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# Toward a Progressive Democratic Party: The Limitations to Expanding the Progressive Left in 2020

By Moritz Wichmann

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# Toward A Progressive Democratic Party:

## The Limitations to Expanding the Progressive Left in 2020

By Moritz Wichmann

Bernie Sanders did not win the primary, but the progressive revolt within the Democratic Party continues. Much has been written about the reasons Sanders lost his second bid to become the Democratic Presidential nominee, but the fact that the Vermont Senator lost does not tell us as much about the power, positioning, and the potential of the party's left flank as one might think. A look at congressional primaries for the US House of Representatives and the US Senate shows that the party is shifting to the left, even as progressives meet new obstacles, both self-imposed and structural.

### US House of Representatives – a movement to the left, where possible

From 2016 to 2018, the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), had 78 members, or 40% of the Democratic Caucus. Seventy CPC incumbents ran again in the 2018 Midterm election alongside 58 new progressive Democrats who ran for office in districts not previously represented by a CPC-member. These 58 candidates were supported by the campaign arm of the CPC or another progressive organization like Justice Democrats or Our Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Some of these new candidates ran in Republican districts with slim chances of victory. However, their candidacies were part of the party's "re-construction in parts of the country where Democrats had retreated because political consultants who told the party not to invest in unwinnable districts. For instance, the rural populist Kansan who was supported by Bernie Sanders, James Thompson lost in the general election, but improved his party's vote share by 16%. The left-populist veteran Richard Ojeda could not surpass the structural hurdles in the very conservative 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district of West Virginia, only winning 44% of the vote. But with a 32% improvement over the previous Democratic candidate, he won the highest gain in the vote share of any Democrat in the entire country compared to 2016. He outperformed the ideological lean of his district by 25%.<sup>2</sup>

The defeat of progressive candidates in districts with a partisan lean of R+10 or more was to be anticipated. That is why, in an October 2018 analysis, I predicted the growth of the progressive wing of the party would reach "at least 84" House members with a "maximum" of 105 progressive Congress members.<sup>3</sup> Fifteen newcomer progressives who won their primaries went on to win in the 2018 Midterms, bringing the total of CPC-membership in the House to 95 from 2019 on. Because the new Democratic caucus had increased in size to 235 members, the CPC still accounted for 40% of Democratic House members. That meant the progressive wing of the party had more members now but had not increased its relative weight in the Democratic Caucus, because of comparable gains from New Democrat and Blue-Dog caucus members.

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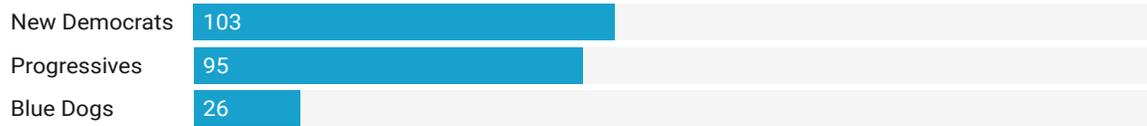
1 [http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/wichmann\\_deu\\_final\\_6.pdf](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files_mf/wichmann_deu_final_6.pdf)

2 <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/everything-is-partisan-and-correlated-and-boring/>

3 [http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/wichmann\\_deu\\_final\\_6.pdf](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files_mf/wichmann_deu_final_6.pdf)

## Progressives currently make up 40 percent of the Democratic Caucus in the "House"

Membership in ideological caucuses in the United States House of Representatives



*11 of the 235 Democratic Representatives are not members in any of the three factions*

Grafik: Moritz Wichmann • Erstellt mit Datawrapper

One trend in the 2020 Democratic primaries was progressive self-assertion. Three members of the "Squad", Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, all very much visible in the media, and all who very publicly supported the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, had to defend their mandate against candidates to the right of them who were generously financed by lobbyists and special interests. The fourth member of the Squad, Ayanna Pressley, ran unopposed. In defiance of prophecies of doom from journalists who opined their 2018 primary victories might have only been a fluke, they all won their primaries decisively by margins of 56 percent, 35% and 22% respectively.<sup>4</sup> This part of the progressive wing of the party has established itself firmly. Even more, voters appreciate the activist political style of the famous legislators.

Overall, here were three insurgent progressive upsets despite there being 17 progressive challengers to moderate or conservative Democratic incumbents.<sup>5</sup> In 2018, there were only two progressive victories, and only one primary progressive win in 2016 that was heavily aided by a long-term incumbent being indicted on corruption charges.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> congressional district of Illinois in the Chicago suburbs, Marie Newman ousted Blue-Dog Democrat Dan Lipinsky in her second run. She ran against him in 2018 and only lost by a small margin, due to Republican "tactical votes" for Lipinsky. In New York's 16<sup>th</sup> congressional district in the Bronx, the Black former school principal Jamaal Bowman won convincingly against longtime incumbent Elliot Engel.<sup>6</sup> In Missouri's 1<sup>st</sup> congressional district in St. Louis, the pastor, nurse and Black Lives Matter activist, Cori Bush, won against incumbent Lacy Clay, a member of the Black establishment, which is closely aligned with the party establishment and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Bush ran against Clay in 2018 and lost.<sup>7</sup>

Since Bowman and Bush are running in deep blue districts, their elections in November are all but guaranteed. The election of Marie Newman in a district with a partisan lean of D+6 should also be safe in the current political climate. All three were supported by Justice Democrats, a progressive group that has made it its mission to primary establishment Democrats deemed not progressive enough.

4 [https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan's\\_13th\\_Congressional\\_District\\_election,\\_2020\\_\(August\\_4\\_Democratic\\_primary\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Michigan's_13th_Congressional_District_election,_2020_(August_4_Democratic_primary))  
[https://ballotpedia.org/New\\_York%27s\\_14th\\_Congressional\\_District\\_election,\\_2020\\_\(June\\_23\\_Democratic\\_primary\)](https://ballotpedia.org/New_York%27s_14th_Congressional_District_election,_2020_(June_23_Democratic_primary))

<https://officialdocuments.sos.state.mn.us/Files/GetDocument/124103>

5 <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/progressive-groups-are-getting-more-selective-in-targeting-incumbents-is-it-working/>

6 <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1138888.us-demokraten-die-neue-schwarze-linke.html>

7 <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1140073.cor-bush-verstaerkung-fuer-linke-squad-black-lives-matter-aktivistin-gewinnt-us-vorwahl.html>

### Only 3 of 17 progressive challengers won 2020

Primary challengers in the US House of Representatives with the support of at least one prominent progressive organization or politician

Candidate	District	Cook PVI	Margin progressive candidate	Result	Indivisible	Justice Democrats	Our Revolution	PCCC	Sanders	Ocasio-Cortez
Eva Putzova	AZ-01	R+2	-17	Lost			✓			
Robert Emmons Jr.	IL-01	D+29	-62	Lost			✓			
Marie Newman	IL-03	D+6	3	Won	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rachel Ventura	IL-11	D+9	-17	Lost			✓			
Jill Carter	MD-07	D+26	-27	Lost			✓			
Cori Bush	MO-01	D+29	3	Won		✓	✓		✓	
Arati Kreibich	NJ-05	R+3	-40	Lost	✓			✓	✓	
Melanie D'Arrigo	NY-03	D+1	-24	Lost	✓					
Adem Bunkeddeko	NY-09	D+34	-30	Lost	✓					
Jamaal Bowman	NY-16	D+24	15	Won		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Morgan Harper	OH-03	D+19	-37	Lost		✓	✓	✓		
Albert Lee	OR-03	D+24	-64	Lost			✓			
Mark Gamba	OR-05	0	-46	Lost			✓			
Keeda Haynes	TN-05	D+7	-17	Lost	✓		✓	✓		
Jessica Cisneros	TX-28	D+9	-4	Lost		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jason Call	WA-02	D+10	-1	Lost			✓			
Rebecca Parson	WA-06	D+6	14	Lost			✓			

For the 2020 primaries the organization changed its tactics. Instead of supporting leftist candidates across the country formally and rather symbolically by promoting them to their big social media following of the organization, Justice Democrats have focused their 2020 efforts on only eight House races where progressives challenged incumbents who are (more) conservative. They focused on deep blue seats and invested more funds, developed focused campaigns and implemented voter mobilization strategies. Justice Democrats are no longer challenging Democrats in districts that are deemed

“electorally vulnerable” according to establishment strategists and the Median Voter Theorem, which posits that candidates moderate their policy positions to that of the median voter, to the political center to appeal to the maximum amount of voters to win, but only in Democratic strongholds where a progressive agenda or perceived leftist policy overreach is likely not be punished at the voting booth.<sup>8</sup> Their strategy, along with the professionalization of the group’s work was successful: Five of the eight newcomer candidates Justice Democrats endorsed won their primaries.<sup>9</sup>

Justice Democrats candidate Jessica Cisneros in Southern Texas lost by a margin of 3.6% against a conservative Blue Dog Democrat.<sup>10</sup> The success of Marie Newman, however, shows that a successful challenge is possible with increased name recognition, which bodes well should Cisneros decide to run again. The same could hold true for Justice Democrat candidate Alex Morse from Western Massachusetts, whose campaign attracted a lot of media attention,<sup>11</sup> but who then went on to lose by 17%, a comparable margin to that of Cori Bush’s lost in 2018.

However, at the same time, there are 26 Democratic districts that have a partisan lean of D+20 or more and 54, that lean more than D+10 and are not represented by a CPC member or have a progressive newcomer candidate on the ballot on November 3. There are plenty of establishment Democratic targets in deep blue districts. But a takeover of the party by primary challenge is still far away.

There are limits on the newly developed progressive infrastructure to support insurgent candidates. Right now, progressives, and Justice Democrats in particular, cannot realistically organize 30 challenges with real chances to win per electoral cycle. However, focusing on fewer primary challenges could lead to more victories and likely has effects beyond the directly affected districts. For example, some congress members will aim to have a more liberal voting record or employ progressive rhetoric to counter a possible primary challenge.<sup>12</sup> This corresponds to the long-term trend of a party that is drifting toward social democratic policy and politics.<sup>13</sup>

Progressives were also successful beyond the highly publicized primary challenges in the 2020 primary season, especially in districts with retiring incumbents. The institutional structure of the Democratic party and the House of Representatives means that 90% of incumbents are reelected, so gains are mostly likely made when House members retire. According to a FiveThirtyEight analysis from August, progressives supported by at least one of six prominent progressive organizations were successful in 18 of 24 “open races” for the House of Representatives.<sup>14</sup> This 75% success rate shows the party is moving leftward where voters do not have to actively decide against a known incumbent and newcomers do not have to make themselves equally well-known and attractive enough in terms of policy. An October update of my research, adding endorsements by the climate crisis organization Sunrise Movement, the CPC PAC, and Indivisible, shows 48 progressive non-incumbent candidates supported

8 <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/04/908524877/how-progressive-democrats-fared-this-primary-season-and-what-it-means>

9 <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/progressive-groups-are-getting-more-selective-in-targeting-incumbents-is-it-working/>

10 <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/04/jessica-cisneros-texas-28-henry-cuellar-congress-primary/>  
<https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1133672.jessica-cisneros-die-revolution-kommt-in-eine-verschlafene-grenzstadt.html>

11 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/23/us/politics/alex-morse-massachusetts.html>

<https://theintercept.com/2020/09/02/alex-morse-primary-result-richard-neal/>  
<https://www.gazettenet.com/Alex-Morse-speaks-after-losing-1st-Congressional-District-race-36076227>

12 <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/1/29/18188601/justice-democrats-alexandria-ocasio-cortezes-aoc>

13 [http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/wichmann\\_deu\\_final\\_6.pdf](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files_mf/wichmann_deu_final_6.pdf)

14 <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/progressive-groups-are-getting-more-selective-in-targeting-incumbents-is-it-working/>

by progressive organizations in the general election. However, most of them are running in fairly “republican territory.”<sup>15</sup>

Kai Kahele will be taking over Hawaii’s 2<sup>nd</sup> congressional district from CPC-member Tulsi Gabbard who gave up her seat to run for president.<sup>16</sup> Eleven of the “open race” districts are swing districts, whose ideological lean spans from D+10 to R+10. In the current political climate as shown by a congressional ballot poll average which shows an advantage of seven percentage points for Democrats, these seats are, on paper, winnable for the party. Democrats have represented four of these seats by Democrats before, while Republicans have represented 20.

**Progressive Democratic candidates in "House"-districts with a Partisan of up to Lean R+7**

Congressional candidates who are supported by at least one prominent national progressive organization or politician and the Republican Partisan Lean of their districts.

Candidate	District	Cook Republican PVI	Previous party control	Indivisible	Justice Democrats	Our Revolution	PCCC	Sanders	Ocasio- Cortez	CPC	Sunrise Movement
Ritchie Torres	NY-15	-44	Democratic							✓	
Kai Kahele	HI-02	-19	Democratic				✓			✓	
Georgette Gómez	CA-53	-14	Democratic		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Teresa Leger Fernandez	NM-03	-8	Democratic	✓					✓	✓	
Mondaire Jones	NY-17	-7	Democratic	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Beth Doglio	WA-10	-5	Democratic	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓
Dana Balter	NY-24	-3	Republican	✓		✓	✓			✓	
Christy Smith	CA-25	0	Democratic	✓				✓		✓	
Jon Hoadley	MI-06	4	Republican	✓			✓			✓	✓
Kara Eastman	NE-02	4	Republican		✓		✓		✓	✓	
Desiree Tims	OH-10	4	Republican	✓							
Pam Keith	FL-18	5	Republican				✓				
Ray Lenzi	IL-12	5	Republican	✓							
Scott Huffman	NC-13	6	Republican	✓							
Amanda Stuck	WI-08	7	Republican	✓							

15 [https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1076761\\_indivisible-gruppen-cupcakes-gegen-den-praesidenten.html](https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1076761_indivisible-gruppen-cupcakes-gegen-den-praesidenten.html)

16 <https://apnews.com/article/honolulu-tulsi-gabbard-hawaii-politics-elections-ccaba2bb8555b32e5936bf6d863923c2>, <https://progressives.house.gov/caucus-members/>

The election of the progressive Democrat Teresa Lager-Hernandez who is supported by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New Mexico's 2<sup>nd</sup> congressional district and that of Mondaire Jones, in New York's 17<sup>th</sup> district, who is supported by four progressive organizations, are quite likely, given the voting history of their districts. The more-or-less progressive candidate, Christy Smith, who is supported by Indivisible, won her primary against the loud, brash, left-populist journalist Cenk Uygur, but then lost the special election in California's 25<sup>th</sup> congressional district against Republican Mike Garcia.<sup>17</sup> However, on November 3, she has a better chance in this perfect swing district, which has an ideological lean that is neither Democratic nor Republican, because the general election will likely see a higher Democratic turnout.

Less safe are the elections of Georgette Gómez in California's 53rd district and Beth Doglio in Washington's 10<sup>th</sup> district, even though they are running in relatively Democratic districts. The reason: The all-party primary system in California and Washington stipulates that the two top vote getters in non-affiliated primaries get to run in the general election. Georgette Gómez got 20% of the vote, placing second in the crowded primary. She faces the wealthy granddaughter of a Democratic billionaire in the general election<sup>18</sup>. Beth Doglio won 15% of the vote and placed second in a primary with multiple candidates, and now faces a Democrat with strong ties to business interests. Both challengers are supported by the New Democrat caucus.<sup>19</sup>

Re-enforcement for the progressive caucus in the House could also come from the 41 progressives running in swing districts who lean towards Republicans. Several of them are in the suburbs of bigger cities, which are trending away from Republicans and toward Democrats in the Trump era. Nebraska's 2<sup>nd</sup> congressional district, which covers the suburbs of Omaha, fits such a demographic profile. Here, Kara Eastman, who is also supported by Justice Democrats, is running again against Republican Don Bacon after her 2-point loss in 2018. The district is only slightly Republican leaning (R+4), and this time Eastman has the support of from the official campaign arm of the party, the DCCC as well as an endorsement from Joe Biden.<sup>20</sup>

Dana Balter, is running again in New York's 24<sup>th</sup> congressional district, which represents Syracuse and its suburbs. Two years ago, the district went to moderate Republican Jon Katko. He is the only Republican in the country representing a district with an ideological lean towards the Democratic party and which is one of three districts in the country that voted for Clinton in the 2016 election but elected a Republican congressperson, an anomaly in a more and more politically polarized country. Katko has been a formidable campaigner, but maybe in 2020 he will no longer be able outperform demographic trends.<sup>21</sup>

The primary elections of Doglio, Eastman, Balter and Jones show that the CPC increasingly is becoming a player in primaries via its Political Action Committee (PAC). This PAC is actively and successfully intervening in the election of progressives. Even though the amount of money it spends is relatively small compared to what individual known House members raise themselves—the PAC spent roughly two

17 <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/13/politics/mike-garcia-christy-smith-california-25-congressional-seat/index.html>

18 <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/3/4/21162400/irwin-jacobs-qualcomm-sara-jacobs-san-diego-congress>

19 <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/04/super-tuesday-primaries-california-georgette-gomez/>  
<https://theintercept.com/2020/08/08/beth-doglio-washington-progressive-caucus/>

20 <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/09/dccc-kara-eastman-dana-balter/>

21 <https://www.syracuse.com/politics/cny/2020/10/john-katko-dana-balter-in-dead-heat-in-house-race-siena-college-syracusecom-poll.html>

and a half million dollars this cycle<sup>22</sup>, but they have helped Jones build name recognition in a crowded primary, and likely contributed to lifting Doglio into the runoff.<sup>23</sup>

Similar to New York 24, Michigan’s 6<sup>th</sup> congressional district only slightly leans towards Republicans (R+4). Progressive Joan Hoadley is running against Republican Fred Upton. The same is true for Ohio’s 10<sup>th</sup> congressional district, located between Cincinnati and Columbus. The district is targeted by Democrat Desiree Tims who is supported by Indivisible. Pam Keith in Florida’s 18<sup>th</sup> congressional district north of Palm Beach, Ray Lenzi in the 12<sup>th</sup> congressional district in southern Illinois, as well as Scott Huffman who is running in the 13<sup>th</sup> congressional district in North Carolina north of Charlotte are “normie-progressives” in similarly republican leaning districts who for instance do not use bold rhetoric and support Medicare for All, but want to “work toward it,” are open to a “Medicare Opt-In” system and want to “fight for universal healthcare.”<sup>24</sup>

### Progressives in explicitly Republican leaning districts

Progressive Democrats who are supported by at least one prominent national progressive organization or politician and in districts with a Republican leaning partisan voting index between R+7 and R+10

Candidate	District	Cook Republican PVI	Previous party control	Indivisible	Our Revolution	PCCC	Sanders	CPC	Sunrise Movement
Qasim Rashid	VA-01	8	Republican	✓					✓
Jessica King	WI-06	8	Republican	✓					
Dani Brzozowski	IL-16	8	Republican	✓					
Cynthia Wallace	NC-09	8	Republican	✓					
Mike Siegel	TX-10	9	Republican	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Candace Valenzuela	TX-24	9	Republican	✓		✓		✓	
Liam O'Mara	CA-42	9	Republican	✓					
Chris Bubser	CA-08	9	Republican	✓					
Brynne Kennedy	CA-10	10	Republican	✓					
Wendy Davis	TX-21	10	Republican	✓					
Sri Kulkarni	TX-22	10	Republican	✓					

22 <https://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/lookup2.php?strID=C00513176&cycle=2018>

23 [https://ballotpedia.org/Washington%27s\\_10th\\_Congressional\\_District\\_election,\\_2020\\_\(August\\_4\\_top-two\\_primary\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Washington%27s_10th_Congressional_District_election,_2020_(August_4_top-two_primary))

24 <https://www.pamkeithfl.com/healthcare/>, <https://lenziforcongress.org/issues/>  
<https://www.scotthuffman.com/issues.html>

The analysis of Cook Political Report says progressive candidate Amanda Stuck in Wisconsin's 8<sup>th</sup> congressional district has slim chances, due to the ideological lean of her district, among other factors, even though the average of generic congressional ballot surveys currently shows a seven-point political advantage for Democrats<sup>25</sup>.

The 33 other progressives running in conservative congressional districts with a partisan lean of R+10 or more have even worse chances, and, generally speaking they do not have broad political support of several national progressive organizations. Most candidates in these conservative districts are only supported by Indivisible (see table last page and appendix table "Progressives in strongly republican leaning districts"). In Texas' 10<sup>th</sup> congressional district in the suburbs of Houston and Austin, in Texas' 24<sup>th</sup> district between the metropolises of Fort Worth and Dallas the attorney Mike Siegel and the Black Latina, mother and school board member Candace Valenzuela are running in suburban districts that heavily lean towards Republicans by nine points, but they are trending left fast. The same holds true for the slightly more "normie-progressive" engineer Donna Imam in Texas 31<sup>st</sup> district north of Austin, who is supported by Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Andrew Yang<sup>26</sup>. Progressive Julie Oliver is in Texas 25<sup>th</sup> similarly rather suburban congressional district just outside of Austin with a rather strong Republican partisan lean of R+11. Yet, she has consolidated the support of several national progressive candidates after winning a primary against democratic socialist Heidi Sloan.

Limited infrastructure and resources were not the only impediments to progressive wins. Progressive vote-splitting was another factor. In New York's 15<sup>th</sup> congressional district—the bluest district in the country—early polls showed the possibility of the conservative, homophobic Democratic district politician Ruben Diaz winning a primary in which 12 candidates were running.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Ritchie Torres went on to win with the help of important New York City unions and establishment Democratic organizations. He was successful in somewhat unifying the progressive vote, to the detriment of community activist and candidate Samelys Lopez, who was supported by Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the DSA. Even though Torres could be termed "normie-progressive," he is supported by the CPC PAC, and many DSA activists in New York dislike him, for, among other reasons, his unquestioning support of Israel. In his case though, at least it prevented the most conservative Democrat prevailing in a district that is safe Democratic.

This was not the case in Massachusetts' 4<sup>th</sup> congressional district, however. Here, former marine Jake Auchincloss, who has openly derided progressive causes, won the primary with only 22% of the vote. Because of his deep blue district, he will likely win the general election and all the advantages of an incumbent against future primary challengers. Six more or less progressive candidates had split the vote of among 70% of voters in the district. Similarly, in New York's 12<sup>th</sup> congressional district, progressive challenger Suraj Patel narrowly lost to longtime incumbent and moderate Democrat Carolyn Maloney 42.9 to 39.2%. Two other left-wing candidates received an additional 17.6% of the vote in that race.<sup>28</sup>

In the solidly Democratic Indiana 1<sup>st</sup> congressional district in the southeastern suburbs of Chicago, 11 candidates each got more than 1% of the vote. Five of the candidates with a progressive profile, and

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25 <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/congress-generic-ballot-polls/>

26 <https://couriernewsroom.com/2020/09/09/john-carter-donna-imam-texas-poll/>

27 [https://ballotpedia.org/New\\_York's\\_15th\\_Congressional\\_District\\_election\\_2020\\_\(June\\_23\\_Democratic\\_primary\)](https://ballotpedia.org/New_York's_15th_Congressional_District_election_2020_(June_23_Democratic_primary))

28 <https://www.cityandstateny.com/articles/politics/campaigns-elections/new-yorks-2020-congressional-primary-election-results.html>,  
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/05/politics/carolyn-maloney-wins-primary-race-new-york/index.html>

who support Medicare For All, received a combined 59.6% of the vote. The winning candidate, who is much more moderate, won the primary with 32.8% of the vote.<sup>29</sup>

At least five newcomer progressives—Bowman, Bush, Newman, Jones and Lager-Hernandez—could be elected to the US House of Representatives in November. Maybe six other new leftist members will join them: Smith, Gomez, Doglio, and maybe Hoadley, Balter and Eastman. If Siegel and Valenzuela can outperform the partisan lean of their districts and the current national political climate, and if Gomez and Doglio win against their moderate opponents, 14 newcomer progressives could be elected to the House of Representatives.

What that means for power relations inside the Democratic caucus, however, is not clear yet. The business-friendly New Democrat wing supports 16 candidates, the conservative Blue Dog faction has endorsed eight candidates. There is overlap among these endorsed candidates, such as Christy Smith who is supported by both the CPC and New Democrats or Sri Preston Kulkarni who is being supported by the New Democrats and the Blue Dogs.<sup>30</sup>

## All three ideological party factions support candidates

Number of endorsements for non-incumbent candidates by the Political Action Committees of the political factions of the Democratic Caucus in the US House of Representatives



Grafik: Moritz Wichmann • Quelle: CPC/Cook Political Report • Erstellt mit Datawrapper

Some forecast models for the US House of Representatives currently expect that Democrats will defend their majority with an average increase in only three pickups for the party,<sup>31</sup> others predict seven congressional district pickups for Democrats.<sup>32</sup> One important reason: The political climate as measured in the generic congressional ballot is very similar and friendly to the party compared to before the 2018 Midterm election, – when the party won 42 seats and moved relatively far into “Republican territory.” Now candidates will need an even bigger preference for Democrats to win significantly more than a few additional seats.

That makes for two scenarios. Should the party gain no or only a few new seats, the victory of the five newcomer progressives in rather solid Democratic districts (Bowman, Bush, Newman, Jones, Leger-Hernandez) and additional successes by Smith, Gomez and Doglio would mean that the left wing of the party and the Congressional Progressive Caucus would roughly “break even” with the New Democrat caucus which currently has 103 members (which, however, includes several congress members who are also CPC members). However, CPC member Dave Loebsack is retiring with no pro-

29 [https://ballotpedia.org/Indiana%27s\\_1st\\_Congressional\\_District\\_election,\\_2020\\_\(June\\_2\\_Democratic\\_primary\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Indiana%27s_1st_Congressional_District_election,_2020_(June_2_Democratic_primary))  
[https://www.nwitimes.com/news/opinion/forum/meet-the-candidates-vying-to-represent-northwest-indiana-in-congress/article\\_e32e7a67-98de-5a73-ba37-1c05ea55bf9a.html](https://www.nwitimes.com/news/opinion/forum/meet-the-candidates-vying-to-represent-northwest-indiana-in-congress/article_e32e7a67-98de-5a73-ba37-1c05ea55bf9a.html)

30 <http://newdemactionfund.com/frontier>  
<https://cookpolitical.com/analysis/house/house-overview/what-will-house-look-and-act-2021-seven-things-watch>,  
<https://bluedogdems.com/>,  
<https://theintercept.com/2018/10/17/sri-kulkarni-congress-texas/>

31 <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2020-election-forecast/house/>

32 <https://projects.economist.com/us-2020-forecast/house>

gressive replacement in sight and Joe Kennedy III's seat in Massachusetts will be taken over by a conservative Democrat. New-Democrat-member Susan Davis in California's 53rd district is retiring too, either a progressive Democrat (Gomez) or a more moderate (Jacobs) one will replace her.

If there is an increase of roughly a dozen Democratic seats, and should all three relevant factions gain seats evenly, the Democratic Caucus will grow from 235 members to 245 or more,<sup>33</sup> diminishing the political power of the Blue Dogs. Their faction currently has 26 members, but one or two of them, like Colin Peterson, could lose their mandates because they represent districts trending Republican. At the same time, the threshold for a majority in the House is 218 votes. That means Democrats can pass more progressive laws without the need of Blue Dogs votes, and they would not need to court conservatives in the party with policy concessions for their votes. Policy progress maybe would not be blocked like 2009 with the passage of Obamacare without a public option.

Even with moderate gains for the party spread across all three factions, the relative of weight of the left wing in the Democratic Caucus would not change. Should there be a typical backlash against the newly elected Biden administration, mostly Blue Dogs and maybe a few New Democrats will lose their seats in 2022, but progressives would remain relatively safe. At that point progressives would become the biggest group in the party—not even accounting for possible intra-party gains for progressives in the 2022 Democratic primary season. Either way, for progressives, the strategy of focusing on “deep blue” districts will have paid off.

## **US Senate – the establishment “steamrolling” the left**

In contrast to the presidential primary and the House primaries, in the Senate, the party establishment, namely US Senate Minority leader Chuck Schumer and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), are firmly in control of the 2020 Democratic primaries for the US Senate.

Progressives writ-large did not have a consolidated strategy or interest in Senate campaigns even in places where victories for progressive candidates would have been possible looking at basic political data. Primaries could have been successful in Kentucky, Texas, Maine, Delaware and Colorado.

On paper, Andrew Romanoff, the former speaker of the Democratic Caucus in the state house in Colorado was a good candidate. Romanoff was known, well-spoken and he produced dramatic and viral election ads about the dangers of the climate crisis in a state that had voted for Bernie Sanders in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential primary. Colorado itself is known for its alternative culture in college towns like Boulder, and the state has been trending steadily from purple to blue.<sup>34</sup> Despite this, Schumer's preferred candidate was presidential candidate and moderate former Governor John Hickenlooper. Romanoff did get an endorsement from the Progressive Change Campaign Committee, which is closely allied to Elizabeth Warren but not from the senator from Massachusetts, herself. Bernie Sanders' speechwriter David Sirota supported Romanoff, but he got no endorsement from the Vermont Senator.<sup>35</sup> In the end, Romanoff won the caucus process in Colorado in March, which shows support from the base, but did not prevail in the second step of the primary in June against Hicken-

33 <https://www.270towin.com/2020-house-election/consensus-2020-house-forecast>

34 <https://www.rollcall.com/2020/06/25/colorado-is-turning-blue-will-that-help-andrew-romanoff/>

35 [https://www.coloradopolitics.com/2020-election/romanoff-picks-up-senate-primary-endorsements-from-progressive-lati-no-groups/article\\_f4ece49e-b670-11ea-976d-4f37fdcf649b.html](https://www.coloradopolitics.com/2020-election/romanoff-picks-up-senate-primary-endorsements-from-progressive-lati-no-groups/article_f4ece49e-b670-11ea-976d-4f37fdcf649b.html)  
<https://www.denverpost.com/2020/06/26/andrew-romanoff-progressives-colorado-us-senate/>

looper, losing 59 to 41%.<sup>36</sup> A poll that was published a few days before the June vote showed support for Romanoff at 28 percent—a sign of him making up ground last minute.<sup>37</sup>

Another close call, but loss, was progressive upstart Charles Booker in Kentucky. The Black State Representative campaigned on the urgency of the climate crisis and the Black Lives Matter protests sweeping the state and the nation over the summer. In the last weeks before the primary, his campaign went viral; progressives all over the United States became excited about the politician from Louisville. Local voters thought similarly and decided at the last minute not to vote for establishment candidate Amy McGrath, who posed as a Trump-Democrat. For months, the Schumer recruit, McGrath, had collected campaign donations from Democrats across the country who were furious with Kentucky Republican Senator and US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. They showered the former fighter pilot with \$40 million in donations. That was 40 times more money than Booker had at his disposition even though he also got a last-minute flood of donations.<sup>38</sup>

## In 2020 progressive Democrats were successful in US Senate elections only in conservative states where the party has few chances of winning

State	Progressive candidate	Margin progressive candidate	2016 Trump margin
Idaho	Paulette Jordan	71	32
Tennessee	Marquita Bradshaw	9	26
West Virginia	Paula Jean Swearengin	5	42
Kentucky	Charles Booker	-3	30
Texas	Royce West	-4	9
Colorado	Andrew Romanoff	-18	-5
Delaware	Jessica Scarane	-46	-11
Maine	Betsy Sweet	-47	-3

Tabelle: Moritz Wichmann • Erstellt mit Datawrapper

<sup>36</sup> [https://ballotpedia.org/United\\_States\\_Senate\\_election\\_in\\_Colorado,\\_2020\\_\(June\\_30\\_Democratic\\_primary\)](https://ballotpedia.org/United_States_Senate_election_in_Colorado,_2020_(June_30_Democratic_primary))

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/06/25/hickenlooper-romanoff-us-senate-poll-colorado/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/1138383.charles-booker-maximaler-kontrast-linke-ueberraschung-in-kentucky.html>

In the end, that money and a few other factors proved to be enough for McGrath. She won the close race 45.4 to 42.6%.<sup>39</sup> The last-minute enthusiasm for Booker was not enough to lift him to victory. Because Kentucky is very Republican, McGrath will likely not win the state, despite record donations. Booker could try again with another senate run, against Kentucky's other Senator, Rand Paul, and determine whether a leftist populist agenda can close the margin against a Republican incumbent better than the "republicanism light" approach of McGrath.

"The truth is, these races were ours for the taking, and progressives blew it," said Evan Weber, political director for the youth climate organization Sunrise Movement. Weber was speaking of the US Senate primaries in Colorado and Kentucky. He complained about a lack of support for both candidates, whom Sunrise endorsed and supported through phone banking, although the organizations support came rather last minute.<sup>40</sup> In Delaware, the lack of broader, national support for progressive candidates was a problem as well. In Maine, Justice Democrats, who typically deploy money and people in winnable races, supported Betsy Sweet symbolically, mostly through social media. Rather symbolic was also Bernie Sanders' endorsements of progressive Paulette Jordan in Idaho and Jean Swearingin in West Virginia.

Another Senate problem was progressive vote-splitting. This happened in Texas, where nine candidates received more than 3% of the vote, including the leftist organizer Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez, the former president of an NAACP group, Michael Cooper, Democratic Socialist Sema Hernandez, and the center-left politician and state parliamentarian Royce West. The first three mentioned candidates alone got 25.9% of the vote, more than the primary winner MJ Hegar who got 22.3%.<sup>41</sup> If only one progressive candidate would have run and won most votes, the media narrative before the runoff might have been different. But with the result progressive organizations were resigned to rally behind the less conservative candidate Royce West in the runoff. He went on to lose to Schumer's preferred and DSCC candidate Hegar by four points. In Kentucky the progressive farmer and populist Mike Boillier was also on the ballot and got 5% of the vote. It was evident in opinion polls before that he was not the leading candidate. Had he dropped out and endorsed Booker and if 80% of his 27,000 votes had gone to Booker, Booker would have won.<sup>42</sup>

Colorado, Kentucky, Maine, and Texas show that the progressive wing of the Democratic Party seems to not have the resources to push through progressive candidates in bigger states against the opposition or preference of the party establishment.

However, the case of Delaware shows that it is not only a question of resources, but also one of lack of interest or missing coordination. Moderate and popular Democrat Chris Coons was up for re-election. Only 120,000 votes were cast in the primary in this small corporation-friendly coastal state. The progressive challenger Jessica Scarane was supported by a handful of local progressive organizations, but received no comparable national attention and support from the broader progressive community.<sup>43</sup> In the end, she received 32,000 votes or 27%. Coons won by a large margin, but it is equally true that in this small state an additional 30,000 votes would have lifted her to victory.

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39 <https://apps.npr.org/elections20-primaries/states/KY.html>

40 <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kp4bq/the-sunrise-movement-is-pointing-fingers-at-progressives-after-2-big-primary-losses>

41 <https://apps.texastribune.org/features/2020/primary-election-results/>

42 <https://apps.npr.org/elections20-primaries/states/KY.html>

43 <https://twitter.com/ryangrim/status/1293938182405394432>, <https://apps.npr.org/elections20-primaries/states/DE.html>

The case of Marquita Bradshaw shows that leftist “insurgents” can win in Democratic Senate primaries against candidates preferred by the party establishment. On August 6, she shocked journalists and observers of electoral politics by seemingly coming from nowhere and winning the Tennessee US Senate primary against the Schumer-backed candidate, attorney and military veteran James Mackler and three other candidates.<sup>44</sup> Mackler had collected \$2.1 million in campaign donations. Bradshaw is supported by environmentalists and left activists and is the only Black female candidate for US Senate in the country. At the time of the primary though, she had only collected \$8,400.<sup>45</sup> With the help of many volunteers, who were active in half of Tennessee’s counties, her grassroots campaign got 35.5% of the vote. Mackler only got 23.8%, which placed him in third.<sup>46</sup> Bradshaw’s victory is truly historic: It is the first time since 2010 that a DSCC endorsed candidate has lost his or her primary. Because Donald Trump won Tennessee in 2016 by a margin of 25%, Bradshaw has improbable to no odds of victory on November 3. However, with her grassroots approach she might be able to rebuild the party in the state like the countless progressive Democratic House candidates in 2018 or gubernatorial candidates like Beto O’ Rourke in Texas and Stacy Abrams in Georgia.

Contrary to the previously described losses, the re-election of Ed Markey was a win for the left. The longtime Massachusetts Senator had his run-ins with the party establishment at the beginning of his political career, was active in the peace movement but for a long time was a rather low-key Senator and not a poster boy of the left. However, in early 2019, he rebranded by aligning with the left very publicly, being the lead Senate co-sponsor of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Green New Deal resolution. As such, he was supported by progressives across the US, but particularly by the Sunrise Movement in this year’s primary.<sup>47</sup>

His campaign came back from a deficit against his primary challenger, the youthful Joe Kennedy III, who had organized a rather moderate campaign even though as a member of the House of Representatives he was a CPC member and supported progressive legislation like Medicare for All.<sup>48</sup> Early in the race, polls showed Markey more than 10% points behind Kennedy.<sup>49</sup> Political insiders suggested he should just retire, but Markey came back and won the September 1 primary by 10 points.<sup>50</sup> It was the first time a member of the Kennedy family lost an election in Massachusetts. The left had put up an example: “When you are an ally to us, we can save your career.”

Overall, progressives can take comfort in the fact that non-progressive candidates like “generic Democrat” Cal Cunningham in North Carolina or Mark Kelly in Arizona are less conservative than their counterparts 10 years ago. Nevertheless: All in all, progressive candidates were “steamrolled” by the establishment in this year’s US Senate Democratic primaries.<sup>51</sup> Despite Bradshaw’s surprise victory and the successful defense of Markey’s seat, results in the other seats show the potential for progressives even in Senate primaries.

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44 <https://demcastusa.com/2020/09/24/can-marquita-bradshaw-beat-the-odds/>

45 <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/politics/2020/08/06/tennessee-us-senate-democratic-primary-results-marquita-bradshaw/3302023001/>

46 <https://tennesseelookout.com/2020/09/10/the-memphis-miracle-marquita-bradshaw/>  
[https://ballotpedia.org/Marquita\\_Bradshaw](https://ballotpedia.org/Marquita_Bradshaw)

47 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6PL6xThDEM&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6PL6xThDEM&feature=emb_title)

48 <https://www.usnews.com/news/elections/articles/2020-09-01/markey-kennedy-senate-race-in-massachusetts-tests-progressive-power-and-influence>

49 [https://twitter.com/Politics\\_Polls/status/1258581547386580993](https://twitter.com/Politics_Polls/status/1258581547386580993)

50 [https://ballotpedia.org/Edward\\_Markey](https://ballotpedia.org/Edward_Markey)

51 <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/07/senate-progressives-election-297332>

## State Legislatures – building progressive power from below

Unlike the US Senate primaries, progressives were relatively successful in a number of state elections. A cursory look on the small “progressive waves” in several states shows success in Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and New York. In Pennsylvania five progressive challengers, backed by the leftist “Pennsylvania Stands Up” coalition, as well as by Bernie Sanders, ousted incumbents.<sup>52</sup> Those wins came in addition to several progressive primary wins in 2018, including four DSA politicians.<sup>53</sup> In New Mexico, five progressives challenged conservative Democratic incumbents successfully under the slogan “No Corporate Democrats.” These unseated Democrats had previously blocked progressive legislation, working in cooperation with Republican lawmakers,<sup>54</sup> similar to the group Independent Democratic Caucus (IDC) in New York. Six IDC members were defeated by progressive challengers in 2018.<sup>55</sup> In the 2020 New York primaries, seven leftist challengers, including four DSA members, defeated longtime Democratic incumbents. This was a real blow to the New York Democratic Machine, which had ruled unchallenged for decades. The 2020 victories of progressives will likely trigger a further small course correction to the left of the Democratic caucus in the state parliament. The New York Times even declared, it might be possible that New York now has “the most liberal state government in the country.”<sup>56</sup>

Additionally, in August four progressive challengers toppled incumbents in Minnesota who had lost the party endorsement for not campaigning and working aggressively enough for social justice issues.<sup>57</sup> In the beginning of September, 15 progressive challengers ousted Democratic incumbents in Rhode Island. The local DSA group, Reclaim Rhode Island (which had developed out of the Sanders campaign in the state), and Rhode Island Political Cooperative endorsed 22 leftist candidates and had run them together on a slate. The 15 successful victors might be able to ward off new austerity and cuts in social services as part of budgeting.<sup>58</sup> In mid-September, four progressive candidates in Delaware backed by Working Families Party won their primaries against more conservative incumbents, which accounts for 12% of the state’s Democratic caucus, as both chambers together have only 62 members.<sup>59</sup>

## Looking Ahead

All of these successes down ballot in state parliament races point to what journalist Paul Blest has called the slow “buildup of power by progressives on the local level and in the states.”<sup>60</sup> In addition, these politicians are building a “bench” of political talent, amassing experience and local name recognition which could be used the foundation for future campaigns for higher office. At the same time, this slowly but surely does the work of eroding and weakening the power of the political Machine of the party establishment.

52 <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/03/june-primary-elections-corporate-democrats-progressives/>

53 <https://www.thedailybeast.com/progressives-score-major-victories-in-pennsylvania-primaries>

54 <https://nmpoliticalreport.com/2020/06/03/progressive-democrats-defeat-incumbents-with-some-races-still-pending/>  
<https://discourseblog.substack.com/p/the-progressive-wave-isnt-stopping>

55 <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/14/17859200/idc-new-york-primaries-democrats-biaggi-klein>

56 <https://www.newsday.com/news/health/coronavirus/democratic-primaries-candidates-1.47563007>,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/nyregion/progressive-primaries-ny-legislature.html>,

<https://rosaluxnycblog.org/nyc-primary/>

57 <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/minnesota/articles/2020-08-12/progressives-beat-democratic-incumbents-in-legislative-races>

58 <https://theintercept.com/2020/09/11/rhode-island-democrat-primary-progressive-wave/>

59 <https://discourseblog.substack.com/p/the-progressive-wave-isnt-stopping>

60 <https://discourseblog.substack.com/p/the-progressive-wave-isnt-stopping>

Regarding the overall advancement of progressives in the Democratic party, challenges remain. However, that a bench of progressive politicians is being built up in state legislatures and US House races bodes well for the future. The decidedly progressive candidates who are running in tossup-territory, like Eastman and Balter, and in environments that lean Republican—Siegel, Valenzuela and Hoadley—could prove prophecies of doom wrong and respectively counter and weaken the argument of the party establishment that progressives can only win in deep blue districts. This is also the reason why they are receiving some rather last-minute support from progressive groups - it remains to be seen if this is enough.<sup>61</sup>

Even though successful US Senate challenges or the advancement of progressive candidates in open races against the interest of the DSCC seemed a bit “too big” for the party’s left wing now, that might not be the case in the not-so-distant future. If that would happen, that would transform the Democratic Party to a powerhouse fighting for progressive change.

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61 <https://theintercept.com/2020/10/09/dccc-kara-eastman-dana-balter/>