

*Build*



# what we're building

A Report on Base-Building in DSA Nationally

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# introduction

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) was founded in 1982, but it's still young. The organization was effectively reborn in 2015, growing exponentially from 5,000 members in May 2016 to 55,000 in December 2018. This is a tremendous achievement, but it has a lot more growing to do.

As DSA develops and organizers think about what direction it might go next, serious questions emerge: Where is DSA really at? What have chapters worked on recently? What are chapters working on now? How does that shape the context for thinking about what DSA should do next?

People within DSA and outside observers have used several approaches to answer these questions. For example, *The Call*, a caucus formerly known as Momentum, takes a rhetorical approach in their statement "[Where We Stand](#)," while Dan La Botz of *New Politics* [describes DSA's position and direction](#) using a historical process. Arun Gupta of *Counterpunch* attempted to answer these questions by framing [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as our de facto national leader](#). *Cosmonaut* [looked at platforms from all of our candidates](#) to try to deduce DSA's political platform, and Andrew Dobbs at The Hampton Institute [examined DSA and its "flirtation with liberals."](#) These essays are helpful in that they both describe DSA's organizing to some degree and then prescribe next steps for the organization, but they also suffer from a lack of deep direct knowledge of DSA's work.

*What We're Building: A Report on Base-Building in DSA Nationally* answers the above questions as well, but using a different, and we believe more effective, method. We directly asked DSA chapters what they are working on and analyzed the results.

What distinguishes this report from the above worthy reflections is its focus on listening. By first asking chapter organizers what they do, rather than cherry-picking examples or relying on one perspective, this report prioritized carefully describing where DSA is at, with the aim of recommending its potential next steps.

Yet, rather than hand down recommendations, the report considers our survey responses to pose questions for national discussion.

Chapter organizers and chapter leaders are the heart of DSA, and they should deliberate and interpret the meaning of these findings for our work.

[Listening is one of Build's values](#), and this report is another way we're practicing those values. While *Build* pamphlets share individual stories of organizing in DSA chapters, this report is a larger-scale study of how chapters are building socialism across the country. We hope it will inform decisions that leaders and organizers make when crafting their visions for the organization's immediate and longer-term future.

*The Build DSA Team*

# summary

## FINDINGS

- In terms of issues, DSA chapters work on **housing justice** (43%) nearly as much as **healthcare justice** (45%), outpacing **labor** (38.5%) and **criminal justice** (33%).
- Tactically, chapters use **electoral work** (57%) and **mutual aid** (48%) almost equally when organizing.
- Almost as many chapters run **brake light clinics** (25%) as advocate for **Medicare for All (M4A)** federal legislation (34%).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- It appears that DSA chapters, nationally, do both electoral work (i.e., candidate campaigns and ballot initiatives) and movement work (i.e., mutual aid and direct action) equally. **What should we make of DSA's fusion of movement and electoral work? What does it say about the kind of organization that DSA is? How should that inform DSA's next steps?**
- At the 2017 National Convention, delegates chose M4A as a national priority, as well as other campaigns and issues. They didn't choose housing justice, yet as many chapters currently work on housing justice as healthcare justice. **What is a national priority in DSA—is it what delegates vote on at convention, or is it what chapter organizers choose to do in their local contexts? How could (or should) DSA's leadership relate to these different kinds of priorities?**
- This survey has some important findings about what chapters work on. **But what else should be surveyed? And what resources should we devote to producing such surveys? Are surveys the best way to learn this?**

# methods

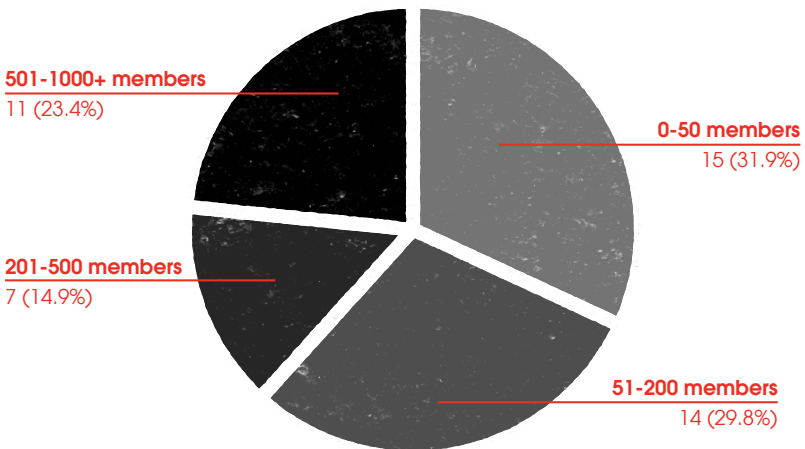
## SURVEY DISTRIBUTION AND RESPONSES

The “What We’re Building Survey” posed three questions (in addition to requesting respondent information): “What is your chapter currently working on?” “What has your chapter worked on in the past?” and “What do you perceive other chapters to be working on?” We distributed the survey to chapters and organizers through messages from Build’s Twitter account. We accepted responses for one month in the winter of 2018.

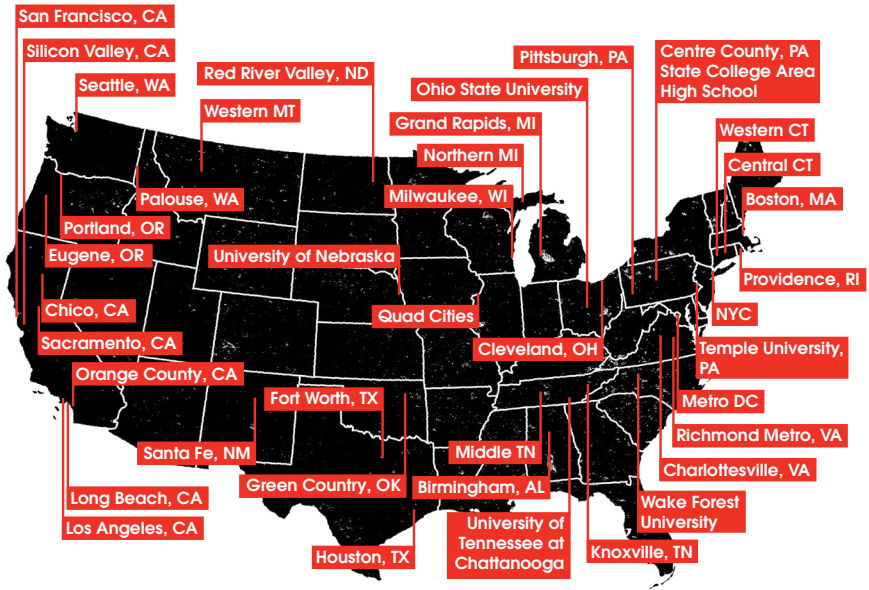
We received 44 responses, which were coded and analyzed for redundancies. Out of a total 261 chapters nationwide, including YDS chapters, our sample represented 17% of total chapters. While small, this sample’s findings are reasonably representative statistically of the full chapter population (see Appendix A for sampling limitations).

## SAMPLE

The size and geographic distributions of chapters who responded to the survey was roughly even:



(Figure 1, Chart of Respondent Chapter Sizes)



(Figure 2. Map of Geographic Distribution of Respondent Chapters)

## THEMATIC CODING

We used [Dedoose](#), a qualitative research software, to code survey responses for themes. Out of 44 survey responses, 40 themes emerged. Some excerpts were themed multiple times for both issue and tactic (see below for more on this distinction). Responses were anonymized for the purpose of coding and all information was secured by password-protected Airtable and Dedoose accounts, visible to a team of four researchers and organizers (see Appendix A for limitations on our methods).

# analysis

We found 40 themes in survey responses:

Antifascist Work, Antiracist Work, BDS, Ballot Initiatives, Brake Light Campaign, Candidate Campaigns, Coalition Work, College for All, Criminal Justice, Debt, Decarceration, Direct Action, Eco-socialism, General Electoral, Healthcare Justice, Housing justice, Immigration Justice, Inter-chapter Work, Internal Chapter Work, Labor, LGBTQ, M4A, MeToo, Minimum Wage, Mutual Aid, Not a chapter yet/OC Development, Police Abolition, Political Education, Reading Group, Public Education, Religion, Reproductive Rights, Sex Worker Organizing, Socialist Feminism, Solidarity Economy, and Transportation.

We then analyzed the frequency of these themes in the responses. Figure 3 below shows what issues chapters are working on by percentage. To find this rate, we counted the number of mentions across chapters and eliminated redundancies. The number to the right of each issue is the percentage of chapters in our sample that reported working on that issue. (Note: The numbers won't add up to 100% since chapters work on multiple issues.)

We found that most chapters in our sample work on healthcare justice (45%) and housing justice (43%). After that, labor is the next most mentioned issue (38.6%), followed by criminal justice (33%). On the lower end, we found fewer than one in ten chapters are working on antiracism, boycott, divestment, and sanctions, College For All, and debt.



Issue	Percentage of Chapters Working on Issue
Healthcare Justice	45%
Housing	43%
Labor	38.6%
Criminal Justice	33%
Immigration Justice	27%
Eco-Socialism	20%
LGBTQ	18%
Solidarity Economy	18%
Antifascism	16%
Socialist Feminism	16%
Reproductive Rights	16%
Internal Chapter Work	16%
Public Education	11%
Voting Rights	11%
Antiracism	9%
BDS	7%
College-For-All	7%
Debt	4.5%

*(Figure 3, Table of Chapter Issues)*

Respondents reported working on two campaigns that have a national presence across chapters: advocating for M4A legislation and operating brake light clinics. Respondents did not categorize these campaigns as any particular issue, mentioning them specifically instead. Because advocating for M4A legislation is primarily focused on healthcare justice, and the majority of healthcare justice work is on M4A, we combined these two categories. More than a quarter of total respondents (34%) wrote M4A specifically, while others listed different healthcare initiatives (e.g., “free flu shot clinic”). Still others reported work on reproductive rights, such as exposing fake clinics and abortion rights, which politically we consider essential to healthcare justice, but respondents reported separately. Yet we did not combine the brake lights clinic into any category, as it does not fit so easily. A quarter of chapters (25%) reported working on that campaign specifically.

We therefore put these campaigns together in a separate table to show the nearly equal extent to which chapters are working on them.

As shown below in Figure 4, we found only a seven percent difference between chapters who advocate for M4A legislation and chapters that run brake clinics.

<b>Campaign</b>	<b>Percentage of Chapters Working on Campaign</b>
Medicare for All Campaign	34%
Brake Light Campaign	25%

*(Figure 4, Table of Chapter Campaigns)*

Finally, Figure 5 below shows how chapters work on issues, or the tactics they use. We calculated these percentages the same way we calculated those in Figure 2. Mutual aid is the top single tactic (48%), followed by coalition work (43%), and political education (36%). For our understanding of mutual aid, see Appendix B.

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Percentage of Chapters Using Tactic</b>
Mutual Aid	48%
Coalition Work	43%
Political Education	36%
Direct Action	32%
Ballot Initiatives	29.5%*
Candidate Campaigns	27%*

*(Figure 5, Table of Chapter Tactics)*

Nearly half of chapters use mutual aid as a tactic for their organizing. However, notice the last two tactics—ballot initiatives and candidate campaigns—are coded separately due to their distinctiveness. Yet they are arguably both “electoral work.” We put asterisks next to these numbers because if we combine them into a broader category of Electoral Work, we find that more than half of chapters (57%) use that tactic. We therefore find that chapters use mutual aid and electoral almost equally as tactics.

In general, we find that DSA works on healthcare, housing, and criminal justice through a diversity of tactics such as mutual aid, electoral work, and coalition work. When it comes to campaigns, they work nearly equally on advocating for M4A legislation and running brake light clinics.

# discussion

It appears that DSA chapters, nationally, do both electoral work (candidate campaigns and ballot initiatives) and movement work (mutual aid, direct action) equally. **What should we make of DSA's fusion of movement and electoral work? What does it say about the kind of organization that DSA is, and how should that inform DSA's next steps?**

Historically in the United States, organizers have often treated movement work and electoral work as mutually exclusive. While some argue fighting the state while working within it is impossible, others condemn protest as ineffective.

Survey responses here show DSA is doing both. Democratic socialists organize "in the streets" through direct action and mutual aid, and "in institutions" through legislative lobbying, pressuring entrenched organizations, and electoral campaigns.

This multifaceted approach is far from unprecedented for a socialist organization. What makes DSA unique is the sheer size of the organization compared to other such groups. In the past several years, we have endorsed and campaigned for dozens of candidates for office, while simultaneously establishing mutual aid and direct action programs. Now that we have clearer picture of that multifaceted approach, what should we make of DSA as an organization?

At the 2017 national convention, delegates chose Medicare for All as a national priority, as well as other campaigns and issues. They did not choose housing justice. Yet housing justice is clearly an issue that chapter organizers are working on. **What is a national priority in DSA—is it what delegates vote on at convention, or is it what chapter organizers choose to do in their local contexts? How could (or should) DSA’s leadership relate to these different kinds of priorities?**

Despite selecting three priorities at the 2017 National Convention, chapters have, as part of our existing federated structure, voted with their feet to work on other priorities. Chapters also operate along a variety of political and tactical lines.

Regardless of whether or not DSA *should* limit this variety, this on-the-ground reality has implications for the kind of organizational leadership needed at the national level. Building strong national campaigns with broad involvement across chapters may require a collaborative effort at the level of strategic planning beyond passing resolutions or writing platforms at the 2019 Convention. Rather than seeing different tactical choices—such as a flu clinic, state level legislation or fighting a hospital closure—as a threat to a national campaign, these could be embraced from the start as they further our overall work towards M4A legislation at the federal level. Convention priorities can’t (and won’t) be the end of the organization’s initiatives, since the world moves too quickly and acute issues arise. For example, our national organization could reflect the nimbleness and adaptability of our chapters.

But how? How could leadership honor that adaptability? How might DSA leaders and paid organizers make the best use of our organization’s diversity of issues and tactics with the relatively limited resources the organization has? We know that DSA national is organizing regional pre-conventions. How can these pre-conventions match the organization’s diversity? Should there be other sorts of events that put chapter organizers in touch with each other to share ideas?

This survey has found some important things about what chapters work on. **But what else should be surveyed? And how many resources should go into producing such surveys?**

Given that DSA is working on so many things, what other questions should DSA organizers research and survey? For instance, what are DSA chapters' resources? How does that affect the decisions they make? Could it be that the tension between electoral and movement work is often a product of limitations on DSA's resources, rather than ideology?

Or another example: DSA members broadly support using a variety of tactics to ensure that people with different abilities and skills can fully participate in DSA's work. Why? Does this have to do with specific circumstances they face? For example, campaigns which heavily rely on door-to-door canvassing may place a high value on members who can physically handle such activities, while limiting the participation of members who cannot. Although certain issues or tactics may be more naturally conducive to enabling participation for all members, any meeting can lack interpreters for the deaf. For a chapter with a large territory, online meetings might be a big boost to attendance. Are chapters moving away from having social events at bars or is that just anecdotal? What about accessibility? Gathering together all the ways in which chapters have approached accessibility would be just one way for chapters to share their learning with one another.

Above all, this team would love to know more about chapter resources and chapter needs. What do members lack in order to accomplish their goals? What is the most useful book DSA members have read on socialism? What feels safe in your organizing and what feels scary? How do you want your chapter to feel to a new person? Building a shared community of struggle takes this kind of sharing and getting into the tough stuff.

# conclusion

The Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky explained that childhood growth happens through a “zone of proximal development”: a zone, or stage, between being unable to reach a goal and then reaching it. Studying how young children learn (or going from not being able to do things to being able to do them), Vygotsky noticed that the context (e.g., where they were and who they were with) affected their development. The right support helped usher children through such zone toward the learning of new skills.

The two basic takeaways from Vygotsky’s research are that to reach a goal: (1) the next step is based on where you are developmentally, and (2) you must carefully consider context when determining how to take that next step.

Teachers learn about Vygotsky because he demonstrated that learning is dependent on context and stages, which requires teachers to deeply understand their students. This is a vital lesson for those working to develop the skills and knowledge of others.

We think effectively prescribing what DSA should do nationally requires describing what DSA is already doing locally (across the nation), and presenting that description to the membership for discussion.

In this report, we’ve described where DSA is at with its chapter work. As we approach the next national convention, we hope this report spurs a thoughtful discussion among DSA’s national leadership, but more importantly its organizers throughout the country. DSA’s potential to continue building a mass movement for socialism over the next two years is positively awesome, in the truest sense of the word. We believe empowering all of the organization’s chapters will best position us to realize that potential to the fullest extent possible.

We’re so excited to join you in your pursuit of a better world, we hope you’ll join us.

# appendix a:

## limitations

**Unofficial.** We recognize that this report is not an official document solicited by a formal process of the Democratic Socialists of America. Respondents to the survey were both chapter activists and chapter leaders, though there was no imperative or official approval for particular members, such as chapter leaders, to fill it out. Given that no one in the organization has undertaken this type of project before, we present the results as a both a first step and provocation. We believe this is the kind of thing DSA's national leaders should be doing regularly and we hope this report inspires that kind of action.

**Saturation.** We recognize that 17% of chapters is not a full survey. The National Census aims for over 60% response rate from its population, for example. However, doing a full survey with volunteer labor and no funding would be difficult. Our findings may have turned out otherwise had we done a full survey. However, given the diversity in size and region, and for the purposes of this report, we believe our sample is representative of the population of DSA chapters currently doing work.

# appendix b:

## select survey response

### raw data

Below are the raw survey responses behind the numbers in the report, specifically when it comes to mutual aid. Chapters mentioned the term “mutual aid” seven times in the data. While we might offer a definition or argument as to our definition of mutual aid, specific projects listed by respondents illustrate it better. We therefore use the term broadly to name how DSA chapters are engaged in work that directly benefits communities affected by disparate and unjust social forces. We used this broad definition when coding the following responses:

Community service projects, winter charity drive, free flu shot clinic, medical debt clinics, mobile hydration teams, “unconditionally give out money to those asking for it”, internal education support for people that need help with classes, GED, SAT, etc, disaster relief: “still doing muck and gut for houses”, Building Community through Food Project, vaccine clinics, medkit creation, public park cleanups, item collection for fires in Northern California, hosting a “found family Thanksgiving”, collecting supplies for a local mutual aid organization, “working to help the homeless population”, giving vegan meals to unhoused individuals, period packs to unhoused individuals, donation drives, “creating a skill sharing document to build community”, community clean up, weekly free store, dump cleanups, fundraising for a bail fund, “partnering with a local BLM chapter to raise more than 10k in a 12-hour telethon for the Black Mama Bailout”, community picnic in the local park for houseless folks, and “raised over \$400 for disaster relief organizations”.



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