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## Democrats struggle for the soul of the party as midterms approach

As activists clash with the establishment, the party embraces some ideas from the left but also customizes campaigns based on district demographics.



Sen. Bernie Sanders stumps for Michigan Democratic gubernatorial candidate Abdul El-Sayed in Detroit Aug. 5. Photo Credit: AP/Carlos Osorio

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In June, the Progressive Change Campaign Committee declared victories after Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of the Bronx and Dana Balter of Syracuse upset their Democratic Party-favored rivals to secure nominations for the U.S. House.

“The battle for the heart and soul of the Democratic Party was on display tonight in New York’s primaries,” the committee said in a statement, arguing that the best way to invigorate voters was “not old-school candidates running establishment campaigns or who are fueled by corporate money.”

In March, Justice Democrats and two other left-wing groups launched a petition condemning the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in part for publishing opposition research against Texas primary candidate Laura Moser in a manner it ordinarily would do against a Republican.

“The DCCC has begun an all-out war against progressives,” Saikat Chakrabarti, executive director of Justice Democrats, said in a statement.

Activist groups clashed with establishment ones throughout the primary season.

But with the general election approaching, it is the establishment that notched more nominations — doing so with custom approaches that boost moderates in some corners of the country and progressives in others.

After all, the Democratic Party's goal is to take back the U.S. House and pick up U.S. Senate and governor seats, political experts say.

### **Establishment wins**

Party committees, including the DCCC, had a 95 percent win rate in open primaries for the Senate, House and governorships as of mid-August, according to an analysis by data-crunching website FiveThirtyEight.

The PCCC was at 67 percent and Justice Democrats was at 32 percent, the study showed.

Meanwhile, a Brookings Institution analysis found that as of mid-August, non-incumbent Democratic candidates for the House who were coded establishment had 107 wins compared to 74 by those coded progressive.

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“The Democratic leadership has played a very careful game of trying to find the best candidates in each district regardless of their ideology,” said Elaine Kamarck, a Brookings senior fellow and co-author of the study. “But more attuned to: Are they of the district? Can they win the district? Do they have experience?”

The DCCC never uses ideology when deciding whom to place in its "Red to Blue" program, a list of districts it deems mostly like to flip from GOP to Democrat, a DCCC aide said, speaking on the condition of anonymity. Thirty-nine of 41 of the candidates in the program won nominations, the aide said.

In Moser's case, in Texas' 7th District, the DCCC had determined she did not have the best chance to unseat GOP incumbent Rep. John Culberson. In the end, after the DCCC memo painted her as "a Washington insider," Moser lost to the more moderate Lizzie Pannill Fletcher. The Cook Political Report has rated the district “Republican toss up.”

In New York's 24th District, Balter defeated the DCCC-funded Juanita Perez Williams and has replaced her on the "Red to Blue" list. Balter is trailing Republican incumbent Rep. John Katko by 15 points, a Spectrum News/Siena College poll found.

In the state's 14th District, Ocasio-Cortez unseated 10-term Rep. Joseph Crowley, the fourth-ranking Democrat in the House. She is expected to easily beat GOP challenger Anthony Pappas in November in the deep-blue district.

But her success hasn't always been transferable. Her Democratic socialism and call to abolish the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency hasn't resonated around New York, let alone the country.

In Thursday's state primary, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo cruised to a nomination, bringing with him Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul and New York City Public Advocate Letitia James for attorney general.

Cuomo challenger Cynthia Nixon in her concession speech said the left will fight on "because before we can take our country back, we have to take our party back."

**‘Not a fight to the death’**

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Earlier this month in Massachusetts' 7th District, Boston city councilor Ayanna Pressley unseated 10-term Rep. Michael Capuano with what she called a "disruptive candidacy." Pressley, who ran to the left of the liberal Capuano, has no GOP challenger in November.

One week before that, Sanders-backed Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum scored an unexpected victory over former Rep. Gwen Graham, a centrist, in Florida's gubernatorial primary.

Manuel Pastor, a sociology professor at the University of Southern California, noted that Graham at the end of the night offered her support to Gillum in his next fight against former GOP Rep. Ron DeSantis, who has closely aligned himself with President Donald Trump. Similarly, Capuano in conceding the race to Pressley said he believed she would be a good congresswoman.

"It is a struggle and a battle and a whatever for the heart of the Democratic Party, but it's not a fight to the death," Pastor said. "This is a party sorting itself out."

Our Revolution, inspired by Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), claimed a victory alongside Gillum and pointed to wins by other Democratic nominees they've endorsed in governor's races, Ben Jealous in Maryland and Stacey Abrams in Georgia, as evidence the group has "been ahead of the curve on a lot of historic candidates this year."

Our Revolution communications director Diane May added that the group believes the national party should place a greater emphasis on ideology, but said the goal is to have progressives and the establishment work together as they did in backing Abrams.

"There's key differences that we're happy to battle out — so to speak — and have voters decide on," May said. "It's a necessary back-and-forth that has to happen; you can't have change without a little bit of chaos."

### **Leftward Lean?**

The tensions this election cycle began in 2016 in the presidential primary featuring Sanders and the eventual nominee Hillary Clinton, political experts say. Today, some of Sanders' more progressive policies have since made their way into the national party's platform, they say.

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“The center of gravity of the party is closer now to Bernie Sanders than it was to Hillary Clinton,” said Brad Bannon, a Democratic consultant and pollster based in Washington, D.C.

The authors of the FiveThirtyEight study noted that since Nixon's entry into New York's gubernatorial race, Cuomo embraced liberal priorities such as the legalization of recreational marijuana and voting rights for parolees.

Kamarck and her co-author in the Brookings study cited the more than 100 Democratic incumbents who signed on to the “Medicare for all” bill earlier this year and wrote: “While the primary season so far may not indicate a takeover or takedown of the establishment, the progressives are having an impact.”

But Rose Kapolczynski, a Los Angeles-based Democratic strategist who managed Barbara Boxer’s Senate campaigns, said she expects pragmatism to win out on Medicare for all.

“If you ask a lot of Democrats running right now whether they’re for Medicare for all, I think the vast majority of them would say, ‘Yes, but where are the votes to pass it?’” Kapolczynski said.

Meanwhile, the push to abolish ICE, embraced by Ocasio-Cortez, Pressley, Gillum and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), has far less support in the party.

It is part of Justice Democrats’ platform but not Our Revolution’s. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) called in June for the dismantling of ICE but sought to clarify to the Post-Star in Glen Falls last week that she wanted to replace the agency. Sen. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) called for a revamping of ICE rather than an abolishment.

Sanders, who like Warren, Gillibrand and Harris is floated as a 2020 contender, dodged the question in June, then tweeted in July that he wanted to abolish the system as it is and work on “restructuring the agencies that enforce our immigration laws, including ICE.”

The Democratic Party is presenting a united front as it moves on to the midterms.

"With the House primary season officially behind us, it is clear that the DCCC has recruited candidates with deep records of service, bipartisan credibility, and

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resonant health care and economic messages who are ready to win," the group's executive director Dan Sena wrote Friday in an open memo.

“You have these fights in the primaries, you have these battles that go on," added Steven Schale, a Tallahassee, Florida-based Democratic consultant who directed Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign in the state. “But in the end, we all want to beat Trump. That is very much where we are.”

Emily Ngo covers the White House and national politics for Newsday, having followed President Donald Trump to Washington, D.C., after following him on the campaign trail.

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