

Left movements (United States): Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) never recovered from Bowman

Assessing DSA's membership figures, 2020-2024

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Andy Sernatinger looks at the numbers and diagnoses the rapid rise and long slide of DSA.

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In 2016, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) became one of the year's many surprises when it suddenly transformed from a stagnant social democratic paper organization into the center of gravity on the U.S. Left. For the next five years, DSA's rapid growth was the subject of much commentary as it became an organization of nearly 90,000, with members in every state and major city in the United States.

This growth came to a definite end in 2021. At the August 2021 DSA National Convention, then-National Director Maria Svart said that membership growth had "slowed to a trickle." The honeymoon period from 2016–2019 had come to an end when confronted with strategic questions around COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, electoral strategy, and internal organization. These issues exploded in what has come to be known as the "Bowman Affair," which marked a crisis within the organization and exodus of many members.

Until recently, no data has been available to make an objective evaluation of DSA's trajectory. Membership data has not been widely available, and [the reports](#) that have come from the organization [for years](#) were only carefully selected partial figures. The National Political Committee (NPC)—DSA's national leadership—seated in the fall of 2023 [began reporting](#) membership figures that show the membership counts both nationally and by chapter from January 2020 to May 2024. In what follows, I analyze the membership data provided by DSA to give a view of the organization over the period that is based on objective metrics. After that, I offer some commentary on the trends and their context.

On the data and technical points

The data used here comes directly from the NPC's figures in their "NPC—Chapter Breakdown of Membership—Public" spreadsheet. The data includes figures for the national organization as well as each chapter or organizing committee (geographic group of members that has not yet been

recognized as a chapter).

The data shows two figures: “Total Membership” and “Membership In Good Standing.” This can be confusing, because DSA has an extremely permissive definition of membership: One is considered “in good standing” if they have paid dues anytime in the prior twelve (12) months. However, a person remains on the roster for an additional two years *after* their membership has lapsed. So, for example, December 2023 counts 71,015 total members (that is, anyone who has paid dues in the past three years, i.e. since December 2020!) but only 53,835 members in good standing, those who have paid any dues in the past year.

This is an important point because DSA has historically reported the *total membership* figures, which exaggerate the current strength of the organization at any given time. The *total membership* figure obscures causal relationships; using those figures, we have a much harder time trying to understand if there were any events that impacted membership.

Even with 50,000 members, DSA has not been a force building mobilization around the loss of Roe, emerging fascization, or practically anything unrelated to either public elections or its Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee.

The “members in good standing” numbers give us a more immediate sense of what has impacted membership in the organization. However, the figures do not distinguish between a lapsed membership and an outright *quit*. Unless there was direct communication from a member to the National DSA stating that they were quitting the organization, one could cease dues payment and remain a member in good standing for up to a year even if they had effectively left DSA.

The data also records the percentage change in the membership, as expressed by the formula $(M2 - M1)/M1$, where M1 is the prior month’s membership figures, and M2 is the following month’s figures; the change in members from M1 to M2 divided by M1’s shows the percentage that membership changed. In December 2021, total members were 94,733, and in the following month, January 2022, the total figures were 94,402. The percentage change was -0.35%, $([94,402 - 94,733] / 94,733)$. The percentage change in the NPC spreadsheet is only calculated for the Total Membership figures, so I have manually calculated the changes for the Members in Good Standing using the same formula.

Trends

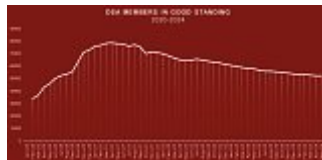
The first graph shows “DSA Members in Good Standing, 2020-2024.” The graph is straightforward and shows that there was huge growth in 2020: from 34,000 members in good standing to 73,000. The organization more than doubled in size in a year. The peak of membership was in April 2021, at 78,682 members in good standing. The membership hovered around that point until October 2021, when it suddenly had the largest single-month drop in the entire data set: 5,536 members drop.

From there, it has been a steady decline in membership, month-over-month, for the last three years. The most recent figures show 50,713 members in good standing as of October 2024.

The second graph plots the *percentage change* for between months, both as a membership total (blue line) and for those in *good standing* (red line). This is a little trickier to follow, because the graph plots change between months. A “0 percent” indicates that organization size didn’t change; negatives show a lower membership count compared to the previous month; positives show an increase. Looking at it in percentages helps to measure the significance of any shifts from month to month.

While 2020 doubled the active membership, March and October of that year were the biggest spikes. February–March 2020 was the height of the Democratic primary between Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden, when Sanders had won the New Hampshire primary before Biden’s crushing victory on Super Tuesday. It suggests a relationship between Sanders’ primary wins in February and a bump for DSA. The second spike is October–December 2020, during the general election.

The two graphs together also demonstrate the exhaustion of the Sanders effect. From 2021 on, membership growth peaked in January 2021 at 4.1 percent growth of members in good standing, then dropped to less than 1% growth the next month, and then stagnation and decline. This occurred during the concerted “[DSA 100K](#)” campaign to actively grow the membership, followed by the 2022 “[Recommitment Drive](#).” Both were touted as major successes for DSA.



The rise and the slide. DSA’s members in good standing from 2020 to 2024. See the text for analysis. Image by the author.

The numbers went down: Bowman disgraces DSA

The percentage change graph also shows the magnitude of the loss of members in October 2021: a 7.32 percent contraction in one month. It changes the pattern from holding steady around 78,000 members to a shock and then downward slope. This marks the height of the [Bowman Affair](#), when three dozen local DSA chapters and many members individually petitioned for the expulsion of Rep. Jamaal Bowman from DSA membership.

Friction with Bowman began in the mid-summer of 2021, largely confined to attempts by DSA’s BDS Working Group to change his position on Palestine. This broke into open dispute at large in August/September, and a general crisis for DSA in October 2021.

The NPC announced on December 2, 2021 that they would [not expel Bowman](#), and then moved instead to [discipline the BDS Working Group](#) in February 2022, going the opposite direction. The numbers show an accelerated decline again from December to March, mirroring the NPC’s actions.

I argued at the time that the NPC Majority, made up of partisans from Socialist Majority Caucus, Groundwork, and to a lesser extent Bread and Roses, had won the vote but [lost the organization](#). We see here that DSA has [never recovered](#) after the Bowman Affair. In the period from October 2021 to March 2022, DSA lost 10,000 members in good standing; 5,536 were in October alone.

This has been compounded by a [budget crisis at the end of 2023](#), where reality finally caught up with DSA that the organization had been living beyond its means. That point is highlighted when you

consider that DSA continued to report having upwards of 70,000 members as of December 2023, when it only had 54,000 paying dues; a margin of 16,000 people leaves a major gap in the expectation about the resources at your command. After 2020, when there was no longer an external Sanders effect upon the organization, DSA is largely responsible for its own fate. This does not seem to have shaken up the strategic view of DSA.



Month-on-month percentage changes in total membership (blue) and membership in good standing (red)—from 2020 to 2024. See the text for analysis. Image by the author.

The end?

Can DSA rebound and become the center of the U.S. Left again? Let's be blunt: no.

As an organization, DSA is permanently tarnished by the Bowman Affair and has been shunned by Palestine solidarity activists for its actions in 2021–2022. In the last instance, DSA gained nothing for siding with Bowman—they lost thousands of members, *and* they lost Bowman, who distanced himself from DSA even before losing his office in 2024. If they had expelled or even censured Bowman, DSA may have been able to be a home for the movement against the genocide that has animated activism on college campuses and in the streets over the last year.

Even with 50,000 members, DSA has not been a force building mobilization around the loss of Roe, emerging fascization, or practically anything unrelated to either public elections or its Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC). DSA has not retained the layers of activists who flocked to it between 2016 and 2019; many members today are new to the organization, retreading the same ground and learning the first lessons of how to be in an organization that should have already been well established. DSA's primary activity has been turnout for electoral cycles, and the premium placed upon policymakers to enact changes has discouraged mobilizations such as the 2017 "Fight the Right" protests that martyred DSA activist Heather Heyer.

This is no cause for celebration. The Left is perhaps at the weakest point it has been at in years. This is not unique to the United States, as the [left-reformist efforts of the last decade have been exhausted](#). But we will need organizations that can simultaneously defend the remaining public goods and democratic rights while having a class conscious understanding of society and a socialist alternative we desperately need.

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P.S.

• Tempest.. Posted January 15, 2025:

<https://tempestmag.org/2025/01/dsa-never-recovered-from-bowman/>

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