is a socialist, she tends to say, "I am a member of the D.S.A.," before turning the conversation toward more conventional aspects of her political identity—as a Democrat, or as an advocate for housing. Gabe Orea, a labor lawyer and a leader of Groundwork, told me that, prior to joining the mayor's race, Raman "was two years behind on her dues."

At a closed-door town hall that Raman had held late in August, D.S.A. members were invited to challenge her on the issues. Many of the questions concerned Palestine, which dismayed Kundassery, who had prepped Raman for the session, both because the mayor of Los Angeles has little to do with Middle East policy and also because "she has no problem calling what Israel is doing a genocide," he said. But Raman had previously accepted the endorsement of a local pro-Israeli advocacy group, after which the chapter formally censured her. She had also voted to appoint a police chief who had coöperated with ICE during Obama-era mass deportations, and had backtracked on a tax for multimillion-dollar homes which she had come to think inhibited new development. "I'm a policy-focussed person," she told me. "I really believe in the things I believe in, and some of them are not one hundred per cent aligned with the D.S.A." By the end of the town hall, when D.S.A. members lined up to give alternating speeches for or against her endorsement, Quintero said, "the 'no' line was longer than the 'yes' line."

One reason D.S.A. members emphasize the endorsement process is that it is the moment when the organization has the most leverage over a politician. For the most part, once figures like Mamdani, Ocasio-Cortez, and Sanders win, they have more power to shape the preferences of the left than the D.S.A. does. After Mamdani's election, he retained his predecessor's N.Y.P.D. commissioner, Jessica Tisch, despite the fact that defunding the police had been a central issue for the New York chapter. Political success had a moderating influence; the calls for more revolutionary police reform from within the D.S.A. have, for now, largely faded away.

I met Raman three days after the D.S.A. had endorsed her. Already the balance of power had begun to shift. In backing Raman, the chapter had implicitly embraced her pro-building approach to housing, a choice, as Politico noted, that amounted to "nothing less than a fundamental redrawing of urban housing politics." During our interview, Raman mentioned the crises that Los Angeles has experienced since the pandemic—the wildfires, the ubiquity of homelessness, the ICE raids—and then described the D.S.A. as merely one of a broad front of progressive organizations that had stepped in to help. "They were outdoors every day volunteering, and that kind of generosity to your community is beautiful," she said. This was an ideologically denuded version of democratic socialism. But, as the possible next mayor of Los Angeles, Raman was testing how she might reimagine the D.S.A. in her own image.

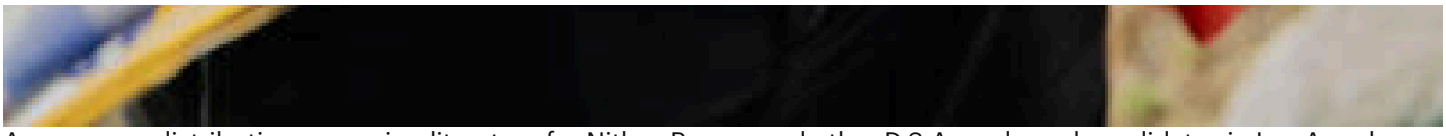
The D.S.A. National Convention held in Chicago in the summer of 2023 was the first one that Leslie Chang attended in person, as a delegate from the Los Angeles chapter. Masks and proof of COVID vaccinations were required. Mamdani, then a member of the New York State Assembly, spoke. The convention debated a resolution urging D.S.A.-endorsed candidates to support the Boycott, Divestment,

Sanctions movement against Israel. But Chang, who was then working for a solar-energy startup, found the proceedings unexpectedly disinterested in political strategy, even as the 2024 Presidential election was fast approaching. "The delegate body just absolutely skewered any effort to think about the need to run bigger electoral campaigns," she said. (The following year, she added, some of those same national leaders dismissed worries about a Trump second term, "and would say, 'Kamala's going to be just as bad as Trump.' And I was, like, 'That is so unacceptable to me.' ") In Chicago, she met some members of the Socialist Majority Caucus. "They didn't know me, but I was, like, 'I'm a bit worried about how the convention is going,' " Chang said. "And they were, like, 'We are, too. Come organize with us.' "

The vast majority of D.S.A. members do not belong to a caucus; joining one often requires interviews and recommendations from other members. At that time, the S.M.C.'s membership in L.A. totalled about sixteen. "That was this moment where I was, like, O.K., I have joined this organization because I am very serious about building power," Chang said. "Now I am going to join another organization within this organization to try to move the particular flavor of politics that is important to me."

At the end of 2025, Chang and an ally, a doctoral candidate in mathematics named Sean Wakasa, were elected to the L.A. chapter's steering committee with the explicit goal of challenging Groundwork, and soon they became the chapter's co-chairs. "Politics is about being opportunistic when it makes sense," Chang told me, when we met for a drink at an outdoor bar in Altadena. She was wearing a yellow sweater and a white headband with a floral design. At the bar's entrance, she had thrown an arm around a bouncer and then ordered a tequila drink. Chang, alert to the ironies of being a down-to-earth person in a heady movement, told me at one point that she is excited about the prospect of an Ocasio-Cortez Presidential run in 2028 "because it would achieve our goal of transforming society but also because it would achieve our goal of bringing a bunch of normal people into the D.S.A."


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MARISSA ROY
A CITY
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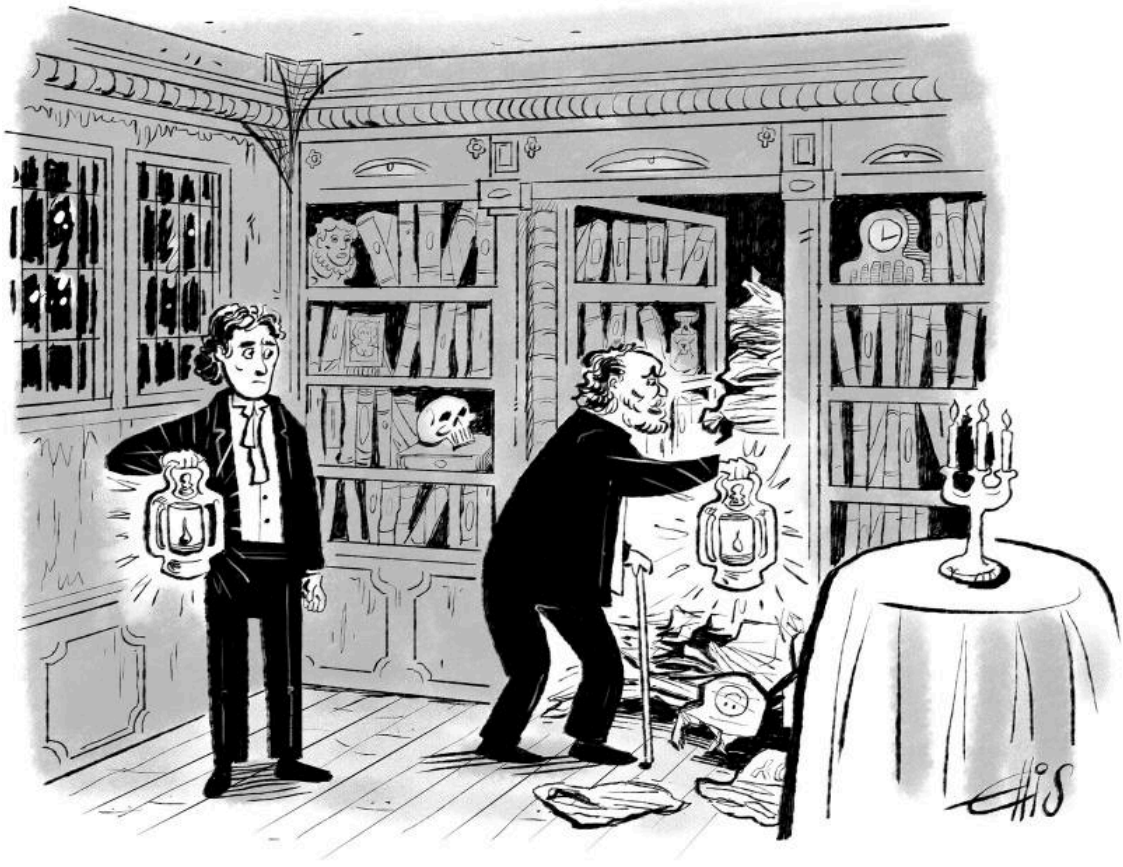
A canvasser distributing campaign literature for Nithya Raman and other D.S.A.-endorsed candidates in Los Angeles.

Chang, who is thirty-three, has been serving as a kind of informal consultant to Raman's campaign. The basic problem that the D.S.A. faces, she said, is the seismic gap between the change it wants to see in the world and its extremely short roster of members. "We're teeny-tiny—we're a six-thousand-person chapter in a four-million-person city in a ten-million-person county," she said. They could not afford to insist on purity. "When we run these types of campaigns, they will make us the chapter we want to become," she said. "There is no other forcing function."

It was a sentiment that I had heard in other cities, too. In August, I'd met up with Autumn Pickett, Milwaukee's D.S.A. co-chair, who was helping to organize the insurgent gubernatorial candidacy of Francesca Hong, a D.S.A. state legislator and former restaurateur who had led in most polls through the summer. Hong had denounced the spread of A.I. data centers, even as she struggled to distance herself from past comments she'd made criticizing Thanksgiving as a celebration of colonialism. Pickett, who hoped to make her chapter increasingly influential in elections—"We want to be the opposite of Occupy," she told me—saw the race as a test of whether the D.S.A. could win voters in purple states, and of whether "we are ready for a Presidential run in 2028 by A.O.C."

Hong ultimately lost the primary, in August, but her defeat didn't seem to weaken the D.S.A.'s resolve: its members, who are mostly young and live in cities where many other people share their political views, tend to have a pellucid optimism. But this optimism also seemed to reflect a socialist world view, in which the odds were always in favor of the alienated masses—the tenants and the politically dispossessed—rising up to topple the powerful few. In Milwaukee, where I'd spent time door-knocking with an engineer and a computer programmer, I asked Pickett if the D.S.A. was really a working-class movement. It was, she said. "But, when I say 'working class,' I mean everyone who has to work."

When talking to D.S.A.-ers, I often had the sense that they sincerely believed in a class revolution that they were not in any immediate way working toward. The Los Angeles chapter's formal program, adopted in 2025, envisioned a "restructuring of the economic, political, cultural, and social conditions and relationships in our society" toward one in which "workers are in control of the means of production." The document also proposed an expansion of public housing while denouncing private landlordship as an expression of "capitalist greed." I mentioned to Chang that it was hard to imagine Raman supporting such transformational parts of the socialist project—what Groundwork had called the "rupture with capitalism." Chang nodded agreeably. I asked, "Do you care about that, or do you not care about that?" Chang thought about it, but only briefly. "I sort of don't really care about it," she said.



*"This isn't a secret passage, either. It's just another closet filled with plastic bags."*

Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Open cartoon gallery

Conservatives think of the D.S.A. as being defined by its ideological fixity. Older liberals see it as an expression of generational disaffection. Democratic socialists often view their movement in the context of class struggle. None of these perspectives quite captures the situation. Chang and the other D.S.A. members I met in Los Angeles represent a generation of highly engaged people who, in other circumstances, might have spent their lives as Democratic operatives or activists. But they had come to see the Democratic Party as careerist, cautious, and ideologically compromised, and what they were mostly trying to do was fashion a new political party within the Democrats—one that's more self-directed and idealistic.

The problem for the D.S.A. is it's often vulnerable to the same criticism that has plagued the mainstream Democratic Party—that its membership too narrowly reflects the perspectives of educated urban progressives. Dan Goldman, a Democrat who represents parts of lower Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn in Congress, lost his primary race this year to Brad Lander, a progressive former city comptroller who was backed by Mamdani—one of three upsets in congressional primaries that the Mayor had helped to orchestrate. But this Mamdani wave, as Goldman saw it, wasn't exactly a revolution of the marginalized. "In the poorest parts of the district, we won by fourteen points," he told me. Goldman is a self-described "proud Zionist," and Israel was a defining issue in the campaign. But he also noted that he had been a co-sponsor of what was, not long ago, the signature initiative of democratic socialism, Medicare for All. "I got smoked—I lost by thirty-two points," Goldman told me. "But, whatever it was that came for me, it wasn't the working class."

The D.S.A.'s big kickoff canvass in support of Raman and a slate of other candidates took place on October 3rd, at more than a dozen locations across Los Angeles. That morning, I met Chang at a meetup in South Central, where she and about three dozen other D.S.A. members had gathered. It had been a few weeks since I'd met with Raman, but in that time a series of public polls had shown her with a significant lead over Bass, and the next day she was scheduled to deliver a policy speech downtown. Chang was still hesitant to believe that Raman was actually going to win, having watched Hong's polling advantage in Wisconsin evaporate. But TMZ had just reported that Raman was being introduced to entertainment-industry leaders by Arnold Schwarzenegger, and her most recent ad had been voiced by the actor Bob Odenkirk. Suddenly, at least in L.A., the socialists didn't really seem like outsiders at all.

It was a hundred degrees outside, and South Central was nearly shadeless; a D.S.A. member named Prit Patel was wearing a huge floppy hat as he made his way door to door. "You're about to watch me speak some pretty terrible Spanish," he said, before climbing up to the second story of a motel- style housing complex and explaining to the residents that Raman and two other progressive candidates had refused to take corporate money. Patel seemed to enjoy the process, even though many people did not answer their doors and most of those who did had not heard about the election at all. During the day, Patel works remotely in advertising from his home in Highland Park. He'd been a dues-paying member of the D.S.A. for a few years, but he'd only become actively involved after Mamdani's victory in 2025. He appreciated the way that canvassing for the organization had deepened his sense of community in Highland Park. "You open these doors in your own neighborhood, and you can see that people might have a relative in a wheelchair living with them, or that they are

really struggling," he said. "It gave me a view into my own neighborhood that I never would have had."

This winsome experience—socialism as socializing—has filled a gap left by the increasingly professionalized mainstream political parties. (A progressive operative in Wisconsin joked to me that the D.S.A. was "the cure for the male-loneliness crisis.") It also demands a time commitment that is difficult to manage for people with children. I canvassed that morning with Marc Krause, a Groundwork leader who had been the L.A. chapter's co-chair before the S.M.C.'s ascent. Krause, who described his origins as "a punk-rock kid from East L.A.," had recently turned forty; he had a twenty-year-old stepson and a job working for the State Bar of California. "To be honest with you, I'm O.K. doing a little bit less," Krause said. He had originally got into politics via the Occupy movement, but, he said, "eventually I realized that kind of horizontal model was never going to work." Krause had not supported Raman's endorsement, which still rankled him, but he seemed to recognize that a new logic was ascendant on the left. "It can feel like the electoral work, which is necessary, is at the expense of the organizing—for Palestine, for immigrants, for labor—that people come to the D.S.A. for," he said, before knocking at an iron gate and, when no one responded, leaving some Raman literature on a decorative spike.



A D.S.A. member leaving flyers at a home in Los Angeles, in October.

Each D.S.A. canvass ended in a social event at a bar, and most of the canvassers in South Central met up downtown at an open, airy space called Audio Graph. Marissa Roy, a Yale Law graduate and a D.S.A. member who is in a runoff for city attorney, told me that she used to host trivia nights there. Across the room, Chang was giving an interview to a reporter from the Washington *Post*. I sat next to Levy, the sports-stats guy, and a friend of his named Gabbie Metheny, a forty-two-year-old who was new to the D.S.A. Metheny told me that her family had been able to afford to live in L.A. only because of rent stabilization, and that she'd started worrying that her sons, who are eleven and twelve, would never be able to move out. "What I want is the furthest-left candidate who can win," she said.

Later that day, Kundassery told me, "This might be a hot take, but I think Nithya has the power to improve the day-to-day lives of Angelenos more than Zohran can in New York." He added that people call New York the greatest city in the world largely because of infrastructure developed there in the nineteen-thirties, through the partnership between Franklin Roosevelt and Fiorello LaGuardia, two legendary progressives, whereas L.A. "had specifically resisted Manhattanization in the seventies and eighties." He went on, "People who currently vote for mainstream Democrats think that Democrats are the grownups in the room, and that the D.S.A. is a bunch of disgruntled young kids who might have some valid concerns, but if we put them in charge they're going to run everything into the ground." If Raman won, and her administration was seen as a success, he said, "that whole narrative would flip on its head."

We were sitting at an outdoor table behind a different bar, Sorry Not Sorry, on the west side of L.A., where Kundassery, wearing sunglasses and a crisp white T-shirt, had led a canvass. Three other west-side D.S.A. members—two students in their early twenties and a twenty-nine-year-old aerospace engineer—were listening attentively. There was excitement in Kundassery's voice. He was saying that it seemed possible that the post-sixties alignments of U.S. politics might be changing. The migration of working-class and Hispanic voters toward Trump in 2024, which now appeared to be swinging back to the Democrats in the midterms, suggested an underlying instability. For the moment, Kundassery and his fellow-socialists felt they had something to offer young people that the Democrats did not: a way to structure their idealism.

"Here it is," Kundassery said. On his phone, he pulled up a diagram from *Labor Notes*, a monthly magazine about workplace organizing, that showed the structure of a typical union—concentric circles in which the innermost was labelled "Core" and the outer two "Disengaged" and "Hostile." Kundassery saw in it a model for a political movement. It was usually a waste of time to spend energy on the hostile, he said. "But the disengaged people you can turn into supporters, and the supporters into activists, and the activists into core members. So, if you have ten core members, and each of those converts ten activists, and so on, you can have a thousand new supporters."

The other three D.S.A. members were leaning over the phone, as if they were locating themselves on the chart, and deciding who they wanted to be. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the area of Los Angeles where Raman organized before deciding to run for city council.*

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