5-14-2021

Primaried from the Left: The Role of a Progressive Campaign Network in Congressional Primary Challenges

Grace C. Burke
College of the Holy Cross, gcburke26@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/honors

Part of the American Politics Commons

Recommended Citation

Primaried from the Left:

The Role of a Progressive Campaign Network in Congressional Primary Challenges

Grace C. Burke
College Honors Thesis
Department of Political Science
College of the Holy Cross
Advisor: Professor Daniel Klinghard

May 14, 2021

Abstract

The modern Democratic Party operates as a broad network of actors that share campaign resources such as donors, endorsements, and personnel to collectively promote candidates that advance its policy goals. In primary campaigns, this network traditionally favors incumbent candidates and maintains high barriers for challengers without independent wealth or high-level connections. Progressive challengers within the Democratic Party—who favor a platform centered on climate justice, economic and racial equity, and systemic political reform—have run as alternatives to traditional "establishment" candidates, many of whom are incumbents. Motivated by a populist political message, these progressives have defied party norms and built momentum by creating their own network of ideologically driven campaign resources that work together to elect candidates who embody their progressive values. As this thesis establishes, campaign expenditures between progressive candidates and organizations illustrate a network of resources, which demonstrates the existence of a distinctly progressive campaign infrastructure within the party. Through their grassroots electoral strategy, this progressive network is democratizing political campaigns and building a movement toward ideological principles of justice and reform.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank a few of the many individuals who made this thesis possible. First and foremost, to my advisor Professor Klinghard for his support and guidance throughout this project. Thank you for giving me space to pursue the project I believe in so deeply, for your wisdom and expertise, and for having confidence in me as a writer. I am also deeply grateful for the many teachers and professors that have served as mentors for me throughout my education, including Mr. Frankenfield who introduced me to politics in 2012 and has not stopped believing in me since, Professor Burnep, who first sparked my confidence to pursue big things at Holy Cross, and to Professor Stoddard for offering valuable suggestions and guidelines throughout this process. I am deeply indebted to my friends and fellow thesis writers for their words of encouragement and emotional support, and to my coworkers who listened to me rant about writing and covered my shifts so I could get it all done. To my parents who have supported me during my journey from arguing with them at the kitchen table to graduating with political science honors, and to my siblings, especially my youngest sister Maeve, for allowing me to lecture them about campaign politics.

I would also like to acknowledge the candidates and organizers who are paving the way for the progressive movement and creating a story worth telling in this thesis. Lastly, to the organizers on the Markey Campaign, at Sunrise Worcester, and the Blue Lab who allowed me to dive headfirst into progressive politics and who continue to put in the work everyday in pursuit of righteous fights—thank you.

Introduction

On March 22, 2019, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) announced a new policy that led Amy Pritchard to quit her job as a senior partner at a top Democratic consulting firm.[1] Prior to her role as partner at Deliver Strategies, Pritchard had senior roles in the Democratic Party and more recently had consulted for Representative Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) during her 2018 upset victory over 10-term incumbent Representative Michael Capuano (D-MA).[2] The DCCC's new policy, which many referred to as the "Blacklist," made clear that it would no longer hire consultants or vendors that worked with challenger candidates like Pressley.[3] The policy update required any organization applying to be a preferred vendor in the 2020 cycle to agree to the following statement: "The DCCC will not conduct business with, nor recommend to any of its targeted campaigns, any consultant that works with an opponent of a sitting Member of the House Democratic Caucus."[4] The day of the announcement, many consultants ended contracts with challenger candidates in order to preserve future opportunities within the Democratic Party; Pritchard's firm, Deliver Strategies, agreed to comply with the rule and no longer work with challenger candidates.[5]

Prichard understood the committee would justify the move by asserting their obligation to protect incumbent members and their fragile House majority, but she saw past that: "I knew the rule would harm women and people of color whose route to Congress is often only by challenging incumbents in blue districts who are out of step with voters. And I knew it would

---

[1] Amy Pritchard, "A Policy to Quash the Women's Wave. From Democrats," *New York Times,* December 9, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/opinion/house-democrats.html
[2] Ibid.
[3] Akela Lacy, "House Democratic Leadership Warns It Will Cut Off Any Firms That Challenge Incumbents," *The Intercept*, March 22, 2019. https://theintercept.com/2019/03/22/house-democratic-leadership-warns-it-will-cut-off-any-firms-who-challenge-incumbents/
[4] Ibid.
[5] Pritchard, "A Policy to Quash the Women's Wave."

damage less established consultants who work on those races."[6] Practices like the DCCC Blacklist have systematically excluded Progressive Democrats like Pressley from the Democratic Party and actively threaten the future of consultants and campaign staffers in Democratic politics if they dare to support an insurgent candidate. Without access to traditional campaign resources, progressives have been forced to look elsewhere for resources. Through primary challenges the progressive coalition has built its own network of resources and written its own rulebook on organizing and campaigning. This thesis will tell the story of those campaigns and the organizations that support them.

Primary challenges within the Democratic Party have been an effective entry point for a new cadre of diverse progressives in Congress. Since 2018, when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Pressley first gained attention for their longshot bids against House incumbents Joseph Crowley (D-NY) and Michael Capuano (D-MA), a class of new progressives have gained prominence in the national conversation. In 2020, three progressive challenger candidates defeated Democratic House incumbents: Jamaal Bowman defeated Eliot Engel in New York City, Marie Newman defeated Dan Lipinski in Chicago, and Cori Bush defeated Lacy Clay in St. Louis. Progressive candidates have galvanized a young and diverse base around a common set of values, including climate justice, racial justice, and universal health care. Their campaigns have utilized innovative digital tools and organizing strategies, embracing social media and relational organizing, methods that they believe are not only successful at getting votes, but which are distinctly helpful in turning out new voters and mobilizing young people. Progressive Democrats

---

[6] Ibid.

are shaping the party not only through their policies but in the very way that they operate and

manage their campaigns.

The strategic knowledge and expertise of campaign firms are vital to all types of

candidates. Consultants and PACs help candidates with strategy, fundraising, voter contact, and

advertising. Monica Klein, partner at the women-led political consulting firm Seneca Strategies

described the importance of access to campaign resources,

> for potential candidates who are new to the political arena, experienced staff can provide
> a key guiding hand — especially during those critical early months. Outsider candidates
> without political experience — say, a former bartender or a public school teacher — are
> precisely the types of leaders we need more of in Washington, and exactly the types of
> candidates who benefit the most from early campaign guidance.[7]

By threatening to shut them out from the party network and put firms like Seneca Strategies out

of business for working with challenger candidates, the DCCC Blacklist instantly shrunk the

pool of necessary resources available to challenger candidates. Representative Marie Newman

(D-IL) was gearing up for her 2020 challenge to conservative Democrat Dan Lipinski (D-IL)

when the policy was announced. Her campaign manager described that two of their key

consultants dropped out of the race immediately, "both citing the D.C.C.C. blacklist issue as the

reason."[8] Prichard described the same reaction:

> Several candidates privately told me that people are afraid to talk to them. Jamaal
> Bowman, who is running for Congress in New York, reportedly struggled to hire young
> people because they fear retaliation later on in their careers. One consultant admitted to
> me that she wants to "do something without burning down my business." Another
> lamented that it's going to hinder "the next wave of people doing this work."[9]

---

[7] Monica Klein, "The DCCC Is Trying to Put Me Out of Business — and I'm a Democrat," *The Intercept*, March 25, 2019. https://theintercept.com/2019/03/25/dccc-blacklist-democratic-party/

[8] Jennifer Steinhauer, "Insurgent Democrats, Many of Them Women, Worry a New Party Policy Will Block Them," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/us/politics/dccc-blacklist-incumbent-policy.html

[9] Pritchard, "A Policy to Quash the Women's Wave."

The rule further complicated the already difficult task of challenging a congressional incumbent by making it near impossible for candidates to find consultants willing to take the risk of working for challengers. The Blacklist, which was not abandoned until Representative Sean Patrick Maloney (D-NY) replaced Cheri Bustos (D-IL) as DCCC chair in 2021, deterred vendors from contracting with challengers out of fear of being shut out from the party. Perhaps surprising the Democratic leadership, the Blacklist was weak in deterring primary challengers and had the opposite effect on some organizations. Although many vendors and staffers left contracts to save themselves from being shut out by the establishment network, others took the Blacklist in stride and eagerly committed themselves to working exclusively with progressive candidates. Klein of Seneca Strategies took the Blacklist rule as a sign: "The old guard of the Democratic Party is petrified... This fear is the clearest signal we have that it's time for a new generation of Democratic leaders. Bring on the primaries."[10]

The Blacklist prompted Pritchard to double down on her commitment to promoting female candidates through her own firm, AP Campaigns, which works with progressives on campaign strategy, communications, and field.[11] Pritchard reiterated her belief that by shutting out candidates like Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley, the DCCC was making a mistake:

> Leaders like Ms. Pressley and Ms. Ocasio-Cortez personify the transformational leadership so desperately needed in our party today. And while their votes in Congress are similar to their predecessors, their leadership styles are radically different. They also inspire many young girls and people from diverse backgrounds to believe they too can run without "permission" and win. Instead of trying to stop them, we should be celebrating their victories and mimicking their campaigns.[12]

---

[10] Klein, "The DCCC Is Trying to Put Me Out of Business."
[11] "AP Campaigns," *AP Campaigns,* http://www.apcampaigns.com/amy-pritchard-bio.html.
[12] Pritchard, "A Policy to Quash the Women's Wave."

Since the Blacklist was first announced, a group of organizations including Seneca Strategies as well as progressive PACs like Justice Democrats and Indivisible, who had already made it their mission to elect diverse and progressive members of congress, announced a new website, DCCCblacklist.com. The website, designed by another blacklisted firm Middle Seat Media, served as a resource to candidates by listing organizations from digital consultants to fundraising strategists who were still willing to take on challengers.[13] The list is also populated by an array of communications firms, media consultants, pollsters, and PACs dedicated to primarying incumbent Democrats and electing progressives in their place.

Progressive challenger candidates have had to navigate the hostile traditional party network as outsiders and are now, with growing political capital, trying to reshape things. Challenger candidates come up against a powerful operation when they challenge incumbents in primaries (a process known in the campaign world as "primarying" an incumbent). Congressional incumbents and the party system they operate within are often referred to by challengers as the "establishment." Within the context of the Democratic Party, I define the "establishment" as the dominant group of leaders and insiders within the party, who have high political capital and largely retain control over the party's campaign resources such as endorsements, consultants, fundraising networks, and human resources. Historically, the establishment has allocated these resources to incumbents or preferred primary candidates in effort to win general election races. Traditionally, first-time candidates must rely upon the support of their party and its network of resources to ease the burden of running a congressional campaign, and it has often been suggested that without that support from the establishment,

---

[13] Alexander Sammon, "How Progressives Built a Campaign Machine … Thanks to the DCCC," *the American Prospect*, September 15, 2020. https://prospect.org/politics/how-progressives-built-a-campaign-machine-thanks-to-the-dccc/

running for office is an uphill battle.[14] But the success and national recognition of candidates like Ocasio-Cortez, Pressley, and other Justice Democrats candidates like Bowman and Bush have suggested that outsider candidates can obtain the resources to run successful campaigns. With innovative strategies and an energized base, progressives have successfully ousted incumbent Democrats in several districts across the country in the past five years and have made waves by trying in many more. The growing progressive movement has begun to reshape the network and dynamics of the Democratic Party and has shifted best-practice strategies for campaigning.

In this thesis, I define the Democratic Party as a coalition of individuals and groups that operate both formally and informally to promote candidates who advance the party's policy goals and win a majority of seats in Congress. A partisan coalition as strong as the Democratic Party is difficult to infiltrate because of its deeply entrenched connections and powerful, well-financed operations; however, progressive Democrats have challenged this structure and demanded a seat at the policymaking table. Through primary challenges the progressive coalition has built its own network of resources and written its own playbook on organizing and campaigning. I will argue that by analyzing campaign expenditures and case studies of progressive challenger candidates, a burgeoning extended party network that is distinctly progressive can be identified. This network, along with unique campaign tactics characterize the electoral strategy of today's progressive movement and represent the broadening of the Democratic Party's coalition physically and ideologically.

I will begin by examining the existing structure of the Democratic Party through the lens of extended party network (EPN) theory and will explore how the Democratic EPN is able to

---

[14] Casey Byrne Knudsen Dominguez, "Before the Primary: Party Participation in Congressional Nominating Processes' (doctoral dissertation, University of California-Berkeley, 2005), 4.

influence primary races. In the second section, I will analyze the role of progressive challenger campaigns in opposition to the existing structure of the party. Then, I will explore today's definition of progressivism and the current state of the progressive movement. In the fourth section, I present my own model of the progressive extended party network, which illustrates how challenger campaigns, progressive organizations, and other actors behave as an extended network. In the fifth section, I identify campaign practices and strategies that characterize the progressive movement and constitute the "progressive campaign playbook." To further develop an understanding of the network and the strategies it employs, I present three case studies and examine the campaigns of Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), Jessica Cisneros (D-TX), and Arati Kreibich (D-NJ). Lastly, I discuss the broader implications of a progressive campaign network and its impacts on electoral politics and the future of the Democratic Party.

I. Extended Party Networks[15]

In order to understand how progressives have challenged the Democratic Party one first must understand how the party operates as an extended network. The theory of parties as networks suggests that American political parties are not simply composed of their elected candidates and official party organizations but are instead complex coalitions of individuals and groups that exchange information and work together toward common policy goals.[16] Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller's 2008 book, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform,* elaborates on this characterization and the role these coalitions play in deciding Presidential nominees. Cohen, et. al. explore the structure of the United States presidential primary system, arguing that although 1970s election reforms lessened the direct role of party insiders in deciding the nominees behind closed doors, they led to the growth of an "invisible primary" during the period of time before the first primary contest where party elites and organizations can weigh in and ultimately choose the nominee.[17] While the party may not directly choose the nomination, its broad coalition of members—not just elected officials but prominent activists, interest groups and consultants—can influence the competition through endorsements and donations to ultimately narrow down the primary pool and allow the most acceptable candidate to prevail.[18]

The "party" in this case is extensive. It is made up of "organized interests—unions, religious organizations, civil rights groups, business," as well as "organizers, fundraisers,

---

[15] Sections of the first chapter originally appeared in my 2020 Holy Cross Washington Semester thesis entitled "The Establishment Decides: The Role of the Democratic Party in Congressional Primaries."

[16] Marty Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[17] Ibid, 188.

[18] Ibid, 190.

pollsters, and media specialists."[19] Major party coalitions, such as the Democratic and

Republican parties, consist of each party's official committees as well as other organizations

with specific policy interests but similar underlying goals. The task for both parties is to win a

majority of seats in government to pursue the collective goals of their platform. The plurality of

interests among these coalitions hinders the nomination process as it is difficult to choose a

single presidential nominee that appeals to everyone. Thus, the authors argue, the party insiders

have learned to compromise on a candidate most aligned with the party's goals who has the best

chance of success in the general election and to provide them with support during the "invisible

primary."[20] Party insiders can support candidates with endorsements, money, and other resources

from the party are used to shape the race long before anyone casts a vote.

The *Party Decides* theory suggests that although the formal party committees may have

lost their direct power to influence nominations behind closed doors, collective decision making

from the broader party coalition guides primaries.[21] While today's Democratic Party network is

strongly influenced by actors within the DNC and its campaign arms, its power is shared with

prominent interest groups and elite consultants. These actors work together to shape policy in the

party and to promote the best candidates possible. Unlike approaches that portray parties as

formal organizations with hierarchical leadership, the extended party network is considerably

less formal and less hierarchical. In a 2009 study, Gregory Koger, Hans Noel, and Seth Masket

describe the decentralized behavior: "Like birds in a flock, activists, interest groups and the

media are autonomous but co-operating. They can pursue their common goals more effectively

---

[19] Ibid, 4.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid, 280.

Burke 13

through co-operation, but no single actor appears to be in charge."[22] Party actors have strong

incentives to coordinate support of a candidate during a primary, especially in the case of swing

districts where a vulnerable Republican opponent is being challenged. The Democratic

establishment is a vast network and has control over a great deal of partisan resources needed to

run successful campaigns and the Establishment can use its power to influence a campaign's

fundraising, its endorsements, who is on staff, and even which consultants it hires. Partisan

coalitions or networks serve as efficient models for party behavior because they allow

participants to informally coalesce around a mutually beneficial candidate and coordinate

resources.[23]

Political scientists have mapped these party networks to reveal webs of organizations that

are linked by exchanges in information and resources. Koger, Masket, and Noel tracked the

exchange of donor contact lists between political organizations to reveal two distinct, but

informal, partisan webs in the United States.[24] The exchanges tracked included lists of mailing

addresses, emails, and phone numbers of loyal supporters and are sold and rented among similar

organizations in efforts to increase outreach and fundraising.[25] The research concludes that both

the Democratic and Republican parties have distinct egonets—webs of interlocking party

organizations, interest groups, PACs, candidates, and individuals—that are linked together

through exchanges of resources. For example, a snapshot of the extended party network for

Democrats in 2004 included its formal campaign organizations (DNC, DCCC, DSCC), as well as

---

[22] Koger, Gregory, Seth Masket, and Hans Noel. "Partisan Webs: Information Exchange and Party Networks."
British Journal of Political Science 39, no. 3 (2009): 636.
[23] Ibid, 636.
[24] Ibid, 643.
[25] Ibid, 638.

groups such as the Brady Campaign, EMILY's List, and Kerry for President.[26] Meanwhile, the

GOP network included its formal party organizations and organizations like the National

Review, The Club for Growth, and Bush Cheney '04.[27] The links between these organizations

illustrate their cooperation because sharing and selling contact information between groups helps

build bases of supporters and allows similar candidates and causes to reach larger audiences and

raise more money. The study also revealed that the Democratic network is more dense and more

likely to exchange information and resources amongst itself than its Republican counterpart. [28]

Support from the partisan extended party network can be an important indicator of

candidate quality and success, especially to partisan voters in primary elections.[29] The authors of

The Party Decides explain the ways in which the party network can indirectly influence

presidential primary elections by directing donations, endorsements, consultants, and other

resources to its preferred candidates, therefore shaping which candidates are able to enter and

remain in the race during the "invisible primary," before anyone casts a vote.[30] This process aims

to ensure that by the time voting begins, voters will choose between acceptable candidates who

will have the best chance of winning the general election and promoting the network's policy

demands once they are elected.

The "invisible primary" is influential because the party network can use this time period

to exhibit control over the allocation of campaign resources. Resources like donations,

endorsements, staff and volunteers are highly partisan and tend to follow the party network.[31] A

---

[26] Ibid, 645.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid, 653.
[29] Cohen, et. al., *The Party Decides*, 4.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Dominguez, "Before the Primary".

2005 study by Casey Dominguez explained that campaign professionals, volunteers, and large-dollar donors are "overwhelmingly party loyal" and that which candidates they choose to work with can serve as "a signal of party insider support for that person."[32] Because these resources are finite, the candidate with support from the EPN is better positioned in a primary campaign. The process of the network coalescing on a candidate and directing resources toward them takes place before voting even begins. Although the extended party network is decentralized, organizations within the EPN will often take cues from the national party organizations on which candidates to back. Koger explains, "while the formal party organizations are not the entire party, they are important players in it. Membership information flows to the formal organizations, allowing them the broadest access to the donor base of the party."[33] Therefore, when a candidate has support from a formal party actor like the DCCC, their campaign has easier access to the resources that the network offers. The party committees also contribute consulting services to campaigns and help candidates build their staff, create communications content, and raise funds from other major players within the network. Thus, the organizations within the party and the formal party itself are mutually dependent and their coordinated actions can be very effective. As *The Party Decides* suggests, the consolidation of resources in favor of one candidate makes it difficult for those lacking EPN approval to find quality resources and can tilt the primary in favor of one candidate.[34]

While an extensive body of research exists surrounding the role of the party in presidential primaries, the theory can also be applied to congressional primaries, which have not yet been studied or mapped in the context of progressive challenger candidates. Congressional

---

[32] Ibid, 13.
[33] Koger, et.al., "Partisan Webs: Information Exchange and Party Networks," 652.
[34] Cohen, et. al., *The Party Decides*, 232.

primaries are distinct from presidential primaries in several important ways, including the facts

that they take place on a more local scale and they happen twice as frequently. The structure and

frequency of Congressional races strengthens the role of incumbency allowing incumbent

candidates a myriad of advantages over their challengers. The absence of federal term limits for

members of Congress allows members to run for reelection every two years and continue

building campaign resources, including staff, donations, and experience. Aside from the benefits

of name recognition and experience, time in office also gives incumbents the opportunity to

directly demonstrate their commitment to the policy interests of the extended party network.[35]

Incumbents are also protected by policies within each party's campaign arms—DSCC, DCCC,

NRSC, NRCC—which vow to support incumbent members for re-election. Support from these

organizations gives candidates access to a plethora of campaign resources and oftentimes the

support of other caucus members.

Competing hypotheses exist on the extent to which parties influence congressional

primaries, whether the party plays the role of "kingmaker" or simply backs the candidate with

the best odds. A 2015 study "Kingmakers or Cheerleaders? Party Power and the Causal Effects

of Endorsements" used data from California electoral trends to suggest that in races where there

are large gaps in candidate quality, meaning one candidate is significantly better qualified for the

position, party support only accounts for a small percentage of electoral success.[36] The study

suggests that in these races, where one candidate has a significant advantage off the bat, the party

plays the role of "cheerleader" for the strongest candidate by offering its endorsement or funding

---

[35] Dominguez, "Before the Primary."

[36] Thad Kousser, Scott Lucas, Seth Masket, and Eric McGhee, "Kingmakers or Cheerleaders? Party Power and the Causal Effects of Endorsements," *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2015): 443–456.

as a rubber stamp but largely staying out of the race.[37] On the other hand, the authors argue that in competitive primary battles the party can play the role of "kingmaker," when endorsements from the party establishment can make or break a candidacy.[38] When voters face a difficult decision between two or more qualified candidates, endorsements and support from the party establishment—party leaders or campaign committees—can signal credibility and capability that will swing voters toward one candidate.[39] It can also bring in funds to the preferred candidate to use on large-scale outreach such as TV advertisement expenditures. In this way, "putting the party's mark of imprimatur on one of two otherwise strong candidates" can influence electoral outcomes.[40]

Other scholarship reiterates the role of the party in primary campaigns, suggesting that while the party may not hand-select the winner, visible support form the extended party network can shape which candidates are able to enter the race and which have access to the best resources. Casey B. K. Dominguez describes in her 2005 study on congressional primaries, "Just because most states' official party rules say that any candidate can compete in a primary election does not mean that most primary elections are free-for-alls whose dynamics are most heavily influenced by the private ambitions of candidates."[41] Her thesis rebukes the idea of "candidate-centric theory," a theory that in Congressional races, voters are solely concerned about the candidates personality and platform rather than their alignment with the party. Instead, she suggests that a candidate's alignment with their party does shape electoral outcomes; her study showed that the Democratic Party picks a single candidate and supports them with an

---

[37] Ibid, 444.
[38] Ibid, 453.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid, 454.
[41] Dominguez, "Before the Primary," 4.

endorsement or donation in more than half of open primaries.[42] This support from what

Dominguez describes as "party elites," can dictate which campaigns succeed before the race

even begins. Because campaign professionals and committed volunteers tend to be party loyal, a

lack of party support early in a race can prevent campaigns from getting off the ground to begin

with. She describes the fate of a runner-up in a 2002 House primary, whose campaign changed

course rapidly once the party endorsed his opponent.[43] In one particularly illustrative excerpt

from their interview, the candidate states

> Once the party got him, I was evil. I had dinner with one woman who was going to work on my campaign, then she and other people stopped returning phone calls. Staffers wouldn't be hired by me, they were told that the party would view them in disfavor if they worked with me instead of the party favorite. I had to just find a guy I know to run the campaign.[44]

In this sense, the party is able to indirectly shift resources to one campaign in a primary. In the

case of progressive primary challengers, this tends to be the incumbent's campaign. Those who

challenge Democratic incumbents face the risk of being rejected by prospective staff and

supporters. not due to substantive ideological positions but simply because loyalty to the

extended party network is valued so highly.

In addition to controlling material, monetary, and human resources, support from the

EPN can also serve as a signal to voters themselves of whether candidates are serious and

credible. In a 2011 paper Dominguez describes that endorsements are campaign resources: "like

experience in office and effective campaign ads, they convey a candidate's credibility to voters...

Endorsements are a way that elites—celebrities, community leaders, interest groups—can vouch

---

[42] Ibid, 55.
[43] Ibid, 1.
[44] Ibid.

for the quality of a candidate."[45] Desmarais, La Raja, and Kowal also describe that beyond

individual endorsements, approval from the EPN at large can signal candidate credibility and

show voters that a candidate shares the same policy goals as the network does: "The fact that a

coalition converges on a candidate sends a strong signal to attentive voters."[46] EPN support,

especially support from issue-based groups and endorsements from local or national politicians,

helps attentive voters understand where a candidate falls ideologically, and similarly has the

capacity to provide context to help low-information voters, or voters who do not follow politics

very closely, make decisions. In the case of progressive primary challenges, this often means that

candidates without connections to the party will never receive endorsements from the most

prominent Democratic organizations. Without that support, it is difficult for campaigns to build

name-recognition and credibility for their candidate.

Specific endorsements from interest groups also help indicate to voters which important

policy positions a candidate has. For example, for a voter who values access to reproductive

healthcare, an endorsement from Planned Parenthood Action Fund, Emily's List or NARAL can

be an indicator of which candidate has the best track record on the issue. When these groups

converge with the extended party network on a singular candidate in a primary, which they often

do, it indicates a stamp of approval from pro-choice advocates. As actors within the EPN, these

groups are subject to influence from the larger coalition and often prioritize party loyalty,

because of this, when they *diverge* with the EPN on any particular candidate, it is an immediate

indicator that a candidate has a satisfactory stance on a Democratic issue. For example, in 2018

---

[45] Casey B. K. Dominguez, "Does the Party Matter? Endorsements in Congressional Primaries," *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2011): 535.
[46] Bruce Desmarais, Raymond La Raja, & Michael Kowal, "The Fates of Challengers in U.S. House Elections: The Role of Extended Party Networks in Supporting Candidates and Shaping Electoral Outcome," *American Journal of Political Science, 59* no.1, 194-211.

and 2020 Democrat Marie Newman (D-IL) ran challenger campaigns against Representative Dan

Lipinski (D-IL), who was at the time one of the only remaining anti-choice Democrats in the

House. While groups like Planned Parenthood and NARAL tend to endorse Democratic

incumbents, they sided with Newman and offered significant support to her campaign—sending

a clear signal to voters that Lipinski's views were out of step with the districts on reproductive

healthcare.[47] While this sort of divergence from the EPN is not common, it illustrates how

powerful endorsements are as a campaign resource.

During the "invisible primary" in open seat races—races where the incumbent is not

seeking re-election or is not a Democrat—the EPN will often coalesce around one candidate who

aligns most closely with the ideology and politics of the party leadership. The party is forced to

be selective because it faces an imperative to converge on the with the greatest likelihood of

winning the general election and delivering on policy demands forces it to be selective. This

leads actors within the EPN to favor incumbents or Democrats who tend to be more moderate

and palatable to a wide variety of voters. This very real concern leads to the often-trivial debate

of "electability," an ill-defined concept that dominates election discourse each cycle.

"Electability" is not possible to describe or to predict because while campaigns can conduct

polling to measure a candidate's popularity, "electability" cannot be measured in any significant

way until voting is done. "Electability" often evokes images and connotations of historic and

current politicians who were successful in elections in the United States, a cast of characters

significantly dominated by white cisgender male candidates.[48] Of course voters may be

---

[47] Simone Pathe, "Illinois Democrat becomes first house incumbent to lose primary in 2020," *CNN Politics*, March 18, 2020. https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/17/politics/illinois-primary-congress-primary-lipinski/index.html
[48] Maggie Koerth, "You'll Never Know Which Candidate is Electable," *Five Thirty Eight*, February 7, 2020. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/youll-never-know-which-candidate-is-electable/

motivated by preconceived notions and biases about appearances and identities, but studies show that "electability" is far from a stand-in for candidate fitness or qualifications.[49] Unfortunately, when the EPN is concerned over abstract ideas of voter's psychology, they often deny candidates outside of the Democratic elite mold before investing any resources in their candidacy at all. This perpetuates the status-quo within the party.

The EPN's support for candidates they view safe bets for general election voters often leads it to promote more moderate candidates, as well as candidates who are easily identifiable with historical concepts of what elected officials look like. This has a disproportionate impact on women, people of color, and candidates from other minority backgrounds. Similarly, candidates that stray further from the ideological center of the party are less likely to gain broad support from the party coalition, for example, those who support progressive policies like the Green New Deal, debt-free college, taxing the wealthy, abolishing ICE, or opposing corporate influence in politics. In some ways, this strategy is rational and has proven to be effective at choosing primary candidates who will go on to win seats in the general election. The network has an incentive to close in on the candidate they see as most likely to win a general election and advance their policy goals in the halls of Congress. Additionally, the EPN may have an incentive to get involved in the race before primary candidates attack each another, leaving themselves vulnerable to whatever Republican challenger they face.[50] While there are conflicting viewpoints from scholars on whether competition during the primary has any tangible impact on general election results, some suggest that the party has an obligation to minimize intra-party conflict during the primary to best prepare a single candidate for the general election.

---

[49] Ibid.
[50] Raymond J. La Raja and Jonathan Rauch, "Voters need help: How party insiders can make presidential primaries safer, fairer, and more democratic." Brookings. The Brookings Institution, January 30, 2020.

Proponents of party involvement in primaries argue that not only is the process effective in choosing nominees who are perceived to be best suited to win general elections but the process of involvement from party insiders actually makes elections safer and more democratic.[51] La Raja and Rauch argue that party insiders *should* leverage their power to ensure the highest quality candidates are nominated by the party because they view "outsider" candidates whose viewpoints stray from the status quo of the party as dangerous to democracy; without party involvement, they argue, extreme or demagogic candidates may emerge victorious.[52] The authors point to the case of the 2016 presidential primary and lack of involvement from Republican elites, the consequence of which was the nomination and presidency of Donald Trump, whose policies strayed from the platform of the GOP at the time.[53] The role of the EPN in primaries, in the eyes of its proponents, is to filter out radicals and allow voters to choose from only candidates who are representative of the party and who are likely to win general elections. On the other hand, many progressives would argue that the party's campaign practices prevent primaries from being open to any candidates willing to run and stifle intra-party democracy. By committing to support incumbents and making early endorsements of "electable" candidates, the party forgoes the opportunity for primaries to hold incumbent candidates accountable and to be a barometer of ideological support among rank-and-file party voters.

An example of EPN influence playing a decisive role can be found in high-profile open primary races when an incumbent candidate retires or when the seat is seen as "flip-able" by one party or the other. Without an incumbent, major decision-making organizations within the party

---

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.

have the opportunity to step in and shape the field in ways that best suit their policy preferences

and interests. This action can help campaigns during the "invisible primary," by giving the

candidate credibility among partisan supporters across the country. For example, in fall 2019, the

DSCC stepped into the North Carolina senate race to endorse Cal Cunningham, a veteran and

former state senator. Cunningham was backed over another former state senator, Erica Smith, a

progressive African American woman who had been running since January 2019, but whose

progressive policies on healthcare, support for the Green New Deal, and open refusal to take

corporate PAC donations made her unattractive to the DSCC. Cunningham, who had only been

running since June when he was recruited to drop out of the race for Lieutenant Governor, was

more moderate than Smith on many issues. At the time of the endorsement, Smith was polling

ahead of Cunningham and they both were polling ahead of the Republican incumbent, Senator

Thom Tillis.[54] The DSCC ultimately endorsed Cunningham in October, citing his work as a

military prosecutor, his time in the U.S. Army Reserve, and countless endorsements from leaders

across the state.[55] North Carolina is a conservative state and to many party insiders, the best

chance for an upset in the Senate race would come from a less radical, more traditional

politician. Smith and her allies were frustrated with the intervention from the DSCC,

"Ultimately, the voters of North Carolina will decide who their next United States Senator will

be —NOT a handful of DC politicians making back room deals in windowless basements,"

Smith wrote in a press release.[56] Her reference to "back room deals" and the power of "elites"

and "insiders" is a common refrain from progressives who believe that the Democratic Party in

---

[54] "Fox News Poll - North Carolina, Nov. 10-13, 2019," *Fox News*, November 14, 2019.
[55] Catherine Cortez Masto, "DSCC Endorses Cal Cunningham in North Carolina Senate Race," DSCC, Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, October 31, 2019.
[56] Erica Smith, "Senator Erica Smith's response to Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Endorsement," Erica for US, October 31, 2019.

Washington does not accurately reflect its voters. The early timing of the endorsement and the early funding poured into the race by the Democratic EPN drastically helped Cunningham, giving him institutional support, credibility, and increased fundraising capabilities early on. He overcame Smith in the primary but went on to lose to incumbent Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC) in November 2020, despite spending over $51 million on the race and having the full support of the Democratic network.

After losing to Tillis, a staunch ally to Trump who was viewed as one of the most vulnerable incumbents in the House, the DSCC and the rest of the Democratic EPN have a lot to unpack. In analysis of the general election featuring an interview with Smith, Alexander Sammon noted Cunningham's polling advantages over Tillis during this summer and his impressive fundraising operation that raised more than twice as much as Tillis. So, what went wrong? Sammon described that "Cunningham ran on his own character, then got popped for prodigious low-grade sexting. Tillis, who isn't even liked in the state... put up a bigger margin of victory than Trump, blowing out Cunningham in rural districts and faring shockingly well with minority groups."[57] While Cunningham's scandal certainly played a role in his defeat, Sammon and Smith both pointed to his failure to connect to rural communities and minority voters and an overall lack of substance in his campaign platform.[58] Smith recognized that the DSCC likely chose Cunningham in spite of her performance in polls because as a veteran, a father, and a white man, he would be more palatable and "electable" running in the general election against Tillis, a Tea Party conservative who lacked popularity in the state.[59] But in her view, the party

---

[57] Alexander Sammon, "What Went Wrong in North Carolina," *The American Prospect,* November 30, 2020. https://prospect.org/politics/what-went-wrong-in-north-carolina-interview-erica-smith/
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.

failed from the outset by interfering in the primary and running a campaign on character and

family values rather than on policy.

> That Senate race was about convincing people to vote against Thom Tillis. As Democrats in public service, our priority should be giving people something to vote for, not something to vote against. I believe the reason why our party lost many races across the state and why we lost the presidential race here is because people want bold ideas that can actually improve their everyday lives. Not empty platitudes. If we're gonna build a winning coalition, we have to talk about health care for all and about clear goals for addressing climate change. That was very important for people in North Carolina. A livable wage. These are the things we need to be running on, not running from.

In Smith's perspective, as well as the perspective of many other progressives following the 2020

general election, the party establishment's fear of bold policies that were exciting to voters and

appealing to marginalized people led to its defeat. As Smith states, by focusing on what the EPN

agreed was "electable," the party failed to acknowledge the winning potential of a progressive

platform or "survivor's agenda," as she puts it.[60]

In Kentucky, another open primary race played out between Democrats Amy McGrath

and Charles Booker both vying for a spot on the ballot to challenge then Senate Majority Leader

Mitch McConnel (R-KY) in November of 2020. Much like Cunningham, McGrath is a former

Marine and conservative Democrat who ran on an anti-Trump and anti-McConnell platform

rather than on any defining policy issues. While McGrath won the support of the DNC and

DSCC, her progressive opponent, State Representative Charles Booker who ran on a progressive

platform centering climate action and healthcare, won the majority of endorsements from in-state

representatives. Booker, like Erica Smith and many others, was shut out of the network once

McGrath had been officially endorsed by the party.[61] With the support of the extended party

---

[60] Ibid.
[61] Isabella Grullón Paz, "Charles Booker Says Progressives Should 'Show Up and Listen' to Deep Red Districts," *New York Times*, July 8, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/politics/charles-booker-kentucky.html

network, McGrath raised more than $94 million dollars to run against McConnell.[62] But even

with this support, McGrath did not win her primary in a landslide.[63] The Kentucky primaries

took place in June 2020 amidst weeks of protests over racial violence and the police killing of

Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman and EMT in Louisville who was killed during a

botched raid into her home.[64] Charles Booker, a Black man and progressive Democrat, made

waves for his involvement in the Louisville protests and won support from progressives across

the country. While McGrath had support from the DSCC and their donors, Booker won

endorsements from progressives such as Senators Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Elizabeth Warren (D-

MA), and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). Booker's candidacy was also supported by the

organization Justice Democrats, which helps nominate and endorse candidates in challenger

races, and the youth-led climate justice organization Sunrise Movement.[65] While Booker may not

have had the institutional support and fundraising that McGrath did, he came within three

percentage points of her.

In the last month of the election, Booker gained nationwide attention for his vulnerability

and his participation in local Black Lives Matter Protests.[66] His campaign galvanized people

across the state: in an interview with the *New York Times* following the election he explained that

"we did the work of creating infrastructure for more people to get involved, even folks that aren't

used to the political process or don't trust it, or felt like it never mattered. We empowered them

[62] Jonathan Martin, "In Kentucky, Racial Justice Movement Transforms Quest to Oust McConnell," *the New York Times.* June 20, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/20/us/politics/amy-mcgrath-charles-booker-kentucky-senate.html

[63] Ibid.

[64] Elena Moore, "Amy McGrath Is Projected To Edge Out Charles Booker In Ky. Senate Democratic Primary,"*NPR*, June 30, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/06/30/882544188/amy-mcgrath-is-projected-to-edge-charles-booker-in-kentucky-senate-democratic-pr

[65] James Arkin, "Endorsements roll in for Charles Booker in Kentucky," *Politico*, June 17, 2020. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/17/charles-booker-endorsements-kentucky-326536

[66] Martin, "In Kentucky, Racial Justice Movement Transforms Quest to Oust McConnell."

to take the lead and organize."[67] The support Booker earned while challenging a deeply establishment-backed candidate like McGrath is indicative of the growing energy within the progressive left of the Democratic Party across the country. Even in a conservative state like Kentucky, Booker was able to come within 15,000 votes of the establishment candidate running on a message of racial and economic justice.[68] The vast network of organizational support that flooded into the race—progressive consultants, key endorsements, and support from organizations like the Sunrise Movement—enabled Booker to amplify his campaign far beyond the reach of a typical challenger candidate. While the traditional or "establishment" party network continues to support incumbents or moderate candidates like McGrath in primaries, there is sufficient evidence that progressives themselves are building their own campaign infrastructure to promote candidates like Charles Booker in all parts of the country.

While the case studies of the North Carolina and Kentucky U.S. Senate races can be used to point out the flaws in the Democratic Party's 2020 electoral strategy, the stories of challenger candidates like Erica Smith and Charles Booker indicate an opening for progressives to gain popularity in rural areas and traditionally conservative states. The method of campaigning illustrated by the Booker campaign bears many similarities to other progressive candidates whose campaigns serve as case studies later in this thesis, including his style of organizing, his messaging, and the organizations and actors who his team worked with. The network he tapped into is becoming an increasingly powerful tool for progressive candidates across the country and represents a challenge to the structure of the traditional Democratic EPN that, for all intents and purposes, counted him out in 2020.

---

[67] Grullón Paz, "Charles Booker Says Progressives Should 'Show Up and Listen' to Deep Red Districts."
[68] Ibid.

II.   **Progressives as a challenge the Democratic Party framework**

The process of primarying incumbents from the left in safe Democratic districts is not new to American politics, but it has played a major role in challenging the party's campaign framework, especially in recent years. Progressive rising-stars like Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) both were elected to Congress by primarying powerful long-time Democratic incumbents. In this type of race, where a challenger faces an experienced and well-resourced incumbent, the challenger starts out at a major disadvantage. Here, the support of the extended party network can give a significant advantage to the incumbent and make accessing campaign resources and funding difficult for challenger candidates. The pattern of EPN support and electoral success can be seen in today's Democratic Party and is magnified through the repeated occurrence of progressive primary challenges. While some candidates have had success challenging incumbents, they represent a small minority of challenger candidates—nearly 80% of candidates backed by the national party establishment go on to win primaries.[69] The Democratic EPN's pattern of defending incumbents and backing safe candidates may have strategic merit, but many progressive challengers and their allies resent this behavior. The party's early involvement in primary races creates high barriers to entry for any candidate who is not independently wealthy or well-resourced and dissuades qualified candidates from entering. These factors disproportionately affect candidates of working-class backgrounds, women, and people of color who face difficulties accessing the funds, material resources, and professional expertise needed to organize a successful campaign.[70] Without connections to wealthy donors or experienced political operatives, these candidates may not be seen as polished

---

[69] Dominguez, "Does the Party Matter?"
[70] Pritchard, "A Policy to Quash the Women's Wave."

or easily electable. These difficulties are heightened exponentially in races for high-level federal races. This behavior all but ensures that candidates who challenge the status quo do not receive backing from the EPN, forcing them to look elsewhere for campaign resources like staff, volunteers, consultants, and funds.[71]

Similarly, campaign firms themselves are deterred from contracting with or supporting candidates outside of the established network due to rules like the DCCC Blacklist. The DCCC, which connects candidates with campaign resources within the network, announced in their standards for political vendors that, "the DCCC will not conduct business with, nor recommend to any of its targeted campaigns, any consultant that works with an opponent of a sitting Member of the House Democratic Caucus."[72] This policy actively dissuades consultants from helping candidates who challenge incumbent Democrats by threatening to blacklist them from the EPN. Similar policies, although unofficial, exist on the Senate side as well according to reports from *The Intercept.* In Colorado, the DSCC reportedly encouraged staff not to work with progressive Andrew Romanoff (D-CO) and to back DSCC-endorsed John Hickenlooper (D-CO).[73] These policies and expectations that party leaders and organizations will support incumbent candidates and protect sitting house members, intensify the struggles of small start-up campaigns.

While the Blacklist tends to target progressive challengers, it has broader implications and effects on the democratic process. The purpose of primaries is to give partisan voters input in the direction of the party and its platform, to ensure parties and candidates reflect changing

[71] Grace Burke, "The Establishment Decides: The Role of the Democratic Party in Congressional Primaries," Washington Semester Thesis, May 2020.

[72] "Standards for DCCC Political Vendors," Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, 2019.

[73] Lacy Akela and Aída Chavés, "Senate Democrats' Campaign Arm is Pressuring Consultants not to Work with Leading Progressive Candidate in Colorado," *The Intercept,* August 29, 2019. https://theintercept.com/2019/08/29/dscc-colorado-senate-democrats/

demographics and cultural moments, this is an especially important process given that in the general election voters must choose between two increasingly polarized parties. Primaries also serve as a referendum on the incumbent candidate's performance and ability to deliver for their constituents. In this sense, the involvement of the extended party network in primaries might sway voters one way or the other, inhibiting the democratic process from unfolding naturally. Candidates mounting challenges against well-resourced incumbents have noted this. In her 2018 campaign against Joseph Crowley, a prominent member of Democratic leadership, then-candidate Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez lamented the role of Crowley's connections and war chest. She framed her campaign around the David vs. Goliath dynamic of facing a leader in the party and the tacit understanding that lack of support from the "establishment" contributed to her authenticity as a candidate.

Critics of the Democratic establishment argue for a more open system in which candidates can freely enter the race and access political resources. Despite the existing system, challengers of the Democratic establishment's influence and supporters of progressive policies have come together to build a rivaling coalition to elect progressives across the country. Today's progressive movement is challenging the establishment's notion of "electability," bypassing traditional campaign practices and are showing that progressive values can be a winning message.

During the past several years, exclusion of popular challenger candidates from EPN resources has energized a growing base of progressive voters into mobilization, and their efforts are beginning to pay off in electoral victories. While the above-described Democratic extended party network may have the tendency to promote establishment candidates, there is significant evidence to suggest that progressive firms and candidates have defected from the traditional EPN

in exchange for their own network of progressive resources. Actors within the progressive network behave similarly to those in the major party networks in the ways that they exchange information and resources and ultimately converge on candidates who best promote their specific policy goals, namely climate justice, universal healthcare, and racial justice.

While support from the traditional Democratic EPN largely goes to "establishment-aligned candidates," a progressive coalition can repeat the same behavior to recruit, endorse, and fund candidates who fit their ideology. Cooperation of these actors is crucial to success for a primary challenger. Scholars have mapped groups of organizations that cooperate in a similar manner to show their efficacy in promoting challengers. Desmarais, La Raja, and Kowal use a method called "community detection," which is used to identify groups of organizations and actors involved in campaigns that have prominent connections between each other.[74] Their data identifies communities of PACs with specific policy interests such as reproductive rights or climate that converge upon specific challenger candidates. The authors describe, "When a challenger is backed by a collection of like-minded interest groups, a clear signal regarding the policy positions represented by the challenger is sent to the broader party network and attentive members of the electorate."[75] Support from these communities allows voters to easily detect policy preferences of the challenger candidate and helps give them exposure and access to resources they otherwise would struggle to find.[76] A progressive community of organizations and actors can support candidates excluded by the traditional party network, or help target unpopular incumbents who have national party approval only on the basis of their incumbency.

---

[74] Desmarais et. al., "The Fates of Challengers in U.S. House Elections," 194.
[75] Ibid, 209.
[76] Ibid, 209.

The role of interest groups in challenger campaigns is notable. Robert Boatright argues that although primary challenges have not become any more frequent in the past several decades, their prominence has been amplified by national organizations and movements that single out "weak" incumbents who are not sufficiently partisan.[77] These organizations exist as factions within both major parties. Formal organizations such as MoveOn, Justice Democrats, and Club For Growth, as well as movements such as the Tea Party, have allowed candidates to identify themselves and their message as a departure from traditional party politics, without running as a third-party or independent candidate. Boatright explains, "Because primaries tend to be relatively low-visibility elections, the fact that groups are involved can be of more consequence than the sums of money spent."[78] Like endorsements from establishment groups and leaders can influence low-information elections, so too can national organizations and interest groups. National organizations can signal to voters which races are contested and lead out-of-state supporters to donate to endorsed candidates. In the case of progressive primaries, actors like Justice Democrats and Sunrise Movement can release a slate of national endorsements to draw supporters from across the nation to get involved in challenger races by donating or volunteering their time. This can have a large impact on candidates without a lot of resources because it draws issue-driven supporters and volunteers to candidates and helps boost their brand.

Outside groups can also indirectly influence challenger campaigns. Since 2010, interest groups have had increased power to support niche candidates through independent expenditures. As Cory Maneto explains, "with the advent of super PACs in the second half of the 2010 primary cycle, a small number of interest groups can act as a latent threat to broader coalitions that unite

---

[77] Robert Boatright, "Interest Groups and Congressional Primaries" in Getting Primaried: The Changing Politics of Congressional Primary Challenges, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), ProQuest Ebook Central.
[78] Ibid, 192.

behind a candidate using independent expenditures to outspend the broader coalitions. This increased resource parity has tangible representational consequences."[79] Maneto discusses the phenomenon of interest groups defecting from the party's traditional EPN. Due to the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision, super PACs can now spend unlimited funds independently of a campaign. Organizations can pay for advertisements, opposition, and voter outreach, as long as it is done independently of the campaign. Before Citizens United, Maneto explains that "Groups who wanted to defect from or challenge the party network's consensus could spend no more than $5000 USD throwing their support behind a different candidate….those cases effectively removed that limit, granting individual members of the party network significant leverage in gaining policy loyalty from candidates."[80] Increased interest group spending allows low-resource candidates who lack EPN support more resources to pose a credible challenge to long-time incumbent challenges. For example, progressive organizations with Super PACs such as Sunrise, Justice Democrats, and the Working Families Party can spend millions of dollars in independent expenditures, on GOTV outreach, TV spots, or social media ad buys to promote candidates. This policy gives power to the establishment EPN but also threatens their strategy by allowing niche progressive groups to pour millions into targeted races.

Progressive Democrats are utilizing networks and interest groups and making use of primary challenges as a means for entering the party and shifting the platform on policies surrounding race, economic justice, and climate. While they are certainly trying to infiltrate the ranks of the party to gain power, they are not necessarily trying to dismantle it. Koger, La Raja, and Desmarais describe in their EPN study that "networks may feature several actors or factions

---

[79] Corey Maneto, "Party Crashers: Interest Groups as a Latent Threat to Party Networks in Congressional Primaries," Party Politics 27, no. 1 (January 2021): 137.
[80] Ibid, 138.

that simultaneously cooperate to beat the opposing party and compete to shape the future of the party."[81] An indication of this larger post-primary cooperation occurred in 2020 as Democrats such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders came together to support Joe Biden as the Democratic nominee, despite their divisive primary. The role of outside actors and defection from the traditional party network has played a role in the rise of progressives during the past several years. The progressive faction has managed to create a budding party network that is able to recruit and fund progressive challenger candidates itself with increasing rates of success. This does threaten the business-as-usual politics of the Democratic establishment; however, it could be a sign of a larger shift to an increasingly diverse coalition of interests within the party.

---

[81] Koger, et. al., "Partisan Webs," 637.

III. Defining Progressivism

From Democratic Socialist Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) to "pragmatic progressive" Representative Jake Auchincloss (D-MA), Democratic candidates from a wide ideological range have labeled themselves "progressives." The term's ambiguity makes it easy for candidates to identify themselves with a more left-leaning faction of the Democratic Party, although it lacks a universally accepted definition or criteria. But progressivism is more than a label or identification for left-leaning Democrats, it is a faction leading a leftward shift and realignment within the party. For the purposes of this thesis, I define progressivism as a faction within the Democratic Party that represents a dissatisfaction with the status quo and willingness to reform. The term dates back to the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, when progressives were focused on social reform, including addressing government corruption, economic injustice, and issues caused by industrialization and urbanization. Early progressives also had an anti-establishment stance and focused on reforming politics and electing candidates who better represented the needs and interests of working-class Americans. The contemporary iteration of progressivism follows many of these basic principles, but contemporary progressives support a platform centered around climate justice, economic and racial equity, political reform, and a grassroots political approach that centers working-class people and marginalized communities.

In the context of the American Democratic Party, "progressive" signifies a position ideologically left of the traditional liberal Democratic Party. While progressives uphold most of the traditional Democratic platform, they demand more bold policies on several fronts. In the 117th Congress, there are 90 members of the Progressive Caucus which is committed to passing policies that "prioritize working Americans over corporate interests, fight economic and social

inequality, and advance civil liberties."[82] The caucus includes a diverse range of Democrats and champions progressive policies like the Green New Deal proposal and other climate justice policies, universal healthcare, racial justice initiatives like Black Lives Matter, and redistributive economic policies including student loan debt forgiveness and a wealth tax. The ambiguity of the term and the vagueness of the caucus's criteria for membership allow for a diverse coalition of policy preferences within the label but similar overarching priorities of social and economic justice.

While there is a certain ambiguity in the label, there are several policy positions that are considered essential progressive litmus tests. Peter Werner, an open critic of the progressive left, described a few of the most important policies that are leading the progressive shift in the Democratic Party: support for the Green New Deal, Medicare for all, tuition and debt-free college, institution of a wealth tax, abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and reparations for African Americans.[83] Werner also pointed to reforms of the political system such as the elimination of the Senate filibuster and the electoral college, as well as an expansion of the Supreme Court.[84] Similar to many others within the party, Progressive Democrats typically support strong labor unions, and policies like a federal minimum wage and jobs guarantee that seek to ensure better living conditions for workers and their families. Like the Progressives of the 1900s, today's progressives aim to reform the American political system to be more representative of its people.

---

[82] "About the CPC," Congressional Processive Caucus. https://progressives.house.gov/about-the-cpc
[83] Pete Werner, "The Democratic Party Is Radicalizing," *The Atlantic*, April 3, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/progressivism-making-democrats/586372/
[84] Ibid.

When asked what progressivism means to them, many of my progressive peers responded that being progressive represented a dissatisfaction with the status quo of the Democratic Party. One recent Holy Cross graduate described, "I think being a progressive Democrat is about refusing to accept a government that only pays lip service and doesn't put in real work. Maybe that's too broad, but I see a lot of acceptance of 'that's how it is' from moderates and conservatives."[85] Boston University student and progressive campaign intern Lily Kelly described being progressive as, "Being against corporate interest in government, fighting for causes that actually help people who have been hurt by the system, and working to change those systems."[86] Beyond policy positions, the progressive identity is also associated with a community-oriented approach to politics. Holy Cross sophomore Jaime Perez described "a dedication to grassroots organizing and working class mobilization as a means of achieving political goals and promises" as vital to progressive ideology.[87] Another young progressive, Aidan Smith, wrote about the infamously ambiguous term, "Rather than an abstract concept in favor of 'progress', leftists should insist that being a *true progressive* means supporting the trademark initiatives of the American Left: A generous welfare state, principled non-interventionism abroad, and protecting marginalized communities, among many others."[88] While the term serves as a convenient label, it goes beyond that and identifies a growing faction within the party that is markedly to the left of the establishment

Progressives also identify themselves through a populist lens of being representative of "real people." This type of rhetoric is common among populist politicians, but in these sense of

---

[85] Johanna (Holy Cross graduate), in conversation with the author April 2021.
[86] Lily Kelly (Boston University Student), in conversation with the author April 2021.
[87] Jaime Perez (Holy Cross student), in conversation with the author April 2021.
[88] Aidan Smith, "What is a 'Progressive' Anyway," *Labyrinth Magazine*, January 1, 2021.
 https://www.labyrinthmag.org/post/what-s-a-progressive-anyway

the progressive movement, it refers to policies and politicians themselves being representative of

working people and families as well as Black communities, indigenous people, and other

historically marginalized communities. In *Winning the Green New Deal*, Sunrise organizers

emphasize the importance of organizing for a future that supports all Americans, not just wealthy

white ones: "We are Americans from all walks of life. We are of many colors and many creeds,

from the plains, from the mountains, and coasts. A wealthy few want to divide us, but we value

each other in our differences, and we are united in a shared fight to make real the promise of

society that works for all of us."[89] Alejandra Rojas of Justice Democrats describes the

importance of progressivism as a diverse coalition and the importance of that diversity being

reflected in Congress, many of the most prominent progressives in Congress are BIPOC

including members of "The Squad" who represent Americans of all backgrounds and origins.[90]

Even in terms of class and professional backgrounds, the progressive challengers highlighted in

this thesis highlight that diversity: schoolteachers, bartenders, nurses, lawyers, and doctors

representing their communities in Congress. Rojas states,

> As Alexandria [Ocasio-Cortez] has said herself for one of us to make it a hundred will
> have to try. It will take a multiracial, multigenerational mass movement of working
> people in districts across America to get it done [passing the Green New Deal]. But now
> we see what is possible. We won, and we'll do it again.[91]

This message is essential to defining today's progressivism.

Since Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign, Democrats have seen an increased

number of candidates running on the progressive tenants of climate action, economic justice,

---

[89] Aru Shiney-Ajay and Sara Blazevic, "We Shine Bright," in *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*, ed. Varshini Parkash and Guido Girgenti (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 189.
[90] Alexandra Rojas, "From Protests to Primaries," in *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*, ed. Varshini Parkash and Guido Girgenti (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 245.
[91] Ibid, 245.

racial equity, and political reform. A study from the Brookings Institute showed that the number

of primary candidates self-identifying as progressive in 2018 was 44%, compared to just 29% in

2016. Sanders' candidacy in 2016 catalyzed the progressive movement, inspiring a new group of

millennials to adopt his leftist policies. In the four years since his initial run for president,

Sanders and the movement he inspired have successfully shifted discourse within the Democratic

Party on a number of fronts including Medicare for All. In *Winning the Green New Deal* Guido

Girgenti and Waleed Shahil describe

> Bernie's "radical" ideas—Medicare for All, free college, a Green New Deal-sized climate
> plan—are no longer just Bernie's but define the agenda of a rising progressive faction in
> Congress and are increasingly the center of gravity in Democratic politics. Every 2020
> Democratic presidential candidate was expected to respond to Bernie's idea; no one was
> asked if they supported Bill Clinton's Third Way. Two out of three leading candidates for
> the Democratic presidential nomination called for a break from the Regan era, either
> through "big, structural change" or "political revolution."[92]

This support is also being reflected in the electorate. Matthew Yglesias described how policy

mood, a composite of polling data that seeks to reflect public opinion, has shifted leftward in

recent years, "Public support for big government — more regulation, higher taxes, and more

social services — has reached the highest level on record."[93] The compounding crises of today—

COVID-19, economic recession, climate change, racial injustices and police violence—are

further compelling

As support for progressive policy making is growing, so too is the coalition of politicians,

activists, organizations, and voters trying to enact it. Organizers from Bernie Sanders' 2016

campaign went on to found organizations such as Justice Democrats, Sunrise Movement, and

---

[92] Guido Girgenti and Waleed Shahid, "The Next Era of American Politics," in *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*, ed. Varshini Parkash and Guido Girgenti (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 235-236.
[93] Matthew Yglesias, "Public support for left-wing policymaking has reached a 60-year high," *Vox*, June 7, 2019. https://www.vox.com/2019/6/7/18656441/policy-mood-liberal-stimson

Brand New Congress, which focus on electing progressives and building movements

surrounding progressive policies like the Green New Deal. Waleed Shahid describes how

running progressives in primary elections pushes forward the progressive agenda,

> Unseating incumbents is the clearest way our movements can demonstrate our political power in terms of sheer votes—and occasionally elect a game-changing champion to Congress. Increasingly in primary elections across the country, younger progressive insurgents aligned with social movements have drawn lines against incumbents aligned with big corporate donors and establishment networks of patronage.[94]

Progressive activists like Shahid see primaries as a mode of entry for young progressive

insurgents, candidates like Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley who both primaried incumbents in

Democratic districts to win their seats in 2018. Excluded from Democratic Party's extended

party network, or "establishment network of patronage" as Shahid calls it, these candidates,

largely women and people of color, have had no choice but to build their own network of

campaign resources.

---

[94] Shahid, "From Protest to Primaries," 255.

IV.   Mapping a Progressive Network

As progressive candidates and their policies have been blocked by the Democratic Party's network of campaign resources, progressives have responded by constructing their own extended party network built and operated outside of the party establishment. As policies like the DCCC Blacklist exemplify, the Democratic Party establishment has created a hostile environment for progressive hopefuls looking to enter the arena through primary challenges. Rather than embrace the success of organizations working to elect progressives, party officials cornered them. In response, the progressive ecosystem that was already in formation only became more visible. Organizations impacted by the DCCC policy created DCCCblacklist.com as a list of the campaign resources available to those candidates who were willing to challenge the status quo. The DCCC Blacklist is a microcosm of the larger progressive campaign network that has arisen in recent years. Organizations like Justice Democrats and Sunrise Movement endorse candidates who embody their mission, support those candidates, and link them to a broader network of candidates, consultants, PACs, and donors.[95] Through tracing candidate expenditures in 2020 primary elections, transfers between candidates, committees, and consultants reveal a large network of progressive-aligned organizations working to elect candidates that embrace values of climate action, economic justice, racial equity, and political reform.

One of the leading organizations within the progressive movement is Justice Democrats, a political action committee which raises money to support the campaigns of progressive Democrats across the country. Justice Democrats inaugural class of 2018 candidates included Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) as well as

---

[95] Shahid, "From Protests to Primaries."

Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Ro Khanna (D-CA), Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), and

Pramila Jayapal (D-WA). Their goal as an organization is to "to elect a mission-driven caucus in

Congress that will fight for solutions that match the scale of our many crises: skyrocketing

inequality, catastrophic climate change, deepening structural racism as the country becomes

more diverse, and the corporate takeover of our democracy."[96] Justice Democrats began in 2017

when a group of like-minded Bernie Sanders campaign staffers decided to target incumbent

Democratic members and replace them with progressive candidates who supported Sanders's

signature policies like Medicare for All and refused to take money from corporate PACs.[97] The

founders of Justice Democrats worked together with Brand New Congress, another organization

founded by supporters of Sanders in 2017 similarly looking to shift the Democratic Party toward

progressive goals, to seek out nominations from communities and endorse hundreds of

candidates across the country.[98] In 2018, Justice Democrats endorsed more than 70 candidates,

only seven of whom were victorious. Those seven candidates, however, did make a splash,

particularly four freshman congresswoman who would become known as "The Squad": Omar,

Tlaib, Pressley, and Ocasio-Cortez. As "the Squad" grabbed the attention of political

commentators and energized a new base of progressives, Justice Democrats refined their

approach for 2020.

In 2020, Justice Democrats endorsed fewer candidates in order to focus their resources on

targeted districts. Three of their 2020 candidates were successful in their primaries and later in

general elections, Marie Newman (D-IL), Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), and Cori Bush (D-MO).

---

[96] "About Justice Democrats," Justice Democrats, 2020.
[97] Tessa Stuart, "Can Justice Democrats Pull Off a Progressive Coup in Congress?" *Rolling Stone,* November 21, 2018. https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/who-are-justice-democrats-758447/
[98] Ibid.

Alexandra Rojas, executive director at Justice Democrats, described how the organization has grown and evolved over time. She describes how the organization is using funds to help set up successful campaigns for those outside the party establishment, "By creating a scalable infrastructure that candidates can use to run their campaigns, we are able to start creating a party-like infrastructure that not only endorses and fundraises for candidates, but also provides them with the tools and people necessary to run a successful campaign."[99] While this "party-like" infrastructure began with the success of Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley in 2018, it has grown immensely in the past several years. Justice Democrats selects a few targeted districts to recruit and endorse candidates in but its model of connecting candidates to the resources they need has expanded and grown a network that supports progressives up and down the ballot all across the country. Now, Justice Democrats is an organization crucial to progressive candidates which helps campaigns build teams, train staff, and connect to a broader network of consultants, strategists, and organizers that support progressive policy goals.

Justice Democrats and the select candidates they endorse serve as a node or a central connecting point within the broader network of the progressive campaign world. As unspoken rules and explicit policies like the DCCC Blacklist have pushed challenger candidates and organizations who align with them to the margins, it has also become evident that there is a burgeoning community of candidates, organizers, groups, and companies expressly interested in promoting those marginalized progressive candidates against the establishment. Much like the mainstream Democratic Party operates as an extended network of actors interested in promoting shared policy goals, a progressive campaign network is made up of actors with more liberal

---

[99] "Frequently Asked Questions," Justice Democrats, 2021. https://justicedemocrats.com/frequently-asked-questions/

policy demands. These organizations and actors adhere to the progressive principles of climate justice, racial and economic equity, and structural reform to the political system, and believe that primarying incumbents from the left is a viable way to move closer to achieving those goals.

The existence of this progressive campaign network is evident by examining 2020 campaign expenditures among organizations and candidates. To explore the functioning of the progressive movement, I tracked campaign finance disclosures from the Federal Elections Commission to visualize links between candidates, organizations, and businesses. The mapping reveals that candidates with similar progressive ideologies and challenger status often share a pool of ideologically driven campaign resources such as digital firms, financial consultants, and media production firms.

The mapping began with the organization Justice Democrats, a key player in the progressive movement and a major contributor to challenger campaigns. In 2020, there were six challenger candidates for house seats supported by Justice Democrats through direct transactions as well as independent expenditures: Marie Newman of Illinois, Morgan Harper of Ohio, Jessica Cisneros of Texas, Cori Bush of Missouri, Jamaal Bowman of New York, and Alex Morse of Massachusetts. The diagram below shows Justice Democrats' campaign expenditures and then branches out to show the expenditures of the consultants and PACs linked with Justice Democrats. It continues to branch out linking organizations with other candidates and other organizations that were included in its top ten vendors as reported by the Center for Responsive Politics.[100] The graphic omits several organizations for clarity's sake: Facebook, ActBlue, and other administrative services that are either used universally or are not partisan.[101] The graphic

---

[100] "Politicians and Elections," *OpenSecrets.org*, Center for Responsive Politics, 2020.
[101] ActBlue is a fundraising platform used almost universally by Democrats. Expenditures to Facebook for advertisements as well as payments for payroll, administrative costs such as rent and travel are also excluded.

includes many candidate committees, PACs, Super PACs, combination PAC and Super PACs, as well as media, digital, and strategic consulting firms. The map reveals a network of overlapping connections between organizations with progressive missions or policy goals with candidates who promise to carry out those policy demands. The candidates highlighted in yellow on the graphic indicate candidates who challenged a Democratic incumbent in a 2020 U.S. House primary and the green highlights indicate a 2020 U.S. Senate primary challenge.

2020 Campaign Expenditures

Black line = direct payment

Blue line = independent expenditure FOR candidate or AGAINST their opponent

Figure 1: 2020 campaign expenditures from progressive organizations

Omitted: facebook, act blue, payments that appear to be for salaries

This map shows a high level of overlap between progressive challenger candidates and progressive-aligned organizations. Even candidates who were not recruited and funded by Justice Democrats, are closely linked to the same network of organizations. Organizations like the Working Families Party PAC and Super PAC contribute to dozens of progressive candidates and organizations throughout the country. At the same time, the map also shows the recurring use of the same consultants such as Left Rising, a fundraising consultant for progressive candidates, and Middle Seat Consulting, a digital media firm that builds websites and digital content for candidates. The overlap in candidate expenditures to firms as well as from PACs to candidates and between PACs reveals significant cooperation, whether formal or informal, between these organizations to promote progressive candidates and causes. This image shows a far-reaching web of organizations and candidates working with one another. The same PACs are spending on a similar set of progressive candidates, and the same organizations are contracting with the candidates to power their campaigns. For example, while Justice Democrats only endorsed 11 candidates for congressional races, their PAC's main consultants Left Rising and Middleseat worked with dozens of other progressive campaigns and PACs, connecting Justice Democrats to open-seat challengers and incumbent challengers across the country.

Similar connections have been made on behalf of the campaigns themselves. The figure below shows each of the Justice Democrats endorsed candidates and all of the organizations— everything from consultants, to lawyers, to print shops—that they contracted with and paid over $1000 to during the primary 2020 election cycle.[102] Across from each of the candidates is the incumbent who they challenged, showing the differences in campaign resources used by each
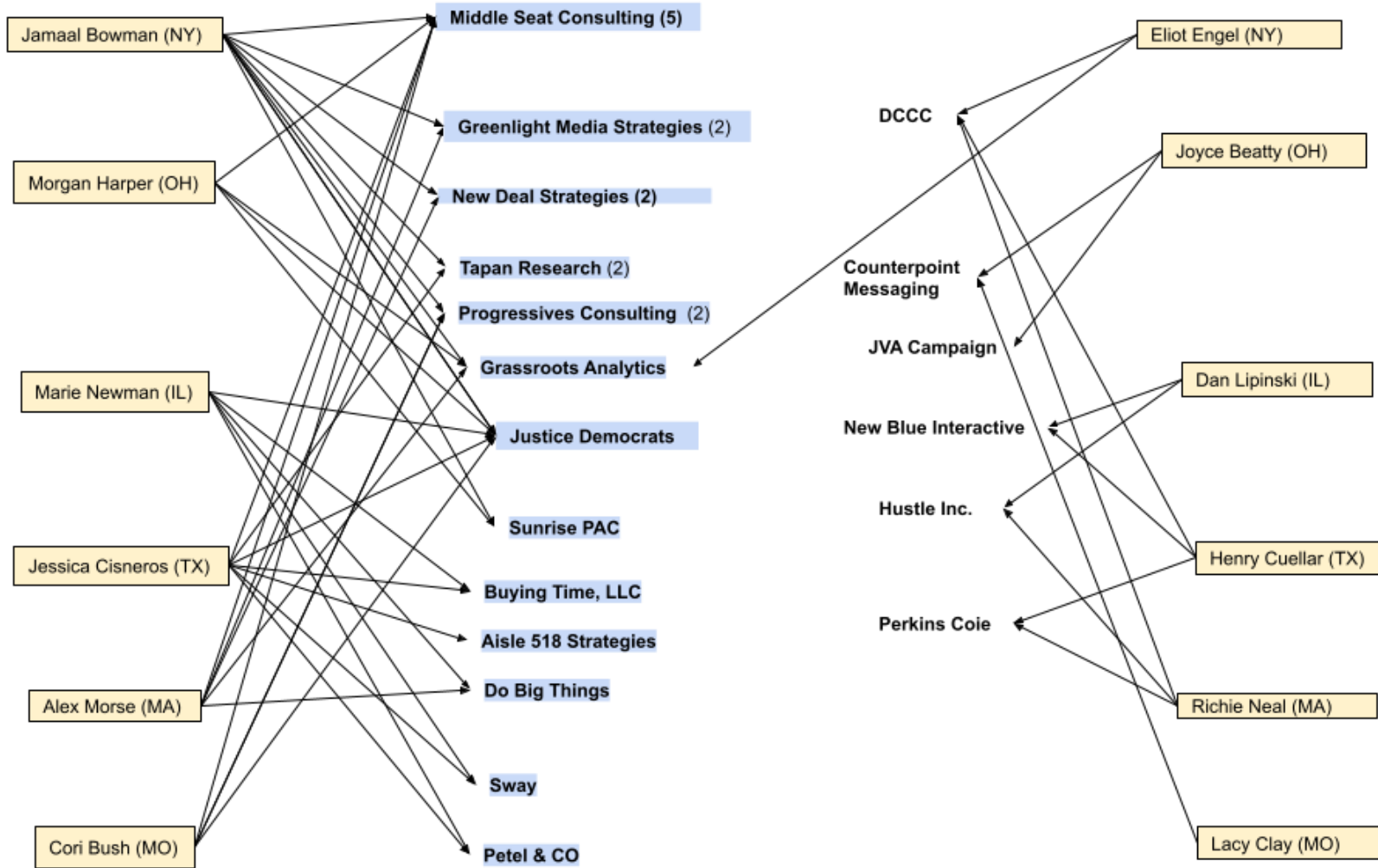
<hr>

[102] Federal Elections Commission.

side of the primary. The bolded names represent organizations that contracted with two or more

candidates listed.

2020 Campaign Expenditures

Based on FEC records of campaign committee expenditures over $1000, excludes payroll and other admin expenses

Challengers

Incumbents

Middle Seat Consulting (5)
Greenlight Media Strategies (2)
New Deal Strategies (2)
Tapan Research (2)
Progressives Consulting (2)
Grassroots Analytics
Justice Democrats
Sunrise PAC
Buying Time, LLC
Aisle 518 Strategies
Do Big Things
Sway
Petel & CO

Jamaal Bowman (NY)
Morgan Harper (OH)
Marie Newman (IL)
Jessica Cisneros (TX)
Alex Morse (MA)
Cori Bush (MO)

DCCC
Counterpoint Messaging
JVA Campaign
New Blue Interactive
Hustle Inc.
Perkins Coie

Eliot Engel (NY)
Joyce Beatty (OH)
Dan Lipinski (IL)
Henry Cuellar (TX)
Richie Neal (MA)
Lacy Clay (MO)

Figure 2: Challengers vs. Incumbents 2020 Campaign Expenditures

This graphic demonstrates the separation between the progressive network and the establishment network. On the left, each of the Justice Democrats endorsed challengers share a variety of resources, twelve of which are shared by one or more candidates. On the right, the incumbent candidates contract with a variety of distinct resources, having some crossover between them, a total of six organizations contracted with one or more of the incumbents analyzed. One of those six is the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which is required to support its caucus members for reelection. The only crossover on this list is Grassroots Analytics, a data firm that maintains a consumer database of left-leaning Americans that is on the DCCC Blacklist. This is the kind of resource that is helpful to candidates as they increase voter outreach. Several challenger candidates worked with this firm including Bowman, Harper, and Morse. Elliot Engel, who lost his seat to Bowman in 2020, also made payments to the firm. The relative separation between these two groups of individuals and resources is indicative of the separate sphere progressives have designed. Additionally, challengers shared resources twice as much as their incumbent counterparts, showing some level of cooperation.

The groups working within the progressive network offer different services that address the variety of needs of each different campaign. As described above, Justice Democrats serves as a central node on both graphics because it offers organizational support to campaigns, strategic consulting, and carries out independent expenditures such as TV and digital advertisements for their endorsed candidates and against their opponents. On the other hand, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) serves as a central node on the incumbent side. Serving a similar purpose in terms of fundraising for candidates and providing strategic consulting. Prominent on the progressive side are consulting firms such as Middle Seat, Greenlight, and New Deal Strategies, as well as data firms like Grassroots Analytics and Data for

Progress. Many of these organizations also populate the DCCC Blacklist website, as they were formally shut out of DCCC business during the 2020 cycle for working with candidates challenging sitting Democrats.

One of the organizations with the most frequent overlap is Middle Seat Consulting, which describes itself as "the digital firm for progressive causes and candidates."[103] The organization states clearly on its homepage its support for key progressive causes like racial justice, climate change, economic justice, immigration, and intersectional feminism.[104] On its website, Middle Seat includes a case study of its work with Justice Democrats candidate Ayanna Pressley. They describe their work with her team to use digital strategies like social media advertisement, a well-designed website, and an email list program to boost interactions, increase engagement, and generate fundraising.[105] Their impact was a 68% increase in the size of Pressley's email list as well as increased donor recruitment for her re-election campaign.[106] These types of services are essential to a candidate running a progressive campaign focused on community engagement and meeting people where they are—whether that be in person, on social media, or in their inbox. A firm like Middle Seat has capitalized on its Blacklist status to create a brand that works solely with progressive causes. Middle Seat has also created content for Justice Democrats itself and many of its candidates, as well as other progressives like Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) and Representative Katie Porter (D-CA).

Other consulting services in the network provide strategic direction for fundraising, TV advertisements, direct mail, as well as media content and speech writing. New Deal Strategies,

---

[103] "The digital firm for progressive causes and candidates," *Middleseat.co*, Middle Seat, 2021.
[104] Ibid.
[105] "Ayanna Pressley," *Middleseat.co*, Middle Seat, 2021.
[106] Ibid.

which worked with Bowman and Alex Morse (D-MA) on their challenger campaigns in 2020, is

similarly motivated by ideology. New Deal describes on its homepage,

> We only work for campaigns, causes, and leaders we truly believe in, even if – especially
> if – they're not favored by the establishment. As a firm, we want to help lift up the voices
> of women, people of color, the working class, and the LGBTQ community. We want to
> fight for the issues that matter, from the Green New Deal to Medicare for All and income
> inequality.[107]

Left Rising, another DCCC Blacklist organization, is a fundraising consultant whose website

boasts, "We won't let successful fundraising be exclusive to incumbents and established

organizations." Left Rising has worked with organizations like Justice Democrats to boost online

fundraising and to create fundraising strategies for the campaigns of Bowman and Bush as well

as other congressional primary challengers like Dr. Arati Kreibich who ran against Josh

Gottheimer in New Jersey's fifth congressional district. The existence of organizations

specifically motivated by progressive ideology and willing to work against the Democratic

establishment is paramount for progressive challengers looking to challenge sitting house

members.

---

[107] "About Us," *New Deal Strategies*, 2020.

V.   The Progressive Campaign Playbook[108]

The campaign expenditures charted in the previous section illustrate that progressive

challenger candidates are pulling from a shared ecosystem of resources, but the similarities

among progressive challenger campaigns extend into their general strategies and practices of the

campaigns as well. The "progressive campaign playbook" is made up of fundraising, digital, and

field strategies that have been utilized successfully by progressives running primary challenge

campaigns. These strategies are also heavily shaped by the progressive consultants and

organizations that have become specialists in running insurgent campaigns like those of

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and her fellow Justice Democrats recruits.

Organizations such as the fundraising consultant Left Rising, the digital media firm Middleseat,

and data analysis firm Grassroots Analytica that are prominent points on the map share this

expertise within the progressive network. These strategies include a grassroots fundraising

approach that emphasizes small-dollar donations and rejects corporate money, a reliance on

social media and targeted digital organizing, as well as community-based and volunteer-driven

field programs that work in tandem to conserve funds and to reach new populations. While these

methods are not always exclusive to progressive candidates, they have allowed progressives to

bypass some of the traditional barriers to entering the political arena, simultaneously reinforcing

progressive principles of accessibility, transparency, as well as the rejection of corporate interests

and elitism.

---

[108] Excerpts of this section first appeared in my Washington Thesis "The Establishment Decides."

Fundraising

In many progressive campaigns there is a heavy emphasis on small dollar fundraising and a rejection of corporate PAC money. Small-dollar fundraising, sometimes referred to as "grassroots fundraising" has become an increasingly effective means of fundraising for candidates since the dawn of internet fundraising in the early 2000s.[109] As the internet became more broadly accessible to voters in the United States, campaigns turned toward online fundraising as a supplement to traditional fundraising. In 2008, Barack Obama made history by raising over $28 million dollars ahead of his victory in Iowa during the 2008 primary, with 90% of those donations being less than $100.[110] This drew a sharp contrast with the traditional fundraising style of his opponent, Hillary Clinton, whose team was lining up big ticket events with Clinton and her husband, targeting large dollar contributions from wealthy donors.[111] The *New York Times* noted that this internet funding "freed" Obama from time spent wooing wealthy donors and hosting events, allowing him instead to build a network of donors and volunteers across the country.[112] By collecting donations in small increments of $5, $10, or $25 dollars, campaigns are not only able to raise large sums of money but they are able to give supporters a sense of ownership and stake in the campaign.

Today, an online fundraising operation is vital for campaigns for all levels of office. Online fundraising tools have given candidates the ability to easily seek out donations online and have made donating to campaigns easy and accessible, especially for "small-dollar"

---

[109] Daniel Bergan, "Clicking for Cash: Campaigns, Donors, and the Emergence of Online Fund-Raising," In *Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign Communications*, ed. Panagolopulus Costas, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 127-40.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Michael Luo, "Small Online Contributions Add Up to Huge Fund-Raising Edge for Obama," *New York Times,* February 20, 2008.

contributions—contributions valued at less than $200. ActBlue, an online fundraising platform used by most Democrats, boasts raising more than 8 billion dollars since it launched in 2004.[113] Act Blue allows candidates to set up their own pages and offers supporters the option to donate any amount of money as well as to set up recurring monthly donations. Lisa Lerer described for the New York Times "On Politics" newsletter, "The technology encourages small, recurring donations that go directly to candidates, giving campaigns more control over how the money is spent. The money can also be transferred quickly, wired from ActBlue into campaign coffers by the next morning."[114] Online tools remove some of the barriers to fundraising and allow non-establishment candidates to raise money directly, without the contacts and networks of the party.

A rise in "grassroots" and "small-dollar" funded campaigns represents a challenge to the traditional campaign practices which involved in-person fundraising from wealthy donors, political action committees, and the party itself. Data based on donor behavior and candidate ideology show that small-dollar donors tend to be more ideologically polarized and emotionally invested in a candidate than typical large-dollar contributors, who might trade a maximum $2,800 donation for a phone call or golf outing with the candidate.[115] Thomas Mann and Anthony Corrado explain that "small donors are more responsive than large donors to fundraising based on partisan taunting and ideological appeals… It is consistent with the conventional wisdom among politicians and their consultants going back decades that 'hot' messages are essential for direct mail fundraising."[116] The original study points to Tea Party

[113] "ActBlue—billions raised since 2004," ActBlue, 2021.
[114] Lisa Lerer, "ActBlue, the Democrats' Not-So-Secret Weapon," *New York Times,* November 16, 2018.
[115] Adam Bonica, "Mapping the Ideological Marketplace." *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014): 367-86.
[116] Thomas E. Mann and Anthony Corrado, "Party Polarization and Campaign Finance," Center for Effective Public Management at Brookings, Brookings Institution, July 2014.

candidates within the Republican Party in 2010, but the same rings true today for progressive

challengers. Jamaal Bowman was able to raise millions of dollars during his primary by sharing

his ActBlue page on social media and via email after some of Engel's largest gaffes. Bowman

ultimately raised more than 55% of his 2.8 million total from small-dollar online contributions,

while Eliot Engel, his opponent, raised less than 4% of his 2.9 million from individual

contributions under $200.[117] Grassroots fundraising online is easily integrated with social media,

email, and digital ads which allow recipients to donate to a candidate with a few simple clicks.

Although online platforms do not free candidates entirely from the necessity of long hours of

"call time" reaching out to donors, they make it possible for candidates outside of the party

network to reach supporters and raise money without the party's rolodex.

Passion for grassroots fundraising among progressives helps engage supporters and turn

them into repeat donors and volunteers. Small-dollar fundraising was a critical part of 2020 races

on all fronts but especially among progressive candidates. Bernie Sanders' campaign described

in 2020 how small donations well below the $2,800 maximum contributions allow donors to

come back repeatedly and donate, a process which allows a more steady stream of contributions

to fuel the campaign.[118] Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) also made grassroots fundraising an

integral component of her campaign as well as her persona as a candidate by instituting a habit of

calling grassroots supporters at random to thank them for pitching in what they could and using

the calls to hear what supporters were passionate about. Warren described in one campaign

email:

> For every time you see a presidential candidate talking with voters at a town hall, rally, or
> local diner, those same candidates are spending three or four or five times as long with

[117] "New York District 16 2020 Race," *OpenSecrets.org*, Center for Responsive Politics, 2020.
[118] Max Greenwood, "Small-dollar donors reshape Democratic race," *The Hill*, October 8, 2019.
https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/464903-small-dollar-donors-reshape-democratic-race?rl=1

wealthy donors – on the phone, or in conference rooms at hedge fund offices, or at fancy receptions and intimate dinners – all behind closed doors... when I thank the people giving to my campaign, it will not be based on the size of their donation.

Warren's phone calls made her voters excited to contribute what they could to help her campaign and created an environment of inclusivity within her campaign that engaged supporters and encouraged them to get more involved through volunteering or donating again. Other means of fundraising like allowing supporters to create personalized ActBlue pages for candidates, a tool implemented by Ed Markey's re-election campaign to empower supporters to raise money from their own friends and family on behalf of Markey.

In addition to the practicality of these modes of grassroots fundraising, rejecting the influence of wealthy donors and corporate PACs exemplifies progressive ideology. In fact, rejection of corporate PAC money is, in many cases, a litmus test for progressive candidates: 2020 saw a surge of candidates signing pledges and promising not to accept money from corporate PACs.[119] Some organizations require candidates to sign onto such pledges before they consider endorsing. Sunrise Worcester, a local chapter of the national Sunrise Movement, requires all candidates being considered for endorsements to sign onto the No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge which states, "I pledge not to take contributions over $200 from oil, gas, and coal industry executives, lobbyists, and PACs and instead prioritize the health of our families, climate, and democracy over fossil fuel industry profits."[120] Other progressives have gone as far to swear off closed-door fundraisers and private phone calls with wealth donors. During her 2020 bid for President, Senator Warren (D-MA), published a memo vowing to not to hold "fancy

---

[119] Brendan Fischer, "No PAC Money Pledges Are in, But That Doesn't Mean Big Money is Out: Understanding the No PAC Pledges," Campaign Legal Center, June 20, 2019. https://campaignlegal.org/update/no-pac-money-pledges-are-doesnt-mean-big-money-out-understanding-no-pac-pledges
[120] "Tell Our Leaders: Take the No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge," NoFossilFuelMoney.org, 2021.

receptions or big money fundraisers only with people who can write big checks."[121] Instead,

Warren relied on her grassroots network of supporters and focused her energy on events

accessible to all supporters.[122] This was indicative of her campaign's broader commitment to

reform and rooting out corruption in politics. Campaigns need money to run and to win,

Congressional candidates with smaller networks and less name recognition may not be able to

swear off call time altogether, but emphasizing grassroots donors is a key strategy for

progressives at all levels of government. Pledges such as these allow candidates to publicly

distance themselves from their opponents, in practice and in principle.

Progressives argue that when candidates accept maximum contributions from wealthy

donors, they become beholden to a small sector of wealthy individuals with special interests

instead of the voters who propelled them to office. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 primary

fundraising strategy reiterated her message of being an outsider, as well as commitment to the

slogan "people over profit." Ocasio-Cortez was able to use a large base of online supporters to

fund her operations and prove that she had broad support without using the traditional resources

Crowley had monopolized. In the end, Crowley outraised Ocasio-Cortez by a 10-1 margin;

however, the money raised by Ocasio-Cortez was composed of small-dollar and non-corporate

money, manifesting her progressive values.[123] She wrote on Twitter, "At the start of my run for

Congress, I publicly pledged to reject all corporate PAC money. That's because I didn't want

anything to get between my community and my advocacy. We won with an average donation of

---

[121] MJ Lee, "Elizabeth Warren's new promise: No fundraisers, phone calls with wealthy donors," *CNN Politics*, February 25, 2019. https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/25/politics/warren-fundraiser-promise/index.html
[122] Ibid.
[123] Jordan Muller, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez boosted by out-of-state donors after primary win," OpenSecrets.org, The Center for Responsible Politics. July 24, 2018.

$22."[124] In this way, the small-dollar model powers campaigns not only by funding operations and empowering donors, but by creating distance between candidates in their ideological battle against the establishment.

Social Media and Digital Advertising

Social media has given politicians useful and far-reaching platforms to interact with voters, something which progressive challengers have taken advantage of, using savvy digital strategies to gain momentum. Social media outreach is a crucial part of campaigns across the political spectrum. In 2006, some congressional candidates began using Facebook to campaign for the first time and by 2010 nearly 92% of all major-party candidates for Congress were using websites, social media, and online fundraising as part of their campaign strategy.[125] Since then, the use of social media has only expanded: candidates are now found on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and even the Generation Z-powered video platform, TikTok. A study from Girish Gulati and Christine Williams shows that congressional challengers were early adopters of social media, although as social media has become more mainstream, incumbent candidates became more likely to use and reuse campaign pages cycle after cycle.[126] Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have broken down barriers allowing candidates to shape their own message and avoid the costs of traditional media—such as television appearances, interviews, and advertisements.

Young candidates in particular have been able to capture new audiences and shape political conversations. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez first made waves in the national arena when her campaign video "The Courage to Change" went viral ahead of the primary election in

---

[124] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Twitter post, June 29, 2018, 5:29PM.
[125] Girish J. Gulati and Christine B. Williams, "Congressional Campaigns' Motivations for Social Media Adoption," In *Controlling the Message: New Media in American Political Campaigns*, ed. Victoria Farrar-Myers and Justin Vaughn, (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 32-52.
[126] Ibid, 42.

2018—the video received 300,000 views on the first day alone.[127] Her video shared her personal story and her inspiring message about change for Queens and the Bronx; it is indicative of her powerful message and is quoted several times throughout this paper. It featured her talking to supporters and volunteers throughout the community and showed her opponent speaking on Fox News: "it's time for one of us," she said. Social media interactions have the capacity to drive up not only support and voter turnout but also direct campaign donations. By linking ActBlue pages to social media posts and embedding fundraising links in almost all content, progressives aim to capture the attention of potential voters and lead them directly to chip in. After her video went viral, Ocasio-Cortez became something of a national sensation and received an influx of donations from across the country. In the end, over 55% of her total campaign funds came from donors outside of New York, a number which would not have been possible without the platform Twitter and YouTube allowed her.[128] Throughout her campaign and during her first term as Congresswoman, Ocasio-Cortez continued to utilize social media, using Instagram live videos to interact with voters and answer policy questions. Social media has given low-resource candidates the ability to share their message with supporters for free and has amplified young voices, like Ocasio-Cortez's, in a way that is attractive and relevant, especially to young voters who are increasingly online.

Candidates have also been able to take advantage of social media through paid targeted digital advertisements on Facebook, Google, and YouTube. In 2018, Ayanna Pressley proved the power of digital media strategy in her race against Massachusetts Democratic Representative

[127] Zaid Jilani, "How a Ragtag Group of Socialist Filmmakers Produced One of the Most Viral Campaign Ads of 2018," The Intercept, June 5, 2018.
[128] Jordan Muller, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez boosted by out-of-state donors."

Michael Capuano.[129] Capuano was a popular Democrat with a strong liberal voting record but fell short of what Pressley calls "activist leadership" and was not representative of Massachusetts' only majority-minority district (MA-07).[130] Without the fundraising tools of Capuano's establishment-endorsed campaign, Pressley focused on digital strategy. She produced online videos with a local production team, entirely bypassing the traditional market for television campaign ads and instead opted to meet voters where she could find them, on social media, creating content in several languages including Chinese and Spanish.[131] In this way, she was able to reach voters across the district—in the city of Boston and its surrounding suburbs. Alex Goldstein, a senior advisor for the campaign, described a "paradigm shift" in the ways that candidates are reaching voters, as well as a decreasing "return on investment from significant amounts of television [and] cable advertising."[132] By targeting specific voters using online advertising technology, Pressley was able to follow through on her goals of expanding the electorate in Boston, winning handedly among young people and Black people.[133] Pressley won her primary by almost doubling traditional turnout rates across the district in a way that represented her inclusive campaign message: "If they deliver me to that seat—I'm not going alone. I'm taking everybody with me."[134] Pressley is not alone in using the digital campaign strategy. In fact, digital ads have been utilized by challengers and incumbents, progressive and establishment Democrats alike. It has played an important role in challenger campaigns

---

[129] Nik DeCosta-Klipa, "How did Ayanna Pressley pull off a double-digit drubbing of Michael Capuano in the 7th District?" *Boston.com*, September 5, 2018. https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2018/09/05/ayanna-pressley-massachusetts-win

[130] Ibid.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ayanna Pressley, "The 1 Bus - Ayanna Pressley for Congress," August 7, 2018, video, 1:24. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgF79Shc_YI

specifically, however, because targeting specific voters and feeding them advertisements is more cost effective than running continuous TV ads to the same audience.

Ocasio-Cortez has also pointed to digital advertising strategies as a point of strength for progressives, but a weakness in the Democratic Party at large. Since her 2018 primary victory, Ocasio-Cortez has grown a massive online presence that employs candid front-facing camera videos and live streams to connect with voters and give insight into the policy making process. She has also spent more than almost any other candidate on targeted digital advertising, like that used by Pressley. These advertisements, often created and coded by the digital consultants that populate the DCCC Blacklist, have the power to target specific audiences to raise money, attract volunteers, and get out the vote. Following the 2020 general election, Ocasio-Cortez described the Democratic Party Establishment's failure to utilize these strategies as failures in their campaign strategy: "the fact of the matter is if you're not spending $200,000 on Facebook with fund-raising, persuasion, volunteer recruitment, get-out-the-vote the week before the election, you are not firing on all cylinders. And not a single one of these campaigns [of Democrats who lost in swing districts] were firing on all cylinders."[135] Ocasio-Cortez refuted the 2020 general election takes that blamed socialist rhetoric and the "defund the police" movement for Democratic loses, instead stating that the Democratic Party could stand to learn from the digital media firms propping up progressives rather than institute policies to put them out of business: "If you are the D.C.C.C., and you're hemorrhaging incumbent candidates to progressive insurgents, you would think that you may want to use some of those firms. But instead, we banned them. So the D.C.C.C. banned every single firm that is the best in the country at digital

---

[135] Astead W. Herndon, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Biden's Win, House Loses, and What's Next for the Left," *New York Times,* November 7, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/07/us/politics/aoc-biden-progressives.html

organizing."[136] Firms that make up the progressive network mapped in the previous section specialize in these sort of targeted, data-driven advertising campaigns that reach supporters on Facebook, Instagram, Google, and YouTube, encouraging them to support progressives by voting, donating, and joining the movement as volunteers. In this way, fundraising, social media, and field organizing are intrinsically linked together, working with one another to provide prospective voters and volunteers with content to interest them as well as direct ways to get involved, either by clicking the link to donate a few dollars, pledging support for the campaign, or signing up to volunteer as a phone banker or canvasser to multiply the impact.

Field

With resources like social media and television ads being highly visible ways to reach voters, the work of a campaign's field operation may not seem glamorous or even important; but reaching voters one-on-one at their doorstep, on their phone, or in their message inboxes remains one of the most critical ways of turning out voters in a primary election.[137] Emphasizing field organizing and energizing large teams of volunteers is certainly not exclusive to progressive campaigns, but progressive candidates have demonstrated its importance and popularized innovative field strategies including digital, distributed, and relational organizing. In *Winning the Green New Deal* Sunrise Movement organizers highlight the key principles of their organizing model, which apply to many of the campaigns it endorses. While Sunrise is a national organization, it's power is rooted in local organizing: "We grow our power through talking to our communities. We talk to our neighbors, families, religious leaders, classmates, and teachers in order to spread our word. Our strength and work are rooted in our local communities, and we are

---

[136] Ibid.
[137] Ben McGuire, "Scaling the Field Program in Modern Political Campaigns: Investigating Determinants of Capacity in Mobilizing and Organizing," *Harvard Kennedy School of Government*, April 2, 2019.

always growing in number."[138] An emphasis on voter contact is common in progressive

campaigns. In 2008, the progressive outsider presidential campaign of Barack Obama

represented this model—beating his establishment primary opponent Hilliary Clinton in part by

building a massive field operation that included hundreds of campaign offices and thousands of

excited volunteers. The campaign similarly utilized technology and social media to drive

engagement with supporters and promote contributions. In 2020, at the peak of the COVID-19

pandemic, the ground game for progressives looked different: it requires online tools like virtual

phone banks on Zoom, peer-to-peer texting apps, and voter outreach using social media. Senator

Ed Markey's re-election campaign exemplified this modern organizing model during his 2020

primary.

Like countless other incumbent Democrats, Senator Markey became the target of a

primary challenge in 2020 as well, but unlike many of his colleagues, the progressive base in

Massachusetts rallied behind the 74-year-old incumbent, rather than to his challenger. At the

onset of the pandemic, Markey was trailing his opponent by double digits in the polls and

suddenly was forced to change its entire field plan to meet COVID guidelines.[139] But the

campaign was just gaining momentum and a classic Markey quote was the new refrain of

volunteers and staffers: "Don't agonize, organize." Organizers from the campaign later wrote

how they overcame that deficit by "building a progressive, youth-led coalition that embraced a

relational-first, digitally-infused organizing model that centered on innovation in place of

---

[138] "We Shine Bright," in *Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can*, ed. Varshini Parkash and Guido Girgenti. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020) 185.

[139] Rory Clark, Joe Thibodeau, Emma Friend, Joe Kent, "Don't Agonize, Organize: The Ed Markey Organizing Model," *Medium*, September 20, 2020. https://medium.com/@emma.h.friend/dont-agonize-organize-the-ed-markey-organizing-model-cf6364ab167e

traditional organizing."[140] The Markey campaign exemplified the progressive notion of people

power by investing in its volunteers and organizers. The campaign highlighted the voice of

young people through its fellowship program as well as the auxiliary organization Students for

Markey.

Mobilizing young people and students as campaign organizers, volunteers, and

ambassadors is a key aspect of progressive field strategy. Markey's campaign ultimately had

more than 400 fellows by its September 1 primary date, young people who were given leadership

roles organizing their communities and engaging voters—beyond the regular voter contact

responsibilities of a campaign intern, fellows were expected to recruit volunteers, host events,

and organize their own social networks. Similar fellow programs existed on the Bowman and

Kreibich campaigns during the summer of 2020. Daniel Wilk, a high school student and a fellow

on Kreibich's campaign for NJ-05 described his own experience

> The youthful energy of the campaign really came through in the outreach portion of our
> work. Zoom hangouts were fun and I'm still close friends with some of the people I
> worked with. Also, the campaign leaders gave us kids opportunities to talk about issues
> that concern us.[141]

As Daniel describes, the concerns of young people are critical to the platform of a progressive

campaign, especially in races centered around issues like healthcare and climate change, where

progressive stances are favorable among young people.

Progressive campaigns like Markey's as well as the progressive primary campaign of

Mondaire Jones (NY-17) also emphasized the importance of relational organizing by

empowering supporters to engage their own social networks. While having volunteers cold call

strangers using a script is a proven strategy for voter persuasion, having volunteers contact their

---

[140] Ibid.
[141] Daniel Wilk (Former Fellow, Arati for Congress), in conversation with the author April 20, 2021.

own social networks to engage voters and build support has much higher contact rates and is proven to be more effective. Emma Friend, Director of Distributed Organizing for the Markey campaign explained the relational-first approach: "We taught volunteers that each of us is uniquely suited to turn out the people in our lives, so when we all take responsibility for talking to our people about Ed and turning them out to vote — even just 20 people each — that becomes a winning coalition of voters."[142] This strategy is essential in building people power and expanding the progressive base.

The progressive campaign playbook looks to grow its coalition by reaching voters who are not traditionally engaged in politics. Campaigns often rely on voter file data and lists that target likely voters or high-propensity voters, rather than first-time voters or voters who do not always come out for primary races. Progressive data firms like Grassroots Analytics and Bluebonnet Data attempt to help progressives find and target theses voters with online advertisements as well as peer-to-peer text messaging and phone calls. Progressive styles of campaigning from grassroots fundraising, social media content, targeted digital advertising, and field strategies that emphasize voter outreach all work together to break down traditional campaign cost barriers and reach voters who otherwise would not turn out in primaries. These strategies seek to make campaigns inclusive and empowering for supporters, donors, and volunteers. These methods help progressives build a base of supporters from the ground up to build name recognition and turn out voters.

The following case studies illustrate the importance of these strategies and how they connect campaigns more broadly to the progressive network of resources mapped out in the

---

[142] Clark et. al., "Don't Agonize, Organize: The Ed Markey Organizing Model."

previous section. The next section will briefly explore the campaigns of three challenger candidates from different parts of the country: Jamaal Bowman from New York City, Jessica Cisneros from the southern border of Texas, and Arati Kreibich from the suburbs of New Jersey. While each candidate came from vastly different circumstances, all three challenged incumbent Democrats in 2020 congressional primaries. All three ran on platforms that centered climate action, racial justice, healthcare, and systemic political reform, and utilized small-dollar fundraising, digital strategies, and strong field programs. There is a great deal of overlap between the resources they worked with as well, campaign expenditures make clear that Bowman, Cisneros, and Kreibich were supported to some extent by the larger progressive network. While only Bowman emerged victorious from his 2020 primary challenge, each campaign left a distinct impact on its district and helped illustrate patterns within progressive challenges of all levels.

VI. Case Studies

Jamaal Bowman for NY-16

Jamaal Bowman was the principal of a public middle school in the Bronx when he launched his primary campaign against 16-term incumbent and chairman of the Foreign Affairs committee, Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY). Following Representative Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 upset victory over incumbent Joseph Crowley in a neighboring district, the New York 16th district, which is comprised of the northern part of the Bronx and southern parts of Westchester County, was identified as a target district for progressives and became a center of focus for the PAC Justice Democrats.[143] Bowman was the principal of Cornerstone Academy for Social Action, a public school in Eastchester, Bronx which he founded in 2009, when he was nominated and recruited by Justice Democrats to run.[144] Waleed Shahid, director of communications for Justice Democrats, described Bowman as having "a record of leadership in the district that was really impressive… he'd been an organizer in the fight for public schools and racial and economic justice. So many families knew him. Activists knew him."[145] Bowman was known by activists for his work promoting social justice and for being an admired educator for 20 years, but he lacked the campaign bank account and political connections of his opponent, Representative Engel. In a safe Democratic district with a Cook Partisan Voter Index of D+24, Engel had served since 1988 with few serious challengers.[146] Engel himself was known to be

---

[143] Jesse McKinley, "Jamaal Bowman Proves Ocasio-Cortez Was No Fluke," *New York Times*, July 17, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/nyregion/jamaal-bowman-eliot-engel.html

[144] Jesse McKinley, "Top Democrats Are Trying to Stop This Man From Becoming the Next A.O.C.," *The New York Times,* June 17, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/nyregion/eliot-engel-jamaal-bowman-primary.html

[145] Jada Yuan, "How a middle school principal used the Ocasio-Cortez playbook against a 16-term incumbent," *Washington Post*, July 16, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/how-a-middle-school-principal-used-the-ocasio-cortez-playbook-against-a-16-term-incumbent/2020/07/15/ea7e9eb8-c2f4-11ea-b178-bb7b05b94af1_story.html

[146] Ibid.

progressive on domestic policy, a supporter of single-payer healthcare and co-sponsor of the Green New Deal, however, his hawkish foreign policy including his support for the Iraq war and history of taking contributions from weapons manufacturers was of concern to some voters.[147] To many people, Engel represented a type of establishment, corporate politician out of touch with his district, which was diversifying rapidly.

The race took place in a time of competing crises as the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests upended politics as usual in New York City and around the world. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, NY-16 was home to one of the pandemic's first epicenters in New Rochelle. Engel claimed to be supporting his district while hospitals suffered from overcapacity and lives were lost to the virus; but reports later revealed Engel had not returned to New York since March and was instead living at his Maryland residence.[148] Bowman, on the other hand, as a Black man from a working-class background and an educator, was acutely aware of the suffering COVID-19 had caused communities in his district.[149] In June as protests erupted over the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Bowman shared his own experiences with police violence and marched in the streets with constituents.[150] At a press conference following protests in New York City, a hot mic captured Engel asking to speak at the event repeating, "If I didn't have a primary, I wouldn't care."[151] To many, this quote exemplified Engel's elitism and the out-of-touch relationship with his constituents and their concerns. The story was quickly picked up by social media, bringing heavy traffic to Bowman's

---

[147] Ibid.
[148] Bridget Read, "Jamaal Bowman's Campaign Is More Than Exciting," *The Cut,* June 23, 2020. https://www.thecut.com/2020/06/jamaal-bowman-eliot-engel-new-york-significant.html
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.

profile from progressives across the country. According to his campaign manager, the hot-mic moment led to one of Bowman's largest days for fundraising.[152] The unique circumstances brought on by COVID-19 and protests over racial injustice amplified Bowman's anti-racism, anti-poverty message of social justice. Alexandra Rojas and Waleed Shahid from Justice Democrats wrote for Crooked Media, "In this political moment, working families like Jamaal's don't have to be content with incremental change; we don't have to defer to conservative, well-funded incumbents—especially when they fail to represent our interests in Congress."[153] Bowman's message resonated with voters who were ready for change.

While it may have seemed like a perfect storm for Engel's defeat—the AOC momentum, a diversifying district, the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and Engel's many gaffes—defeating the 16-term Congressman was no easy task. As a 32-year incumbent, Engel had deep roots in the district, especially among wealthy donors and powerful interests. Engel outspent Bowman and had strong support from outside donors and independent expenditures like the PAC Majority for Israel, which spent more than 1.3 million dollars on Engel's behalf in the Riverdale area alone.[154] To face a campaign machine like Engel's, Bowman relied on the progressive extended party network.

Recruited and endorsed by Justice Democrats, Bowman had an upper hand that not many challengers get when it came to campaign infrastructure, but he was still a political newcomer facing an entrenched incumbent with a well-established war chest. Campaign manager Luke Hayes described in an interview that building name recognition was one of the campaign's

---

[152] Luke Hayes and Chris Hayes, "So You Want to Run for Office with Luke Hayes," July 14, 2020, in *Why Is This Happening?* Produced by MSNBC, podcast, MP3 audio.
[153] Alejandra Rojas and Waleed Shahid, "Jamaal Bowman and the Democratic Revolution," *Crooked Media,* June 24, 2020. https://crooked.com/articles/jamaal-bowman-squad/
[154] McKinley, "Jamaal Bowman Proves Ocasio-Cortez Was No Fluke."

biggest obstacles.[155] While Bowman was a well-respected principal and educator, his name did

not have the same weight as Engel's did after nearly 32 years of service to the district. In order to

attack this problem and get Bowman's name out there, the campaign needed to produce

advertisements for television and social media. Buying ads to boost Bowman's recognition was

costly and without the same connections to the district's wealthiest donors, Bowman relied

heavily on grassroots online fundraising, amassing more than 55% of his 2.8 million raised from

small-dollar individual contributions under $200.[156] Meanwhile, Engel raised a comparable $2.9

million with less than 4% coming from individual donors under $200.[157] Instead, the vast

majority of Engel's support came from large individual contributions and PAC donations.

Ultimately, Engel outspent Bowman by approximately $300,000, but his TV spots and high-

profile endorsements could not compete with the grassroots energy Bowman had already

amassed.[158]

Bowman's communications were bolstered by support from progressive media

consultants and digital strategy firms. Bowman's campaign tapped into the growing ecosystem

of progressive organizations that make up the progressive network identified in this thesis.

Middleseat Digital consulted the campaign on digital advertising and communications, Green

Light Media designed mailers, Grassroots Analytics developed contact lists for email outreach,

and Data For Progress polled the district several times.[159] These firms, which had chosen to

establish themselves as friendly allies to progressive challengers after the DCCC's 2019 policy

update, offered accessible and affordable resources for a political outsider like Bowman. The

---

[155] Luke Hayes and Chris Hayes, "So You Want to Run for Office with Luke Hayes."

[156] "New York District 16 2020 Race," *OpenSecrets.org*, Center for Responsive Politics, 2020.

[157] Ibid.

[158] Ibid.

[159] Ibid.

following graphic highlights Bowman's expenditures in comparison to his fellow Justice

Democrats Challengers. Bowman pulled from many of the blacklisted organizations (denoted

with an asterisk) as well as many of the same organizations as his contemporaries.

Bowman for Congress 2020
Campaign Expenditures

Based on FEC records of campaign committee expenditures over $1000, excludes payroll and other admin expenses

Jamaal Bowman (NY)

Morgan Harper (OH)

Marie Newman (IL)

Jessica Cisneros (TX)

Alex Morse (MA)

Cori Bush (MO)

Middle Seat Consulting*

Data for Progress*

Greenlight Media Strategies

Rewired LLC

New Deal Strategies*

Tapan Research

Progressives Consulting

Grassroots Analytics*

Justice Democrats*

The Working Families Party*

Sunrise PAC*

Buying Time, LLC

Aisle 518 Strategies

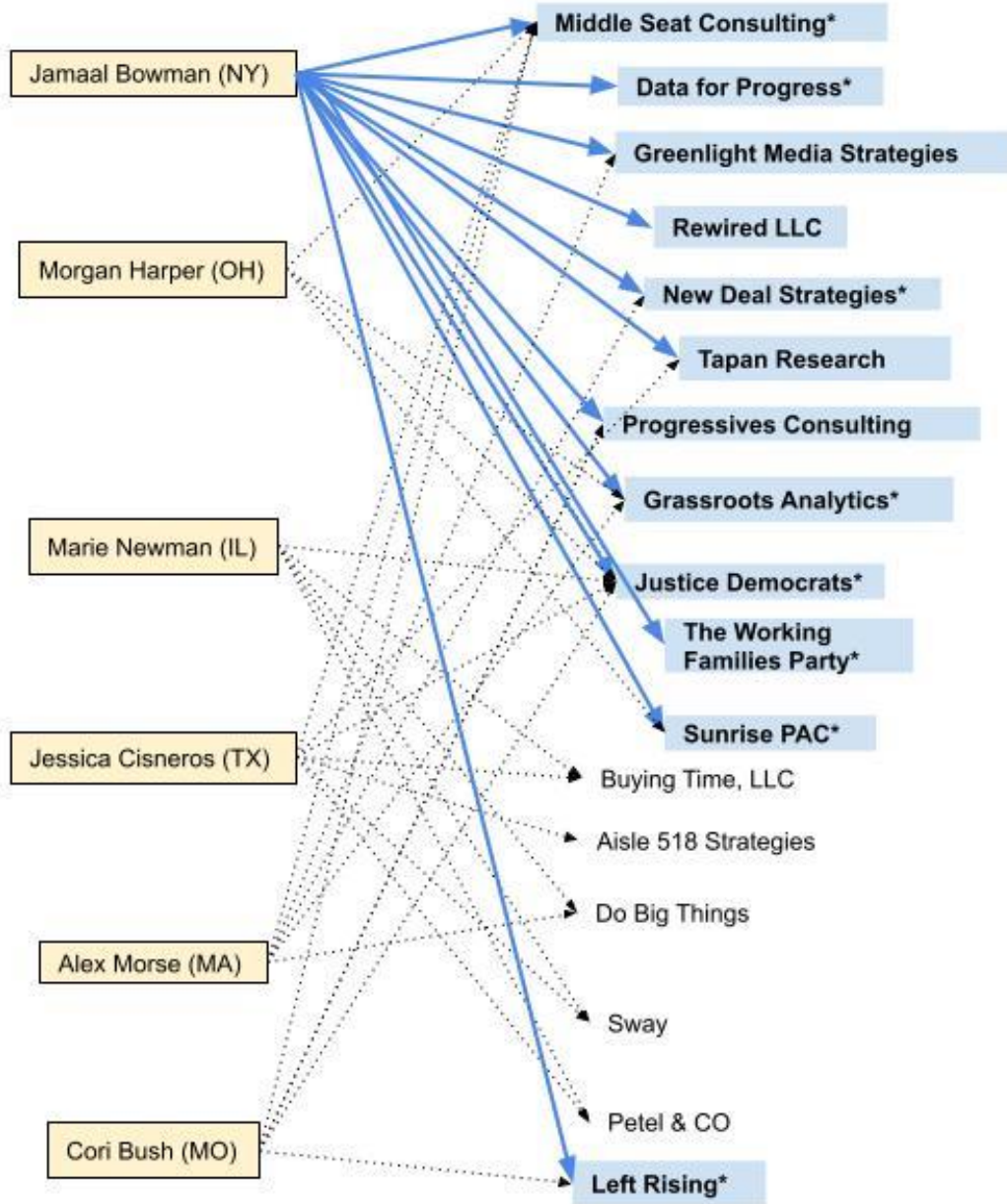Do Big Things

Sway

Petel & CO

Left Rising*

Figure 3: Bowman for Congress 2020 Campaign Expenditures

Bowman's candidacy was boosted by high-profile endorsements from progressive Democrats, many of which came in the final weeks of the campaign. In June, after several missteps from Engel, Bowman was endorsed by progressive favorites, including Senators Warren and Sanders, and Representative Ocasio-Cortez.[160] These endorsements boosted Bowman's online presence and helped him rake in final-hour endorsements from across the country. Studies show that while endorsements are not the single most important aspect of any campaign, they serve as an important reference point for voters and can help separate candidates from a larger pool.[161] In Bowman's case, support from progressives such as Sanders and Warren helped establish Bowman as the true progressive candidate in the race and boosted his platform outward toward supporters across the country.

At the same time, Engel's team announced its own slate of high-profile endorsements. Desperate to protect a long-time member of New York's democratic establishment, politicians such as former presidential nominee Hilary Clinton, Governor Andrew Cuomo, Senator Chuck Schumer, and even House Speaker Nancy Pelosi offered their support to Engel. These endorsements seemed to have the opposite effect that was intended, the endorsements riled up anti-establishment sentiments from Bowman's supporters and the rudimentary graphic design on the announcements instantly became a meme on Twitter.[162] Hayes described that the last-minute Clinton endorsement sparked the second-largest day in donations to Bowman, following the hot-mic incident: "So, thanks!" Hayes remarked, "It gave us another hundred grand to put toward more advertising."[163]

---

[160] Read, "Jamaal Bowman's Campaign Is More Than Exciting."
[161] Dominguez, "Does the Party Matter? Endorsements in Congressional Primaries," 535.
[162] Read, "Jamaal Bowman's Campaign Is More Than Exciting."
[163] Ibid.

Bowman's team also implemented a progressive field program that focused heavily on outreach and voter contact. Unable to rely on long-time supporters and volunteers, Bowman's team needed to establish a volunteer network and voter contact universe from the ground up. Aside from Justice Democrats, he also benefited from the support of the Sunrise Movement, a youth and volunteer-driven organization dedicated to environmental justice and passing the Green New Deal, a policy which Bowman expressed support for. Groups like Justice Democrats, Sunrise, and the Working Families Party provided ample support through over $1 million dollars in independent expenditures on advertising and communications.[164] At the same time, these organizations funneled a mass of local and out-of-state volunteers to make millions of phone calls and texts to voters in the weeks leading up to the election. Bowman utilized organizing tools built by progressives, such as the relational organizing app Reach which was pioneered by Ocasio-Cortez's campaign in 2018. Ultimately, Bowman says his campaign tripled voter turnout, especially among young voters and Black voters which turned out in large numbers in favor of a refreshing new candidate with a message of change and hope.[165]

As the race got tighter, Bowman's team looked to Data for Progress for polling. Data for Progress is a data science firm that performs polling and data analysis for progressive candidates and causes. The firm offers progressives affordable rates for polling—which can become costly in a Congressional race—and offers guidance on messaging and policy. Like many of the other firms utilized by Bowman, Data for Progress was one of the organizations affected by the DCCC Blacklist and is driven by its progressive ideology in its operations. Data for Progress carried out several polls for the campaign, including during the final weeks:

---

[164] "New York District 16 2020 Race," *OpenSecrets.org*, Center for Responsive Politics, 2020.
[165] Julia Ioffe, "This Year's A.O.C., Jamaal Bowman, Says He's Ready to Fight," GQ, August 3, 2020. https://www.gq.com/story/jamaal-bowman-for-congress

In one particularly illustrative moment in the race's final weeks, the Bowman campaign paid $5,000 for a poll from Data for Progress, to get a sense of where they were in the final days. Meanwhile, the Engel campaign had to turn to pre-approved DCCC pollsters for their data, many of which are known to enjoy exorbitant negotiated rates. For polling data in a similar window, the Engel camp spent $45,000, a ninefold markup. And the Engel poll ended up being wrong, giving them false assurances that they weren't decisively behind. The poll the Bowman campaign commissioned had him up by ten points; in the final tally, he won by 15.[166]

Campaign manager Luke Hayes pointed to Engel's misleading and expensive polling as another example of the establishment's weak campaign infrastructure.[167] Engels focus on the traditional ways of campaigning left him behind Bowman's team which chose to emphasize advertising and outreach over expensive establishment polling.

Ultimately, both candidates spent nearly 3 million dollars on the race and Bowman won decisively across the district by 15%.[168] The excitement generated by Bowman's win was indicative of the grassroots energy that fueled his campaign. Bowman's campaign relied on a pool of progressive firms—many of whom had been exiled from the DCCC for supporting challengers—for communications, consulting, polling, and fundraising. With the support of Sunrise Movement and Justice Democrats, the campaign was able to tap into a national base of progressive supporters and volunteers. There were countless factors that led Engel to defeat, including his absence from the district, his repeated gaffes, the backdrop of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter protests; but Bowman did not win solely because Engel was a bad candidate. Jamaal Bowman represented change for the district, and his campaign was built from the ground up, pulling resources from the progressive ecosystem. Following Bowman's victory, Justice Democrats leaders described,

---

[166] Sammon, "How Progressives Built a Campaign Machine."
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.

> Last night's results sent a very clear message: the elections of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib weren't flukes—they were just the beginning. Despite the caution that some Democratic strategists have argued for, now is the time to push big progressive ideas. Democrats don't need to play it safe, triangulate with an increasingly fascist GOP, and push the same donor-approved policies that have led voters to lose faith in our democracy this past decade.[169]

Bowman's campaign dug into the progressive network in a way that gathered the attention of Democrats across the country. Support from the network helped push Bowman over the finish line and ultimately oust Engel after 32 years of service.

Bowman's success exudes the same energy and excitement of Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 win and draws from many of the tools and strategies in her playbook. After 2018 when Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Presley were Justice Democrats' sole candidates to oust incumbents, the group chose to narrow their focus and direct their resources toward a few target races, rather than cast a wide net.[170] Of the six Justice Democrats-sponsored candidates who challenged congressional incumbents in 2020, three were successful: Jamaal Bowman, Marie Newman, and Cori Bush. The other candidates, despite ultimately falling short, used the same strategies and resources as Bowman in their campaigns. Furthermore, even candidates without the Justice Democrats endorsement followed a similar playbook, utilizing progressive firms and a grassroots-oriented field strategy.

---

[169] Alejandra Rojas and Waleed Shahid, "Jamaal Bowman and the Democratic Revolution."
[170] Ibid.

Jessica Cisneros TX-28

Just months before Bowman faced Engel on election day, 26-year-old immigration lawyer Jessica Cisneros was taking the same shot at defeating a 15-year incumbent in the south of Texas. Representative Henry Cuellar has served Texas's 28th congressional district for more than 15 years and is known for being one of the most conservative Democrats in the House of Representatives. Cuellar's anti-choice record and corporate connections made his seat a target for Justice Democrats and other progressive organizations in 2020.[171] In 2019, Justice Democrats recruited Cisneros, a young immigration lawyer and activist to challenge Cuellar. Cisneros was known for being politically active and for being a staunch advocate for immigrants, she was nominated to run by members of her community. Since 2006, Cuellar had not had a serious primary and had never had to answer for many of his votes, "There's a lot he has never had to justify before this," Cisneros described.[172] In a district with a Cook Partisan Voter Index of D+9 where Hillary Clinton won by 20% in 2016, Cuellar has been one of the House's most conservative Democrats, voting alongside President Trump nearly 70% of the time.[173] Cisneros ran against that record in support of universal healthcare, a Green New Deal, and free public college.[174] Ultimately, Cisneros lost to Cuellar in March 2020 by a margin of less than 4% and while she was not successful in ousting Cuellar, her campaign showed that the progressive Democratic playbook could make waves in all parts of the country.

---

[171] Jennifer Medina, "Jessica Cisneros on Challenging an Incumbent Democrat: 'There's a Lot He Has Never Had to Justify,'" *New York Times*, July 3, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/us/politics/jessica-cisneros-2020.html

[172] Ibid.

[173] Elaine Godfrey, "The Search for the Next AOC," *The Atlantic,* October 12, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/10/jessica-cisneros-justice-democrats-aoc/599941/

[174] Ibid.

The Texas 28th district draws a sharp demographic contrast to the urban districts where

Bowman, Newman, and Bush won in 2020 in what issues concerned voters the most. Located on

Texas's southern border, the city of Laredo, where both Cuellar and Cisneros are from, is 78%

Latinx and contains nearly 300 miles of the southern border.[175] Cisneros described that to voters

in TX-28, immigration and healthcare were top priorities. In an interview, she described how

Texas has one of the largest populations of uninsured people who frequently cross the border for

dental care or to receive prescriptions like insulin at affordable rates.[176] On immigration, Cuellar

prefers a law-enforcement centric approach and has notably received contributions from private

immigration detention centers and prisons.[177] While he denounced Trump's anti-immigration

policy, he also advocated for constructing a border wall in parts of the district, something

Cisneros described as "a monument to hate."[178]

Cisneros's rise to national attention and near victory of Cuellar can be attributed in large

part to the support she received from Justice Democrats. After casting a wide net in 2018

endorsing dozens of challenger candidates with little success, Justice Democrats changed their

strategy to focus more money on fewer districts.[179] The organization specifically sought out a

candidate to oppose Cuellar, and in 2019 Jessica Cisneros was their first endorsement of the new

cycle. As a young first-time candidate, organizational consulting from a group like Justice

Democrats is paramount. As a hybrid PAC, the organization is not only well positioned to donate

money and independently spend on her behalf, but its energetic staff brings years of experience

---

[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Emily Cochrane, "Justice Democrats Helped Make Ocasio-Cortez. They're Already Eyeing Their Next Targets." *New York Times*, February 23, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/23/us/politics/justice-democrats-ocasio-cortez.html

working on progressive campaigns such as Sanders's 2016 presidential campaign and Ocasio-

Cortez's 2018 race. After its success promoting the group of Congresswomen known as "The

Squad," Justice Democrats has created a name for itself within the Democratic Party and is able

to signal boost candidates to a broader audience beyond their district. In the first 48 hours

following Cisneros's announcement, she raised more than $100,000.[180] The organization gave

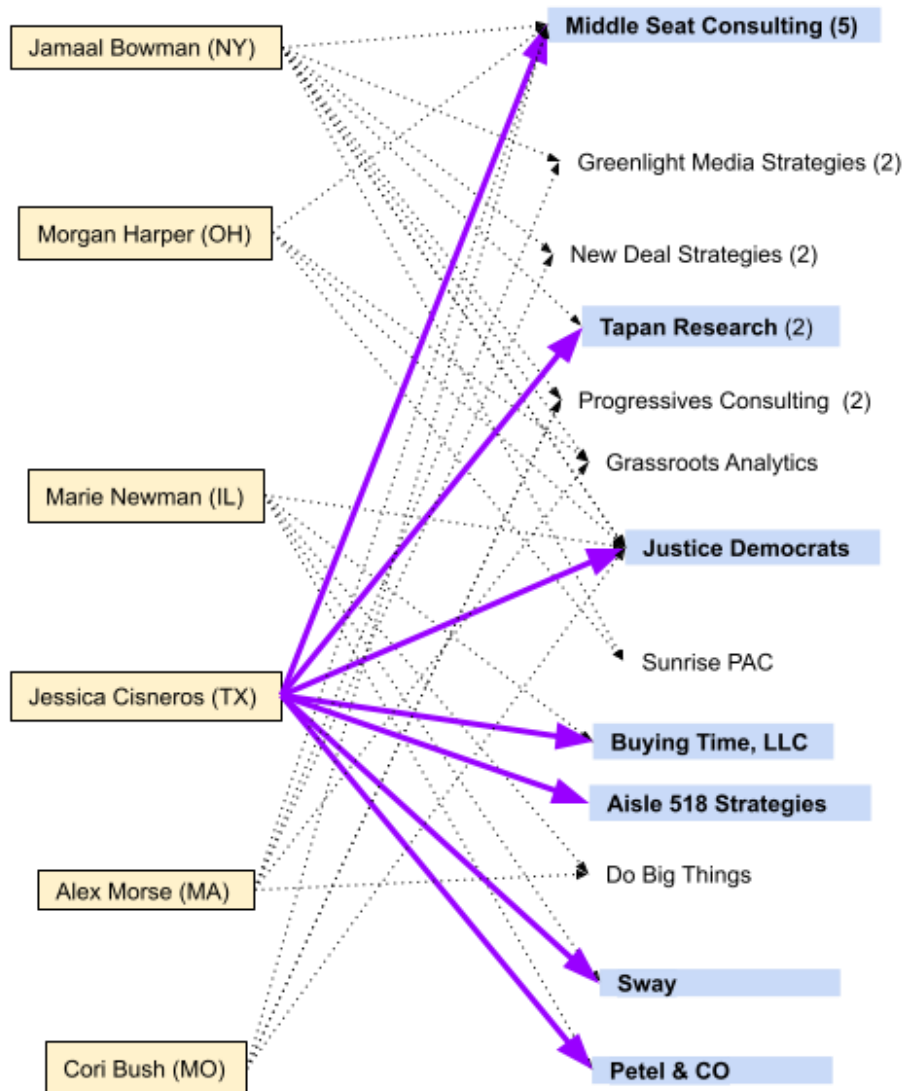her a platform to reach more supporters and donors.

Up against an incumbent with a well-established campaign bank account, Cisneros, like

Bowman and the other Justice Democrats, utilized resources within the progressive party

network. Cisneros relied on the firm Middle Seat Digital for her online advertisement strategy.

For paid media strategy her campaign contracted with Buying Time LLC, the same media

management firm used by Justice Democrat Marie Newman running in Illinois. Aisle 518

Strategies, which played an integral role in Sanders's 2020 presidential campaign, worked with

the Cisneros team on online fundraising and digital strategy. These firms all express in their

mission statement a dedication to supporting progressive candidates. As someone challenging

and incumbent Democrat, Cisneros had to look outside of the traditional Washington firms that

work with the DCCC each cycle. The existence of these firms and their specific commitments to

helping elect progressive candidates allowed Cisneros to circumvent some of the difficulties she

would otherwise face as a challenger. The following graphic shows Jessica Cisneros's campaign

expenditures in comparison to five Justice Democrats candidates running comparable races. The

graphic demonstrates significant overlap among candidates utilizing firms like Middle Seat,

Tappan Research, Buying Time, and Sway which offer consulting to progressive candidates.

---

[180] Medina, "Jessica Cisneros on Challenging an Incumbent Democrat."

Jessica Cisneros for Congress 2020
2020 Campaign Expenditures

Based on FEC records of campaign committee expenditures
over $1000, excludes payroll and other admin expenses

Jamaal Bowman (NY)

Morgan Harper (OH)

Marie Newman (IL)

Jessica Cisneros (TX)

Alex Morse (MA)

Cori Bush (MO)

Middle Seat Consulting (5)

Greenlight Media Strategies (2)

New Deal Strategies (2)

Tapan Research (2)

Progressives Consulting (2)

Grassroots Analytics

Justice Democrats

Sunrise PAC

Buying Time, LLC

Aisle 518 Strategies

Do Big Things

Sway

Petel & CO

Figure 4: Jessica Cisneros for Congress 2020

Cisneros was also well-supported by a number of other PACs within the progressive network. She received early endorsements from the Working Families Party, Sunrise Movement, Ocasio-Cortez's PAC Courage to Change. Cisneros also received endorsements from important labor organizations including Texas AFL-CIO and SEIU, large labor groups which rarely support challenger candidates. Due to her opponent's anti-choice conservative stances on reproductive rights, pro-choice advocacy groups were eager to support Cisneros, winning her vital endorsements from Planned Parenthood, NARAL, and EMILY's List. While PAC and organization endorsements send signals to voters about candidate's policy stances, they also bring in large donations and outside spending. EMILY's List, an organization dedicated to electing pro-choice female candidates offered Cisneros's team on-the-ground organizational support and staff training, additionally contributing to a pro-Cisneros Super PAC, Texas Forward, which spent more than $1.2 million in advertising on behalf of the candidate.[181] These groups contributed to the historic sums of money raised by Cisneros.

Large sums of undisclosed donations or "dark money" flooded the race on Cuellar's behalf from corporate groups such as the American Bankers Association, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and American Workers for Progress.[182] Cuellar's acceptance of corporate funds was a main motivator for Justice Democrats entering the race and his ties to the oil industry in Texas fueled environmental groups to support Cisneros. A report from the Intercept described Cuellar's campaign accepting large donations from conservative donors who feared Cisneros's more liberal politics:

---

[181] Rachel M. Cohen, "In Final Weeks of Heated Texas Congressional Primary, Unions and Progressive Groups Throw $350,000 Behind Jessica Cisneros," *The Intercept*, February 17, 2020. https://theintercept.com/2020/02/17/texas-henry-cuellar-jessica-cisneros-primary/
[182] Ibid.

> The race provided a vivid display of the power of entrenched political interests from across the political aisle. Americans for Prosperity Action, the Super PAC founded and funded by right-wing billionaire Charles Koch, intervened in the race to support Cuellar, the very first time the group has supported a Democrat. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus both worked to raise money for Cuellar over the last month.[183]

Taking a stance against corporate influence in politics is an essential aspect of the progressive campaign strategy that has been reiterated throughout challenger campaigns in recent years. Cisneros pledged not to take corporate PAC money much like Bowman, and used Cuellar's relationship with corporate interests against him at every opportunity.

Despite Cuellar's entrenched support from the party, Cisneros rivaled him in the district by implementing a field strategy of reaching out to first-time voters. In an article in the Texas Signal, Cisneros describes how she sought to connect with new voters and those who had been neglected by Cuellar for so long, including immigrants and first-generation Americans. Chris Chu de Leon described, "She spent time in colonias — low-income border communities that often lack basic public service infrastructure such as potable water, electricity, waste management, and drainage systems — that have long been neglected by Cuellar, such as La Presa. The residents of La Presa, who lack access to water and paved roads, had not seen a congressional candidate in more than 20 years."[184] Cisneros's aim to cater to first time voters and those whose concerns had been ignored by politicians before was not only strategic, but indicative of her commitments to progressive principles of justice, equity, and changing the political power structures in her district and beyond.

---

[183] Ibid.

[184] Chris Chu de Leon, "Jessica Cisneros is not done: How taking on a political machine transformed South Texas," *The Texas Signal*, July 2, 2020. https://texassignal.com/jessica-cisneros-is-not-done-how-taking-on-a-political-machine-transformed-south-texas/

Cisneros's platform gathered a coalition of supporters and volunteers of all ages going

door-to-door, making calls, and sending text messages to voters with the campaign. She gathered

endorsements from volunteer groups as well such as Sunrise and Texas Rising, both youth-led

organizations which galvanized student volunteers across the country.[185] In an interview

following her defeat, Cisneros remarked that the infrastructure of the field campaign and network

of volunteers she built remains a force in South Texas politics: following the election her

organizers and volunteers continued to advocate for COVID-19 mutual aid and work for other

progressive candidates in the state.[186] Ultimately, Cisneros lost 48 to 52, coming close but not

prevailing over her conservative Democrat opponent. Her campaign, the endorsements and

attention garnered, and the community organizing infrastructure it helped build represents an

optimistic future for Democrats in the area hoping to challenge Cuellar again in the future. As

Cisneros stated throughout her campaign, in his decades of service Cuellar had never had to

defend his record in a primary challenge. Cisneros represented that challenge and the tight

margin she achieved is indicative of the strategies and resources utilized by her team. The

Cisneros campaign was ignited by Justice Democrats and powered by a strong platform and a

host of progressive organizations stepping in. While Cisneros did not emerge victorious, her

challenge defied expectations of South Texas politics. It also represented the possibility of

electing Progressive Democrats in all parts of the country. Progressive politics do not need to be

reserved for big cities, when there is sufficient investment from the broader progressive network

as illustrated through Cisneros's campaign, positioning a candidate as an alternative to status quo

and business as usual can be a winning strategy anywhere.

---

[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid.

Dr. Arati Kreibich NJ-05

In New Jersey's 5th congressional district, progressive Dr. Arati Kreibich, a Glen Rock city councilor and neuroscientist, mounted a similar style progressive challenge against incumbent Democrat Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ). Unlike Bowman and Cisneros, Kreibich was not recruited to run or endorsed by Justice Democrats, but her campaign utilized the resources of the extended party network beyond Justice Democrats and ultimately won 34% of the vote, the most out of any New Jersey challenger candidate in recent history.[187] The organization Justice Democrats and its endorsed candidates make up a key node in the larger progressive network, connecting the highest-profile races with a diverse suite of allied resources; however, candidates beyond the Justice Democrats roster have made use of the same pool of resources and strategies as those outlined in this thesis. While Kreibich ultimately lost her bid, her campaign organization and strategy were indicative of the larger influence of progressive Democrats across the country.

Dr. Arati Kreibich launched her campaign against conservative Democrat Gottheimer on a progressive platform which centered healthcare and climate justice. Kreibich, an Indian immigrant, entered the primary for the suburban New Jersey district after becoming disillusioned with Gotthiemer's conservative stances on immigration and his friendliness toward corporations and private equity funds.[188] Unlike other incumbents who have traditionally been targeted for primary challenges from the left, Gottheimer was only elected for the first time in 2016 and represents a predominantly white and wealthy demographic that historically swings between Republican and Democratic representation. Despite these differences, Kreibich ran an

---

[187] Carrie Klein, "In the Jersey Suburbs, Arati Kreibich Challenges the 'Human Fundraising Machine' for a Congressional Seat," *The Indypendent*, July 3, 2020. https://indypendent.org/2020/07/in-the-jersey-suburbs-arati-kreibich-challenges-the-human-fundraising-machine-for-a-congressional-seat/
[188] Ibid.

unabashedly progressive campaign centering her support for a Green New Deal, Medicare for All, and regulation of Wall Street—all policies that Gottheimer is not in support of. In a report for the Huffington Post Zachary Carter described, "Her campaign is a bet not only that progressive values can take down a corporate war chest in a Democratic primary, but that progressive economic ideas will resonate with independents and Republican voters in a general election."[189] Kreibich's opponent and the makeup of her district presented specific challenges for running a successful campaign and while she ultimately did not win, her ability to mobilize people against Gottheimer is a testament to the strategies she employed and the networks she was able to make use of.

Kreibich faced immediate challenges going up against an incumbent like Gottheimer in the expensive New York City media market. Gottheimer has been called "the human fundraising machine" for his ability to amass campaign contributions from corporate donors and the financial industry.[190] As of May 2020, Gottheimer had nearly $8 million in his reelection bank account. A report by Alexander Sammon for The American Prospect stated, "He's received more money from the private equity industry than any other House member this cycle, and is among the top recipients of money from payday lenders."[191] Gottheimer not only accepted contributions from banks, private equity firms, and corporate PACs, he supports policies that deregulate banks and bail out predatory payday lenders.[192] Despite this record, Gottheimer is seen by many as a

[189] Zachary D. Carter, "Conservative Democratic Ringleader Josh Gottheimer Gets A Progressive Challenger," *Huffpost*, July 29, 2019. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/arati-kreibich-josh-gottheimer-progressive-challenge-house-democrat_n_5d3f18e5e4b0d24cde038809
[190] Alexander Sammon, "Arati Kreibich vs. the Human Fundraising Machine," *The American Prospect*, May 26, 2020. https://prospect.org/politics/arati-kreibich-vs-the-human-fundraising-machine/
[191] Ibid.
[192] Akela Lacy, "Josh Gottheimer is a Democrat Who Votes Reliably With Republicans. His Primary Challenge is Heating Up," *The Intercept,* June 18, 2020. https://theintercept.com/2020/06/18/josh-gottheimer-arati-kreibich/

moderate with the ability to appeal to both sides of the aisle in Congress, the kind of candidate that is appealing to the party for their perceived ability to win in swing districts.

To address the disadvantages of being a challenger, the campaign tapped into the existing network of progressive organizations—including those on the DCCC Blacklist. In the fall of 2019, Kreibich described that the DCCC Blacklist's implementation had hampered her hiring process and made acquiring resources more difficult but as blacklisted firms took their exclusion in stride, she was able to find a suite of resources that specifically aimed to work with progressives and challengers.[193] Her campaign made use of many of the same firms as her Justice Democrats counterparts including Greenlight Media, a digital communications firm. Greenlight, which also worked with the challenger campaigns of Jamaal Bowman and Alex Morse assisted the Kreibich team in creating mailers and online advertisements.[194] Kreibich's campaign also contracted with other progressive consultants on the DCCC Blacklist including Left Rising and MVMT Communications. Left Rising, a progressive fundraising consultant that also worked with the Justice Democrats PAC and candidates such as Bush, Bowman, and Jones, helped Kreibich posture herself against her well-financed opponent by leading her financial operations. Like many other progressives and challenger candidates, Arati relied on small-dollar donations from her supporters and took a pledge to reject donations from corporate PACs. A grassroots approach helped her mine alternative resources outside of Gottheimer's sphere and allowed her to live out her commitment to clearing politics of corporate dollars and special interests.[195] As

---

[193] Nikita Biryukov, "Kreibich expects to raise tens of thousands in Q3," *New Jersey Globe,* September 26, 2020.
https://newjerseyglobe.com/congress/kreibich-expects-to-raise-tens-of-thousands-in-q3/
[194] "Dr. Arati Kreibich for U.S. House," *Greenlight Media Strategies*, 2020.
[195] Carter, "Conservative Democratic Ringleader Josh Gottheimer Gets A Progressive Challenger.

the following graphic illustrates, Kreibich's campaign worked with many of the same resources

as other challenger candidates, including many firms blacklisted by the DCCC.

Arati for Congress 2020 Campaign Expenditures

Based on FEC records of campaign committee expenditures over $1000, excludes payroll and other admin expenses
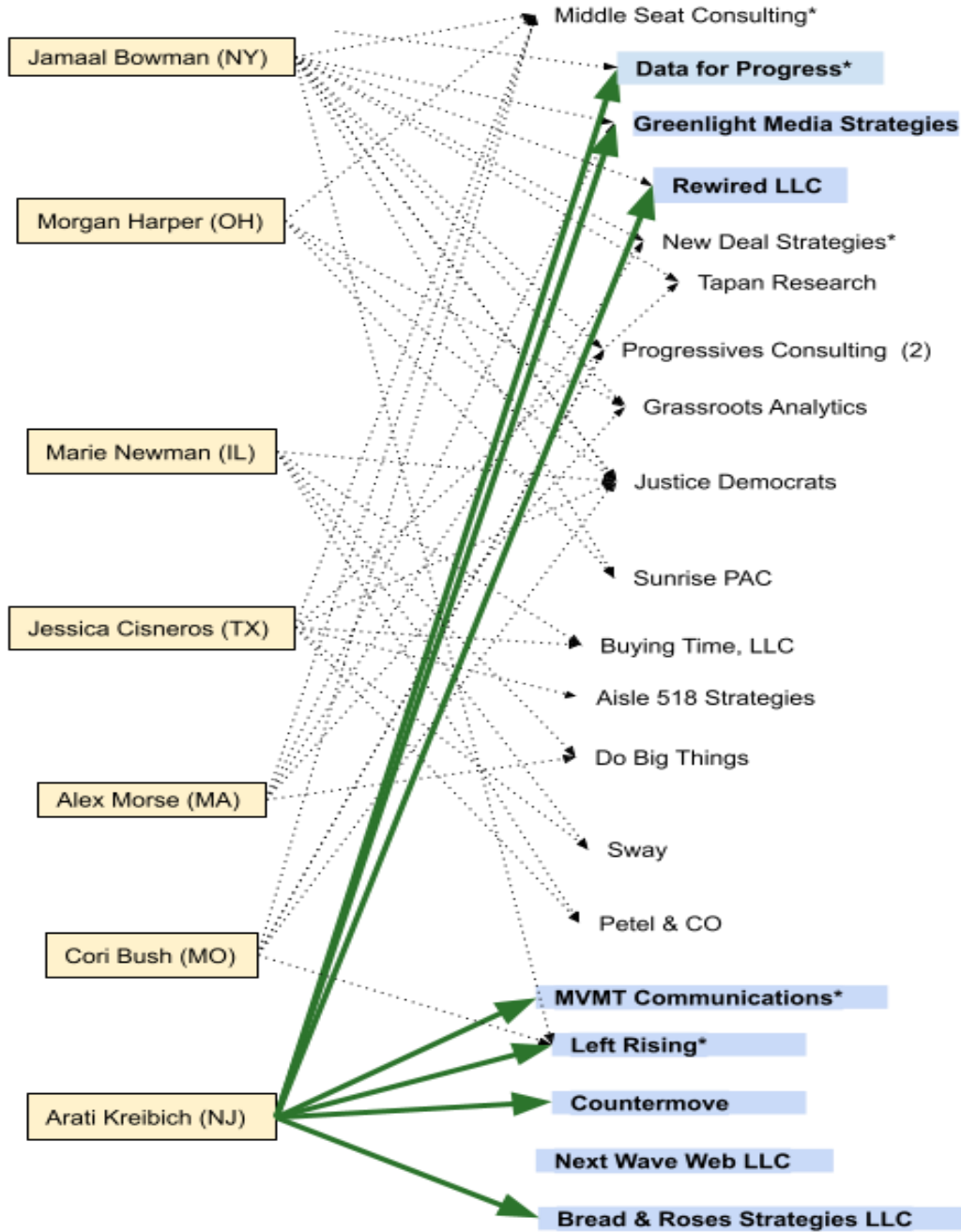
Jamaal Bowman (NY)

Morgan Harper (OH)

Marie Newman (IL)

Jessica Cisneros (TX)

Alex Morse (MA)

Cori Bush (MO)

Arati Kreibich (NJ)

Middle Seat Consulting*
Data for Progress*
Greenlight Media Strategies
Rewired LLC
New Deal Strategies*
Tapan Research
Progressives Consulting (2)
Grassroots Analytics
Justice Democrats
Sunrise PAC
Buying Time, LLC
Aisle 518 Strategies
Do Big Things
Sway
Petel & CO
MVMT Communications*
Left Rising*
Countermove
Next Wave Web LLC
Bread & Roses Strategies LLC

Figure 5: Arati for Congress Campaign Expenditures

While Kreibich was not recruited to run by Justice Democrats like Bowman or Cisneros,

her campaign attracted support and endorsements from the same actors within the progressive

network. Not only was she able to work with firms such as Left Rising, MVMT

Communications, and Data for Progress, Kreibich also earned endorsements from progressive

PACs and candidates. Kreibich received endorsements from organizations such as Indivisible,

Working Families Party, and the Sunrise Movement, which helped broaden her base of

supporters and raise her level of name recognition across the country. Indivisible, a progressive

organization with thousands of grassroots volunteers and supporters, spent over $111,000 in

independent expenditures for Kreibich running digital ads and a direct mail campaign

highlighting Gottheimer's record and his conservative voting record.[196] Lucy Solomon,

Indivisible's political director, described how the shifting dynamics of the district and renewed

Democratic energy following Trump's presidency represented hope for Kreibich's campaign.[197]

She described that Invisible's efforts were centered around bringing in new voters, who had not

felt compelled to get involved in a primary race before now,

> A lot of the work that we've been doing on the (independent expenditure) side in this race
> has been speaking to voters who may not have ever felt a reason to vote in a Democratic
> primary before," Solomon said. "But now that there's a candidate who isn't just aware of,
> but is on the right side of these issues, we're hoping that that can encourage some of these
> voters to turn out.[198]

---

[196] Gregory Kreig, "New Jersey Democrat faces primary challenge from a former volunteer," CNN Politics, July 6, 2020. https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/06/politics/new-jersey-5-primary-josh-gottheimer-arati-kreibich/index.html
[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid.

This strategy evokes a similar theme to other progressive candidates, including Cisneros, of reaching out to voters who do not typically vote or feel engaged in politics as a means for broadening the Democratic base and winning votes. Kreibich's support for trademark progressive issues also earned her endorsements from progressive incumbents, including Ayanna Pressley and Bernie Sanders.[199]

Kreibich's campaign mirrored the grassroots energy harnessed by Bowman and other Justice Democrats candidates by mobilizing progressive supporters and energizing young voters and students. While the pandemic shifted her field strategy away from in-person canvassing, her network of volunteers quickly shifted to phone banking and text message outreach to primary voters. Despite coming up against a well-resourced incumbent, Kreibich remarked that her campaign team was "a testament to how much the people in our communities are hungry for this change and know it's way past time to overturn this system and hold our elected leaders accountable. It's really bigger than just this campaign."[200] Her team also used field technology such as the Spoke peer-to-peer texting platform and received GOTV support from Counterpoint LLC, which describes itself as "full stack campaign expertise without the baggage or price tag of a big box firm." Like Cisneros and Bowman, Kreibich also tapped into the power of students and youth organizing. Her campaign had over 100 youth fellows, who made hundreds of thousands of calls and texts and helped boost Kreibich's name recognition on social media.[201] One fellow

[199] Carter, "Conservative Democratic Ringleader Josh Gottheimer Gets A Progressive Challenger."
[200] Klein, "In the Jersey Suburbs, Arati Kreibich Challenges the 'Human Fundraising Machine."
[201] Lacy, "Josh Gottheimer is a Democrat Who Votes Reliably With Republicans."

for the campaign, 15-year-old Daniel Wilk, explained how Arati's fellowship program made it possible for him to get involved in local politics, something he had long been wanting to do. He described how the campaign leadership made room for young people not only as a tool for voter outreach but as key voices and messengers, "The campaign leaders gave us kids opportunities to talk about issues that concern us. Several of us had opinion pieces about Arati's policy published in local papers, and we discussed what concerns youth in our letter writing campaign."[202] Kreibich's campaign, similar to Senator Ed Markey's 2020 campaign, harnessed the energy of young people as well as their expertise with social media to reach voters.

Although Kreibich did not win her campaign, the strategy she employed illustrates the spread of progressive campaigning through the United States. Unlike the Congressional districts of Cisneros and Bowman, New Jersey's fifth was largely suburban and predominantly white. It was only recently in 2016 that the district had been flipped blue. "We lost by a pretty big margin - there's no getting around that," wrote Wilk, "But I still think there's hope." He pointed to the recent victories of Bowman and Jones, both of whom ran progressive campaigns in New York suburbs. "NJ5 is decidedly less liberal, but if we can go from a tea party Republican to a progressive primary challenge with national attention in less than a decade, I'm pretty optimistic about what the future holds."[203] Like her young fellow, Kreibich is hopeful that her campaign was only the beginning of a long-lasting progressive movement in New Jersey.

It is important to recognize that Kreibich lost by a significant margin to Gottheimer, who went on to be re-elected in November 2020. In the context of her district, however, the Kreibich campaign represents a leap forward. The progressive network is far reaching and has the ability

---

[202]Daniel Wilk (Fellow at Arati for Congress) in discussion with the author, April 16, 2021.
[203] Ibid.

to connect candidates of all backgrounds in all kinds of races with proper resources necessary to be competitive against an incumbent member. While Bowman, Cisneros, and Kreibich come from vastly different districts and backgrounds, their shared ideologies brought forth not only similar campaign resources like consultants and PACs, but they also pulled from the same playbook of strategies to transform their districts politically.

Conclusion

After decades of being blocked from participation in the Democratic Party extended network, Progressive Democrats have built their own network of distinctly progressive campaign resources and strategies that benefit candidates primarying incumbent Democrats from the left. The rise of this network is characterized by a dense and growing web of connections between progressive organizations, businesses, and campaigns and mimics the extended party network structure of the modern Democratic Party. Progressive Democratic candidates, motivated by a shared ideology and dissatisfaction with the status quo, are reshaping the nature of Democratic primary politics by targeting moderate and conservative incumbents as an entry point for a new crop of young and diverse progressive hopefuls. While a majority of progressive primary challenges to incumbents in 2020 were not ultimately fruitful, the number of candidates running on progressive platforms that defy the status quo positions of the Democratic Party Establishment are staggering. Furthermore, the similarities drawn between progressive campaigns across the country insofar as the resources used and strategies employed represents a distinctly progressive model of campaigning that is gaining momentum.

The model of campaigning discussed in this thesis, while not uniform across all progressive primary races, represents a turn from the traditional ways Democratic elites have run elections during the past several decades. Challenger campaigns offer an alternative to traditional means of campaigning not only in the messages progressives are running on, which are markedly leftward of most establishment candidates, but in the very operations of the campaigns. Methods like small-dollar fundraising, social media, and digital and field organizing operations break down barriers by allowing candidates to spend less money and target and connect with new voters. The progressive extended network offers these resources, often at a more affordable rate,

to candidates who would otherwise have difficulty gaining access to establishment consultants or endorsements from the extended party network. This cooperation is essential to the rise of the national progressive movement. Insurgent candidates are no longer singular entities challenging an entire political system alone, they now have a broad network backing them up.

As progressives have redefined what it means to be "electable," they have also pushed the needle on a number of key policy issue. Progressive policy proposals such as Medicare for All, Universal Basic Income, and the Green New Deal become increasingly popular, and stances have shifted drastically among elected officials and the public alike. The impact of these progressives was seen in the 2018 elections with 44.7% of all Democratic congressional candidates explicitly supporting Medicare-for-All or single-payer health care: this included 70.6% of progressive candidates and 32.2% of establishment candidates (as labeled by the Brookings Institution).[204] Additionally, a series of polls in 2020 show that a majority of registered voters approve a Medicare-for-All policy, at record levels since the policy was first introduced.[205] This policy shift was led by progressive Democrats. Candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Cori Bush, and Ed Markey, and organizations like the Sunrise Movement have also popularized climate policies like the Green New Deal, making support for the program a litmus-test for climate-minded voters. Progressive candidates have succeeded in marketing these policies to voters by packaging them not as radical departures from the status quo but as necessary and achievable solutions to urgent issues. In doing so, progressive candidates have

---

[204] Elaine R. Kamarck, Alexander W. Podkul, and Nicholas Zeppos, "Progressives versus the Establishment: What's the Score, and Does It Matter?" Brookings. The Brookings Institution, September 12, 2018. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/07/12/progressives-versus-the-establishment-whats-the-score-and-does-it-matter/

[205] Yursa Muarad, "As Coronavirus Surges, 'Medicare for All' Support Hits 9-Month High," Morning Consult. April 1, 2020. https://morningconsult.com/2020/04/01/medicare-for-all-coronavirus-pandemic/

built an increasing base of energetic and vocal supporters, proving that policies seen as fringe ideas can in fact be popular and "electable" policies.

In the past several years, divisions within the Democratic Party have been under a microscope as "Dems in Disarray" became a national headline. Despite the vast distance between the policy preferences of Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and her fellow Democrat Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV), both members are part of the same party and share many of the same goals. These representatives may have drastically different philosophies of change, but ultimately because of the nature of the American two-party system, working as part of a coalition is necessary in order to enact any meaningful policy change. Certainly, there are actors in all factions of the party that are unlikely to concede to the other, but to argue that progressive primaries are dangerous to the party is a mischaracterization and oversimplification of the issue. Ultimately, the Democratic Party has an obligation to its voters to represent their interests in government and the strategy of primary interference and propping up incumbents at all costs does not serve that obligation nor does it reflect the democratic principles that instituted primaries as vital processes in the first place. While progressive candidates may be assumed to be unelectable or unviable in certain states and districts, the party is not responsible for deciding who should represent voters—voters are. Notions of electability have been wrong before and there is little evidence to suggest that candidates like Amy McGrath and Cal Cunningham who do fit the party's mold are any more likely to win than progressive candidates like Charles Booker and Erica Smith. Lower barriers to entry and more open elections allow primaries to be opportunities to hold incumbents accountable, gauge policy preferences of voters, and increase ideological diversity within the "Big Tent" party.

Progressives need the establishment's political capital in order to enact their bold policy agenda, and likewise the establishment needs progressives to expand the party's base and move Democrats toward a 21ˢᵗ century model of running campaigns. Progressives represent a portion of the party that is attempting to bring in new faces—people and communities who have long felt excluded by the policy making process in Washington. Progressive candidates made specific appeals communities who are often overlooked by Democratic politics and it paid off at the polls. Bowman channeled energy from young people and Black communities in Westchester and the Bronx and ultimately tripled voter turnout during his primary. Jessica Cisneros made a point to spend time speaking with voters in low-income immigrant communities in Texas that had never been visited by a candidate before. Similarly, Arati Kreibich and Ed Markey gave young organizers a prominent voice in their primary campaigns, allowing them to drive social media content and run field operations—energy from students and campaign fellows amplified progressive policies that young people care about, like racial justice and climate change, and galvanized the youth vote. In his victory speech on September 1, Markey credited young people for pioneering the progressive movement, "This is a tribute to young people and their vision. They will save us if we trust them. We must look to them, listen to them, follow these young people."[206] By running on the essential message that it is "time for change" progressive campaigns have rallied together communities of volunteers and supporters willing to go to put in the work to elect them.

Following underperformance from Democrats in the 2020 general election, some Democrats were quick to blame progressives and the right-wing media narrative that has painted

---

[206] Ed Markey, "Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) victory speech," C-SPAN, September 4, 2020, video
https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4904728/user-clip-senator-ed-markey-victory-speech

all Democrats as socialists who want to abolish police forces.[207] While the so-called "socialist narrative" certainly is not helpful to candidates trying to win over swing voters, displacing blame from their losses onto progressives reflects their own failure to respond coherently to unfair projections from Republicans. Controversial topics for moderate Democrats like Green New Deal and support for Black Lives Matter reflect real issues that Americans are facing, and by failing to respond to them in a serious capacity. Chairwoman of the Congressional Progressive Caucus Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) stated in response that "We turned out huge numbers of young people, brown and Black people. Don't be so quick to blame the members who have been responsible for energizing these groups, who will ultimately save the day in the race for the White House."[208] While there is certainly a failure in Democratic messaging, I do not believe it is at the hands of progressives. Progressives have made clear what they stand for— taking immediate bold action on climate change, reforming the broken criminal justice system, holding corporations and billionaires accountable for paying their fair share of taxes, and providing real economic relief to Americans facing crippled by student debt and poverty. In general, the Democratic Party at large did not have that sort of laundry list of policies in their messaging, nor did they have clear solutions to offer to the folks hurting most from the dual crises of COVID-19 and racial violence. Alexandra Rojas of Justice Democrats described, "We need a Democratic Party that stands for something more than just being anti-Trump."[209] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez reiterates; "So I need my colleagues to understand that we are not the

---

[207] Rachael Bade and Erica Werner, "Centrist House Democrats lash out at liberal colleagues, blame far-left views for costing the party seats," The Washington Post, November 5, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/house-democrats-pelosi-election/2020/11/05/1ddae5ca-1f6e-11eb-90dd-abd0f7086a91_story

[208] Luke Broadwater and Nicholas Fandos, "Amid Tears and Anger, House Democrats Promise 'Deep Dive' on Election Losses," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/us/house-democrats-election-losses.html

[209] Bade and Werner, "Centrist House Democrats lash out at liberal colleagues."

enemy. And that their base is not the enemy. That the Movement for Black Lives is not the enemy, that Medicare for all is not the enemy."[210] She suggested that the party establishment could stand to learn from progressives in the ways that they run their campaigns and prioritize social media and digital advertisement, something she has offered to the party leadership several times since her 2018 election.

The Democratic Party is a broad coalition, a "big tent" even, and I am not so naïve to believe its members will ever agree on everything, but the progressive movement has an undeniable energy that is effective, and the party needs to lean into that if it wants to maintain its majority. The goal of progressive candidates is not to burn down the Democratic Party but to expand it. Exiled from the Democratic EPN, Progressives were forced to build their own, that is proving to be successful. Their campaign practices are challenging the gatekeeping within the Democratic Party Establishment and democratizing the campaign space, inspiring people from diverse backgrounds to run for office at every level. 2020 was a historic year for women and people of color running for office. Running a successful campaign should not be exclusive to people who are independently wealthy and broad perspectives from candidates with diverse backgrounds and identities is crucial to the democratic process. Democrats cannot keep operating in fear of getting primaried from the left. Rather than shutting out candidates and their supporters for daring to challenge incumbents, Democratic leadership should embrace them and adapt their strategies in response. Primaries ought to be embraced for what they are: an opportunity for referendum on incumbent performance and a chance for voters to decide for themselves who should represent them in the halls of power.

---

[210] Herndon, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Biden's Win, House Loses, and What's Next for the Left."

Works Cited

Arkin, James. "Endorsements roll in for Charles Booker in Kentucky." *Politico*. June 17, 2020.
https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/17/charles-booker-endorsements-kentucky-326536

Bade, Rachael and Erica Werner. "Centrist House Democrats lash out at liberal colleagues,
blame far-left views for costing the party seats." The Washington Post. November 5,
2020.https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/house-democrats-pelosi-election/2020/11/05/1ddae5ca-1f6e-11eb-90dd-abd0f7086a91_story

Bergan, Daniel. "Clicking for Cash: Campaigns, Donors, and the Emergence of Online Fund-
Raising." In *Politicking Online: The Transformation of Election Campaign
Communications*, edited by Panagopoulus Costas, 127-40. New Brunswick: Rutgers
University Press, 2009. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj455.10.

Biryukov, Nikita. "Kreibich expects to raise tens of thousands in Q3." *New Jersey Globe.*
September 26, 2020. https://newjerseyglobe.com/congress/kreibich-expects-to-raise-tens-of-thousands-in-q3/

Bonica, Adam. "Mapping the Ideological Marketplace." *American Journal of Political Science*
58, no. 2 (2014): 367-86. www.jstor.org/stable/24363491.

Boatright, Robert. "Interest Groups and Congressional Primaries" in *Getting Primaried: The
Changing Politics of Congressional Primary Challenges*. Ann Arbor: University of
Michigan Press, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Broadwater, Luke and Nicholas Fandos. "Amid Tears and Anger, House Democrats Promise
'Deep Dive' on Election Losses." *The New York Times*. November 5, 2020.
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/us/house-democrats-election-losses.html

Carter, Zachary D. "Conservative Democratic Ringleader Josh Gottheimer Gets A Progressive
Challenger." *Huffpost*. July 29, 2019. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/arati-kreibich-josh-gottheimer-progressive-challenge-house-democrat_n_5d3f18e5e4b0d24cde038809

Cochrane, Emily. "Justice Democrats Helped Make Ocasio-Cortez. They're Already Eyeing
Their Next Targets." New York Times. February 23, 2019.
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/23/us/politics/justice-democrats-ocasio-cortez.htm

Cohen, Marty, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. *The Party Decides: Presidential
Nominations Before and After Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Cohen, Rachel. "In Final Weeks of Heated Texas Congressional Primary, Unions and Progressive Groups Throw $350,000 Behind Jessica Cisneros." The Intercept. February 17, 2020. https://theintercept.com/2020/02/17/texas-henry-cuellar-jessica-cisneros-primary/

Corrado, Anthony and Thomas E. Mann. "Party Polarization and Campaign Finance." Center for Effective Public Management. Brookings Institution. July 2014. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Mann-and-Corrad_Party-Polarization-and-Campaign-Finance.pdf

Cortez Masto, Catherine. "DSCC Endorses Cal Cunningham in North Carolina Senate Race." Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. October 31, 2019. https://www.dscc.org/news/dscc-endorses-cal-cunningham-in-north-carolina-senate-race/

Chu de Leon, Chris. "Jessica Cisneros is not done: How taking on a political machine transformed South Texas." *The Texas Signal*. July 2, 2020. https://texassignal.com/jessica-cisneros-is-not-done-how-taking-on-a-political-machine-transformed-south-texas/

Clark, Rory, Joe Thibodeau, Emma Friend, Joe Kent. "Don't Agonize, Organize: The Ed Markey Organizing Model." *Medium*. September 20, 2020. https://medium.com/@emma.h.friend/dont-agonize-organize-the-ed-markey-organizing-

DeCosta-Klipa, Nik. "How did Ayanna Pressley pull off a double-digit drubbing of Michael Capuano in the 7th District?" *Boston.com*. September 5, 2018. https://www.boston.com/news/politics/2018/09/05/ayanna-pressley-massachusetts-win

Desmarais, Bruce A., Raymond J. La Raja, and Michael S. Kowal. "The Fates of Challengers in U.S. House Elections: The Role of Extended Party Networks in Supporting Candidates and Shaping Electoral Outcomes." American Journal of Political Science 59, no. 1 (2015): 194-211. Accessed May 7, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24363604.

Dominguez, Casey B. K. "Does the Party Matter? Endorsements in Congressional Primaries." *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2011): 534-44. www.jstor.org/stable/23056373.

Dominguez, Casey Byrne Knudsen. "Before the Primary: Party Participation in Congressional Nominating Processes." (doctoral dissertation, University of California-Berkeley, 2005).

"Fox News Poll - North Carolina, Nov. 10-13, 2019." *Fox News*. November 14, 2019. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-north-carolina-nov-10-13-2019

Fischer, Brendan. "No PAC Money Pledges Are in, But That Doesn't Mean Big Money is Out: Understanding the No PAC Pledges." Campaign Legal Center. June 20, 2019. https://campaignlegal.org/update/no-pac-money-pledges-are-doesnt-mean-big-money-out-understanding-no-pac-pledges

Godfrey, Elaine. "The Search for the Next AOC." The Atlantic. October 12, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/10/jessica-cisneros-justice-democrats-aoc/599941/

Gulati, Girish J., and Christine B. Williams. "Congressional Campaigns' Motivations for Social Media Adoption." In *Controlling the Message: New Media in American Political Campaigns*, edited by Victoria A. Farrar-Myers and Justin S. Vaughn, 32-52. NYU Press, 2015. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15r3xsj.6.

Greenwood, Max. "Small-dollar donors reshape Democratic race." *The Hill*. October 8, 2019. https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/464903-small-dollar-donors-reshape-democratic-   race?rl=1

Grullón Paz, Isabella. "Charles Booker Says Progressives Should 'Show Up and Listen' to Deep Red Districts." *The New York Times.* July 8, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/politics/charles-booker-kentucky.html

Hayes, Chris, "So You Want to Run for Office with Luke Hayes," July 14, 2020, in Why Is This Happening? Produced by MSNBC, podcast, MP3 audio.

Herndon, Astead W. "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez on Biden's Win, House Loses, and What's Next for the Left." *The New York Times.* November 7, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/07/us/politics/aoc-biden-progressives.html

Ioffe, Julia."This Year's A.O.C., Jamaal Bowman, Says He's Ready to Fight." GQ. August 3, 2020. https://www.gq.com/story/jamaal-bowman-for-congress

Jilani, Zaid. "How a Ragtag Group of Socialist Filmmakers Produced One of the Most Viral Campaign Ads of 2018." *The Intercept.* First Look Media. June 5, 2018. https://theintercept.com/2018/06/05/ocasio-cortez-new-york-14th-district-democratic-primary-campaign-video/

Kamarck, Elaine R., Alexander W. Podkul, and Nicholas Zeppos. "Progressives versus the Establishment: What's the Score, and Does It Matter?" Brookings. The Brookings Institution, September 12, 2018. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2018/07/12/progressives-versus-the-establishmen t-whats-the-score-and-does-it-matter/.

Klein, Carrie. "In the Jersey Suburbs, Arati Kreibich Challenges the 'Human Fundraising Machine' for a Congressional Seat." The Indypendent. July 3, 2020. https://indypendent.org/2020/07/in-the-jersey-suburbs-arati-kreibich-challenges-the-human-fundraising-machine-for-a-congressional-seat/

Klein, Monica. "The DCCC Is Trying to Put Me Out of Business — and I'm a Democrat." *The Intercept*. March 25, 2019. https://theintercept.com/2019/03/25/dccc-blacklist-democratic-party/

Koerth, Maggie. "You'll Never Know Which Candidate is Electable." *Five Thirty Eight*. February 7, 2020. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/youll-never-know-which-candidate-is-electable/

Koger, Gregory, Seth Masket, and Hans Noel. "Partisan Webs: Information Exchange and Party Networks." *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 3 (2009): 633–53.

Kousser, Thad, Scott Lucas, Seth Masket, and Eric McGhee. "Kingmakers or Cheerleaders? Party Power and the Causal Effects of Endorsements." *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2015): 443–56. www.jstor.org/stable/24637786.

Kreig, Gregory. "New Jersey Democrat faces primary challenge from a former volunteer." CNN Politics. July 6, 2020. https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/06/politics/new-jersey-5-primary-josh-gottheimer-arati-kreibich/index.html

La Raja, Raymond J., and Jonathan Rauch. "Voters Need Help: How Party Insiders Can Make Presidential Primaries Safer, Fairer, and More Democratic." Brookings Institution. January 30, 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/research/voters-need-help-how-party-insiders-can-make-presidential-primaries-safer-fairer-and-more-democratic/.

Lacy, Akela. "House Democratic Leadership Warns It Will Cut Off Any Firms That Challenge Incumbents." The Intercept. March 22, 2019. https://theintercept.com/2019/03/22/house-democratic-leadership-warns-it-will-cut-off-any-firms-who-challenge-incumbents/

Lacy, Akela and Aída Chavés. "Senate Democrats' Campaign Arm is Pressuring Consultants not to Work with Leading Progressive Candidate in Colorado." *The Intercept.* August 29, 2019.https://theintercept.com/2019/08/29/dscc-colorado-senate-democrats/

Lacy, Akela. "Josh Gottheimer is a Democrat Who Votes Reliably With Republicans. His Primary Challenge is Heating Up." *The Intercept.* June 18, 2020. https://theintercept.com/2020/06/18/josh-gottheimer-arati-kreibich/

Lerer, Lisa. "ActBlue, the Democrats' Not-So-Secret Weapon." *New York Times.* November 16, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/16/us/politics/on-politics-actblue- democrats.html

Lee, MJ. "Elizabeth Warren's new promise: No fundraisers, phone calls with wealthy donors." *CNN Politics*. February 25, 2019. https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/25/politics/warren-fundraiser-promise/index.html

Luo, Michael. "Small Online Contributions Add Up to Huge Fund-Raising Edge for Obama." *New York Times.* February 20, 2008. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/20/us/politics/20obama.html

Maneto, Corey. "Party Crashers: Interest Groups as a Latent Threat to Party Networks in Congressional Primaries." Party Politics 27, no. 1 (January 2021).

Ed Markey. "Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) victory speech." C-SPAN. September 4, 2020. Video https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4904728/user-clip-senator-ed-markey-victory-speech

Martin, Jonathan. "In Kentucky, Racial Justice Movement Transforms Quest to Oust McConnell," June 20, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/20/us/politics/amy-mcgrath-charles-booker-kentucky-senate.html

McGuire, Ben. "Scaling the Field Program in Modern Political Campaigns: Investigating Determinants of Capacity in Mobilizing and Organizing." *Harvard Kennedy School of Government*. April 2, 2019. https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/degree%20programs/MPP/files/Scaling%20the%20Field%20Organization%20in%20Modern%20Political%20Campaigns_Final.pdf

McKinley, Jesse. "Jamaal Bowman Proves Ocasio-Cortez Was No Fluke." *The New York Times*. July 17, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/nyregion/jamaal-bowman-eliot-engel.html

McKinley, Jesse. "Top Democrats Are Trying to Stop This Man From Becoming the Next A.O.C.." *The New York Times,* June 17, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/nyregion/eliot-engel-jamaal-bowman-primary.html

Medina, Jennifer. "Jessica Cisneros on Challenging an Incumbent Democrat: 'There's a Lot He Has Never Had to Justify.'" *New York Times*, July 3, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/us/politics/jessica-cisneros-2020.html

Moore, Elena. "Amy McGrath Is Projected To Edge Out Charles Booker In Ky. Senate Democratic Primary." NPR. June 30, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/06/30/882544188/amy-mcgrath-is-projected-to-edge-charles-booker-in-kentucky-senate-democratic-pr

Muller, Jordan. "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez boosted by out-of-state donors after primary win." *OpenSecrets.org*. The Center for Responsible Politics. July 24, 2018. https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2018/07/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-boosted-by-out-of-state-donors-after-primary-win/

Muarad, Yursa. "As Coronavirus Surges, 'Medicare for All' Support Hits 9-Month High." Morning Consult. April 1, 2020. https://morningconsult.com/2020/04/01/medicare-for-all-coronavirus-pandemic/

Pathe, Simone. "Illinois Democrat becomes first house incumbent to lose primary in 2020." *CNN Politics*. March 18, 2020. https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/17/politics/illinois-primary-congress-primary-lipinski/index.html

Pressley, Ayanna. "The 1 Bus - Ayanna Pressley for Congress." Ayanna Pressley. August 7, 2018. Video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgF79Shc_YI

"Politicians and Elections." *OpenSecrets.org*. Center for Responsive Politics. 2020.

Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. Twitter post. June 29, 2018. 5:29PM. https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1012810382220591106?s=20

Read, Bridget. "Jamaal Bowman's Campaign Is More Than Exciting." *The Cut.* June 23, 2020. https://www.thecut.com/2020/06/jamaal-bowman-eliot-engel-new-york-significant.html

Rojas, Alejandra and Waleed Shahid. "Jamaal Bowman and the Democratic Revolution." *Crooked Media.* June 24, 2020. https://crooked.com/articles/jamaal-bowman-squad/

Sammon, Alexander. "Arati Kreibich vs. the Human Fundraising Machine." The American Prospect. May 26, 2020. https://prospect.org/politics/arati-kreibich-vs-the-human-fundraising-machine/

Sammon, Alexander. "How Progressives Built a Campaign Machine … Thanks to the DCCC." The American Prospect, September 15, 2020. https://prospect.org/politics/how-progressives-built-a-campaign-machine-thanks-to-the-dccc/

Sammon, Alexander. "What Went Wrong in North Carolina." The American Prospect. November 30, 2020. https://prospect.org/politics/what-went-wrong-in-north-carolina-interview-erica-smith/

Smith, Aidan. "What is a 'Progressive' Anyway." *Labyrinth Magazine*.January 1, 2021. https://www.labyrinthmag.org/post/what-s-a-progressive-anyway

Smith, Erica. "Senator Erica Smith's response to Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee Endorsement," Erica for US, October 31, 2019. https://ericaforus.com/senator-erica-smiths-response-to-democratic-senatorial-Campaign-committee-endorsement

Steinhauer, Jennifer. "Insurgent Democrats, Many of Them Women, Worry a New Party Policy
Will Block Them," *The New York Times*, June 2, 2021.
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/us/politics/dccc-blacklist-incumbent-policy.html

Stuart, Tessa. "Can Justice Democrats Pull Off a Progressive Coup in Congress?" *Rolling Stone*.
November 21, 2018. https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/who-are-
justice-democrats-758447/

Winning the Green New Deal: Why We Must, How We Can. Edited by Varshini Parkash and
Guido Girgenti. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020

Werner, Peter. "The Democratic Party Is Radicalizing." The Atlantic. April 3, 2019.
https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/progressivism-making-
democrats/586372/

Yglesias, Matthew. "Public support for left-wing policymaking has reached a 60-year high."
Vox.com. June 7, 2019.
https://www.vox.com/2019/6/7/18656441/policy-mood-liberal-stimson

Yuan, Jada. "How a middle school principal used the Ocasio-Cortez playbook against a 16-term
incumbent." *The Washington Post*. July 16, 2020.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/how-a-middle-school-principal-used-the-
ocasio-cortez-playbook-against-a-16-term-incumbent/2020/07/15/ea7e9eb8-c2f4-11ea-
b178-bb7b05b94af1_story.html