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USA

Julia Salazar, DSA Member, Wins Democratic Primary Election for NY Senate What Does the Election Mean for DSA and the Left?

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While Salazar won, two other DSA-endorsed Democratic Party statewide candidates, actress and public school advocate Cynthia Nixon for governor and NYC city council member Jumaane D. Williams for lieutenant governor, both lost. And Zephyr Teachout also lost. Teachout, the progressive candidate for attorney general, was endorsed by Salazar and by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The latter, another DSA member, had won a stunning victory in the Democratic primary for the U.S. Congress in January. Turnout for this election was extraordinarily high, with 1.5 million casting votes this time, more than double the 600,000 voters four years ago.

The question now “after the victories of DSA member Ocasio-Cortez in a congressional primary and Salazar in the state senate primary as well as DSA victories in other races around the country” is what does DSA’s electoral strategy mean for DSA, for the left, and for the movement generally. Should the left plunge into Democratic Party races to push that party to the left and change the direction of the country? Should it run Democratic candidates to build the socialist movement, and to win more recruits to DSA and other organizations? Must we run such candidates as socialists, or simply as progressives, or as regular Democrats? Or should we draw the conclusion that while these two races and some others where DSA members were candidates were successful, the strategy has limited effectiveness outside of very particular circumstances? Or, as some in DSA and other parts of the left argue, is DSA being drawn into coalitions with progressive organizations and into the party, where it will have little weight or impact, while being gradually compromised by the corrupt political system? Before we turn to those questions, let’s look at the experience of this election.

Julia Salazar’s Campaign

Thanks to the phone-banking and door-knocking of many DSA members and other supporters “activists knocked on 10,000 doors and spoke to 100,000 potential voters” Salazar defeated incumbent Martin Dilan by 59 to 42 percent. She conducted her campaign in a changing neighborhood, once largely Puerto Rican, but now more Central American, increasingly gentrified, and simply more diverse, a neighborhood no longer to be counted on by its longtime Puerto Rican senator who, Salazar argued, was out of touch with his constituents. [1] Salazar, who grew up in Florida before she came to study at Columbia University, was relatively new to the neighborhood, as Dilan was quick to point out. But then too, many other residents were also newcomers.

Salazar’s campaign website described her as, “a proud staff organizer for Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, a

key partner in the Communities United for Police Reform coalition, and a leader in the Democratic Socialists of America. As a member of the Bushwick community, she has been a tireless advocate for her neighbors and fellow tenants.” Her description goes on:

Julia’s decade of experience as a local community organizer has brought her from the streets of Bushwick to the halls of Albany. She has protested, picketed, lobbied, and organized to achieve a more just New York. From working with her neighbors to fight for their legal right to safe housing to demanding criminal justice reforms at the city and state levels, Julia has been at the forefront of campaigns for social justice in New York. [2]

Salazar ran on a broad progressive platform but she emphasized the fight against gentrification, calling for “The expansion of the rent stabilization system to cover all New York apartments, so that no tenant is faced with the prospect of suddenly being evicted from their homes.” [3] Her opponent Martin Dilan had over the years accepted \$200,000 from real estate interests, belonging to anti-tenant organizations “including one headed by landlord Donald Trump” and he had a very poor record in terms of defending tenants’ rights. [4]

While NYC DSA had endorsed Nixon and Williams, the organization concentrated its efforts on the Salazar campaign, for which it provided staff, 2,000 campaign workers, including social and graphic media talent, and a powerful canvassing operation, as well as other resources. Salazar presented herself and the media also saw her as part of a constellation of progressives, among them many young women of color, who are challenging Democratic Party moderates not only in New York State but around the country. [5] These candidates constitute the bluest part of what Democrats hope will be the blue wave inundating the midterm elections. In addition to DSA, Salazar was also endorsed by a slew of progressive organizations that included the Working Families Party, Our Revolution, the Brooklyn and New York Progressive Action Networks, Citizen Action, New York Communities for Change, the immigrant group Make the Road, Women of Color for Progress, and two labor unions, the United Auto Workers and the Communications Workers of America. [6]

Salazar overcame a barrage of publicity locally, nationally, and even internationally about her most complicated and unclear personal history: Was she a Columbian immigrant or a native-born American? Was she Christian or Jewish? Was she raised “hard scrabble” as she claimed or comfortably well-off as her \$600,000 trust fund would suggest? Had she graduated from Columbia University as she stated, or had she attended but never graduated as records indicated? How had she gone from conservative Christian anti-abortion activist to democratic socialist? Was she guilty of stealing the identity of the wife of NY Mets first baseman Keith Hernandez, for which Salazar was arrested though not convicted? And did she have an affair with the athlete as suggested in court documents, though denied by her and Hernandez? And then on the day before the election came her accusation that David Keyes, an aide to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had sexually assaulted her, a charge he denies. While these articles raised questions about her judgment, her honesty, and her character, Salazar and DSA dismissed them all as a smear campaign. But her constituents apparently didn’t pay attention, didn’t care, or weren’t convinced that any of that mattered. Voters were evidently more moved by her as a candidate, by her progressive platform, and convinced by the DSA door-knockers.

A DSA member who worked on her campaign observed, “Julia is not a natural politician. I think her victory was a testament to running an ideas- and policy-based campaign, plus having a really dedicated pool of organizers who consistently got the ideas out into the community. She won despite not being a natural politician, and despite every doubt-inducing scandal that was released about her.”

Who were the 26,000 people who voted for Salazar? Her district, like many in New York, has been undergoing gentrification, which means an influx of some downwardly mobile young white people as well as new groups of people of color even as some older residents are being forced by rising rents to move. [7] While we do not yet have the data, probably much as in the case of Ocasio Cortez, Salazar won votes from both of these groups: older

residents facing rising rents or notices of eviction and newer residents moving into small, high rent apartments. [8] These populations in flux provided a de facto coalition that took its grievances to the polls and voted for Salazar.

The Nixon, Williams, and Teachout Campaigns

The other DSA-endorsed candidates, Nixon for governor and Williams for lieutenant governor, were both soundly defeated. Nixon was crushed. Governor Andrew Cuomo, usually described as a “moderate Democrat” but perhaps best understood as a representative of banking and real estate interests, defeated Nixon, well known for her role as Miranda in *Sex and the City*, by a vote of 65.6 to 34.4. Williams made a respectable showing being defeated by Cuomo’s running mate, incumbent Kathy Hochul, by a vote of 53.3 to 46.7. Both Nixon and Williams failed to convince more conservative upstate voters, many in small cities, towns, and rural areas that they could represent their interests.

Nixon, until recently a neoliberal Democrat who had endorsed Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, attempted under the influence of the Bernie Sanders victory to transform herself into one of the new, progressive women like Ocasio-Cortez. [9] She described herself as being akin to a democratic socialist, writing; “Some more establishment, corporate Democrats get very scared by this term but if being a democratic socialist means that you believe health care, housing, education and the things we need to thrive should be a basic right not a privilege then count me in.” [10] This was democratic socialism a la Sanders, without mention of taking over the banks and corporations and organizing a democratically planned and operated economy. But it was good enough for her purposes. She elaborated a very progressive political platform, and worked with DSA to develop the planks on labor, overcoming an anti-labor remark made early in her campaign. [11] [12]

In the televised, but perhaps not much viewed, debates between Cuomo and Nixon, the political novice held her own and even gave a wonderfully radical answer to a question about the labor planks in her platform, pointing to the importance of the recent West Virginia teachers’ wildcat strikes in fighting to defend and improve public education. [13] DSA’s labor advisors no doubt helped prep her for that one. Yet Nixon couldn’t overcome the doubts of many voters that a woman with no political or administrative experience should run the state government. And one campaign worker told me when Nixon’s name was mentioned more than one voter said they weren’t interested in that “rich white woman.” Above all, it was the Cuomo juggernaut that defeated Nixon.

Jumaane Williams, DSA-endorsed candidate for lieutenant governor, represented something altogether different: a militant, Black, working-class tenant activist-politician. Williams, whose parents are from the island of Grenada, grew up in the Afro-Caribbean neighborhoods of Brooklyn, graduated from Brooklyn Technical High School and from Brooklyn College. First elected to the New York City Council in 2009, he has served three terms and has been an outspoken critic of police violence, an advocate for affordable housing, and a fighter for immigrant rights. Calling himself both a democratic socialist and an activist public official, he has been arrested several times in protests over a variety of issues, most recently in a demonstration protesting plans to deport immigration activist Ravi Ragbir. [14] Williams lost his election, but his vote was ten percent higher than that of Nixon, likely due to a combination of his strong base in the NYC Black community as well as the incumbent candidate he faced being a less well-known candidate.

While Zephyr Teachout was not endorsed by DSA, the endorsements extended by DSA candidates Ocasio-Cortez and Salazar (without consultation with the NYC DSA membership) draw her into this assessment. The attorney general’s (AG) race resulted from the resignation of the liberal Democrat AG Eric Schneiderman after four women charged him with sexual and physical abuse, leading to his resignation. The progressive Teachout, a law professor at Fordham University, has been striving for several years now to become a politician. She ran in the Democratic

primary for governor against Andrew Cuomo in 2014 and lost by a vote of 34 to 66 percent. She then ran for Congress in 2016 in the 19th Congressional District, winning in the Democratic Party primary but losing to the Republican in the general election. And then this year she ran for attorney general.

A strident critic of Hillary Clinton, Teachout had worked for Bernie Sanders and won his endorsement of her campaign. And she featured DSA member Ocasio-Cortez's endorsement prominently on the front page of her website. Teachout's progressive platform should have recommended her to many New York State voters, but failed to do so, perhaps mostly because of her apparent lack of practical experience as a lawyer. [15] And Teachout's opponent, Letitia James, New York City Public Advocate and ally of Cuomo, was formidable. [16] She had a long history of political activism and name recognition and if elected would become the first Black woman to ever hold statewide office in New York. In the end James defeated Teachout, winning 40.6 percent of the vote, while Teachout won only 31 percent, the rest being divided by two other candidates. So in statewide races, DSA-endorsed candidates, Nixon and Williams " and Teachout who was endorsed by DSA members Ocasio and Salazar " were all defeated.

We should also note that progressive forces such as Indivisible and the Working Families Party convinced voters to defeat six incumbent members of the Independent Democratic Conference, a group of Democrats, protected by Cuomo, who often aligned themselves with the Republicans and defeated much progressive legislation. [17] While this is very good, it is not what The Nation so giddily calls "a revolution in New York politics." [18] Forcing Democrats to be Democrats can hardly even be called a reform. But if it gives some more momentum to progressive developments, that will be good.

What Have We Learned?

So let's return to some of the questions we raised earlier about what this all means from the perspective of the left, progressives, and the Democratic Party.

The first general observation might be that if we on the left thought that there would be shift at this time in the Democratic Party from its politically moderate " and many would say inveterately corrupt " leadership to the left, we were mistaken. Cuomo, who ran as the anti-Trump, had the backing of virtually the entire Democratic Party and all of the major unions, as well as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and all of the major LGBT groups. The governor has for years used the old tools of professional politics " favors and fear " to build and maintain his machine and to ruthlessly punish those who fail to follow instructions. [19] And many Democrats have become convinced that in these times, in order to fight and to defeat President Donald Trump, it is necessary to resist the left, hold the middle ground and pull more conservative voters toward the Democratic Party. At least in New York State, the moderates have been able to keep the progressives at bay.

Second, we should note that both Ocasio-Cortez and Salazar won in relatively small compact districts in New York City, even though those small districts have hundreds of thousands of residents. In these districts, however, one can win a primary election " elections in which generally few participate " with a relatively small number of votes. In Ocasio-Cortez's race for U.S. House district 14, only about 30,000 votes were cast, of which she won about 16,000 while incumbent Joseph Crowley got 12,000. [20] Similarly, Salazar won her race with 20,600 votes to Dilan's 14,600. Since DSA has about 5,000 members in New York City and because it is capable of mobilizing hundreds to work in local campaigns, it is possible for the organization to have a very significant impact on the election outcome. [21] And it has been able to do this in districts where there is very little participation in the campaigns from local residents. In upstate New York, DSA has several chapters, but they are much smaller and it is more difficult for them to have an impact on the geographically larger and demographically less compact districts. [22] So DSA could not do much to move voters upstate. And in the statewide elections, media plays a larger role than it does in local elections

and Cuomo's campaign with its multi-million dollar war chest dominated TV and other media advertising, dwarfing Nixon's modest campaign resources and lower media profile.

Third, NYC DSA members have by and large supported what has become, through both formal decisions and actual practice, the organization's political approach, which can be described as preferring to endorse DSA members, being willing to endorse other progressives in the Democratic Party, and being willing to consider and to sometimes back a Green Party or other left candidate. NYC DSA's political strategy is also based on building its own independent political campaign organization "doing its own research, maintaining its own organization, keeping its own data bases, developing its own materials" even when it works on or cooperates with non-DSA Democratic Party or other candidates. [23] NYC DSA has also eschewed becoming involved in the snares of the Democratic Party clubs and committees. All of this is good though it is no guarantee against being influenced by or in the long run even absorbed into the Democratic Party.

The emphasis has been on building an organizationally independent operation, but DSA's political identity has become blurred in the recent election. Consider Ocasio-Cortez who as soon as she was elected ran away with Bernie Sanders to support Democratic Party candidates in Kansas. Since he lost the presidential election, Sanders has spent an enormous amount of time and energy trying to rebuild the Democratic Party in his image with quite mixed success, and now he has taken the DSA's leading figure in hand and drawn her into the same project. [24] And it was not hard for him to do so. Then too both Ocasio-Cortez and Salazar felt that once they had been endorsed by DSA they were free to endorse others, no matter what their comrades might have thought, and they both endorsed Zephyr Teachout. So, finally, once the New York State election campaigns were in process, DSA's candidates became part of the blur of progressive candidates for change and good things generally. Some DSA members think this is a good thing, identifying DSA with a developing mass movement for change, a movement that DSA can even influence. Others like myself see the danger of being drawn into a powerful undertow, the force of which, though not always immediately visible, is derived from the Democratic Party's institutional and financial power, the NGOs and unions aligned with it, and the media it influences.

Ben Beckett, an NYC DSA member, has written an article for Jacobin titled "We're on a Winning Streak" that recognizes the problem of maintaining socialists' independence from the Democratic Party. [25] He writes:

...the Left must follow Salazar's lead and work to cohere a distinct and consistent collective political identity based on a material analysis of society, the centrality of working-class solidarity and struggle against the capitalist class, and simple-to-understand, class-wide reforms that bring concrete benefits to voters at the expense of capitalists.

While Salazar and her supporters argued against gentrification and called for single-payer health care for all, there was not much that approximated Beckett's ringing socialist prose. I think few of Salazar's supporters voted for a struggle against the capitalist class and many may not even have known she is a socialist or what a socialist is. And I should say, unlike Beckett, I don't think winning single payer would represent a step toward socialism, though the reform would be good and the fight most important. While Salazar won a real victory, it is not clear at this point what it means for the voters or for DSA. The real test of DSA's strategy will come not with elections, but with candidates actually serving in political office and seeing if they can operate not as politicians but as leaders of a left movement that is not fundamentally electoral. We have in the United States almost no models of this sort of leadership, and the creation of such a leadership will be difficult, since the Democratic Party will do everything possible to crush it. For example, Salazar's district is 50 percent Latinx, though most of her campaign workers came from the young, mostly white, largely professional DSA members. [26] Can DSA build a movement and an organization in that district made up largely of the Latinx working class? Can DSA through this and other such election campaigns transform itself into a more diverse working-class organization?

Finally, DSA's electoral successes come at a time when the labor and social movements remain flat. We have hoped

and continue to hope that the West Virginia teachers strikes, in which some DSA members played an important role, and which encouraged other such strikes in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, Colorado, and North Carolina, would be the beginning of a labor upsurge. And we hope that such an upheaval would take on the rank-and-file character of the West Virginia strike. But in fact, contrary to some recent reports in Jacobin, working-class struggle remains rare; there is no strike wave. [27] [28]

Socialists have always understood, that it is working-class struggle, the unions, workers centers, left organizations and the social movements based on oppressed groups that drive political change. DSA's electoral victories will in the long run only become meaningful if we have a working-class upsurge in the United States on the scale of the 1930s or the 1960s and 70s. Many of DSA's members in the unions are working to build a socialist organization that can play a role in such movement when it comes. At the same time, they recognize that a rank-and-file movement must have an independent political party to express its demands. A socialist movement in the United States depends on such a working-class uprising in order to finally break the hold of the Democratic Party over the working class and to create the possibility for today's election victories to become tomorrow's revolutionary socialist movement.

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