

# State of DSA 2024–25

Prepared by the Growth and Development Committee for  
Presentation at the 2025 National Convention

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Note on “How to read this paper” for readers unfamiliar with this format/want to skim:

1. Start with Abstract and Introduction to get an overview of what we did and why
2. Skip Methodology and Findings
3. Read Discussion and Conclusion to get the punchline
4. If you are interested in the details of how we did our research and exactly what we discovered, then read Methodology and Findings
5. Future Work is a list of ideas for further research

## Abstract

DSA has existed since the 1980s, but the last decade has completely transformed our organization. Our membership is more than 10 times larger than it was ten years ago, and these quantitative changes have translated to qualitative shifts in how we organize and relate to each other.

What leads some chapters to grow their membership as others struggle to find traction? Which factors contribute to members’ long term engagement in DSA? How has our organization changed throughout the past few years?

In this report, we identify key trends and factors related to membership recruitment and retention as well as common challenges and best practices for engagement, political education, and leadership development at the chapter level. We also outline several “phases” of DSA’s recent history: from an initial burst of membership in 2016, to the rapid formation of new chapters, followed by a period of moderate membership decline.

As of writing in mid-2025, DSA is again in the middle of a broad-based membership upswing in the reaction to the second Trump administration. We hope this report surfaces valuable lessons and stories from our past decade of struggle and inspires members to engage scientifically in their organizing as we embark on a decade of party-building.

# Introduction

*Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone... In their social practice, men engage in various kinds of struggle and gain rich experience, both from their successes and from their failures.*

— Mao Zedong “On Practice” (1937)

Today, in 2025, the Democratic Socialists of America is a nascent mass membership organization aspiring to become a party. In the midst of competing political visions within the big tent, we can all agree that our path to power will require recruiting, developing, and relying on our membership to fight for socialism. We must build an organization with more and more members who are collectively more and more capable.

The 2023 Convention tasked the Growth and Development Committee (GDC) with the drafting of this report via the adoption of *Consensus Resolution Amendment B: State Of DSA Reports and At-Large Member Program (Amendment to Consensus Resolution #3: Growth and Development Committee 2023 Convention Resolution)*. We were assigned to document the factors which brought chapters success and identify common challenges.

The vast majority of DSA’s organizing happens at the chapter level. Most members interact with DSA exclusively through their local chapter, rather than with DSA as a single national organization. Our report focuses on chapters as the primary sites of engagement within DSA and their memberships as our primary subject. We compared how chapters recruited, engaged, retained, and otherwise developed members across the national organization.

To do this, we conceptualized the “lifecycle” of a DSA member as follows: initial engagement, consistent participation, politicization within the organization, leadership development, and long-term retention. This framework helped us contextualize the different roles members play within chapters and the different forms of engagement chapters offer to members throughout their development.

In this report, we quantitatively describe the organization over the past decade with a special emphasis on two main drivers of membership growth: recruitment and retention. We find some statistical correlations and identify first year membership retention as a key factor in long term membership retention. We hypothesize that initial engagement at the chapter level is critical for activating and integrating new members in the life of the organization, transforming individual members of the working class into active participants in our liberatory struggle.

Our research also relied heavily on qualitative methods. We used both small group and one-on-one interviews with a variety of chapter members to find common narratives across chapters. This approach allowed us to better understand specific chapters of interest as well

as establish a richer understanding of the context and causes of different trends we discovered in the quantitative analysis.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the hard work and valuable contribution of dozens of comrades over the last two years who made this research possible.

Our core team was composed of professionals and academics from relevant fields (social movement research, economics, political science, and statistics) as well as lay members who eagerly embraced learning new skills and applying them to this project. Our research approach, methods, and final analysis is the synthesis of real-world organizing experience with trained professional research know-how.

Thank you to the members who provided last minute editorial support and feedback prior to publication.

Thank you to the past and present leadership of the Growth and Development Committee, members of the National Political Committee, as well as National DSA Staff who helped facilitate the logistics, gather the privileged data, and coordinate outreach activities needed to conduct the research presented in this report.

Thank you to the dozens of listening session participants and case study interviewees who shared valuable insights into their particular chapter conditions and personal organizing histories. We deeply appreciate members who provided feedback and asked follow up questions following presentations of earlier versions of this research.

And finally, thank you to all DSA members past and present who participated in the often-underappreciated day-to-day work of organizing in your local communities for a better world.

## Methodology

We used both quantitative and qualitative methods to study DSA chapters. Quantitative methods focused on pseudonymized member records. This data was very broad, covering all members past and present, but also relatively crude. To compensate, we lean on qualitative methods to draw out common themes: narratively describing members' journeys and chapter successes and failures where our quantitative data fell short. We also used quantitative methods to identify broad organization-wide trends as well as identify outliers or otherwise interesting chapters for interviews in our case studies.

We started by developing a conceptual framework: a theoretical structure that guided our research. This allowed us to integrate an analysis of chapter structures and activities

alongside an individual members' experience of being in DSA. The framework unified our various methods and allowed us to study the impact of different chapter functions on members.

Note: in this report, we determined membership status by the state of their dues payments. Only people with current dues were considered members at each point in time. This means we only considered "Members in Good Standing" (MIGS) as members in this analysis, not "Constitutional Members."

## Conceptual Framework for Chapter Structure and "Membership Lifecycle"

Our framework is composed of two parts: an "internal/external power" model and a "lifecycle of membership" model.

The "internal/external" power model was used to conceptualize the two primary forms of chapter organizing. Internal power constitutes the organizational capacity, democratic processes, and membership engagement that sustain a chapter. It takes the following forms:

- Membership growth
  - Recruitment strategies
  - Retention mechanisms
  - Attrition drivers
- Chapter structure
  - Leadership models
  - Decision-making processes
  - Role clarity/division of labor
- Internal democracy
  - Transparency in organization
  - Member participation in decisions
  - Accountability mechanisms
- Political education
  - Formal and informal political training
  - Mentorship and onboarding
  - Ideological development

External power constitutes the chapter's ability to influence political and material conditions through collective action. In this conception, external power can take the following forms, among many others: electoral and legislative campaigns, mutual aid, labor organizing, international solidarity, and tenant organizing.

In addition to the "internal/external" power model, we utilized a "Member Lifecycle" model for integrating the internal analysis areas at the chapter level with an individual member's experience over time (see diagram below).

### “Lifecycle” framework for integrating analysis areas

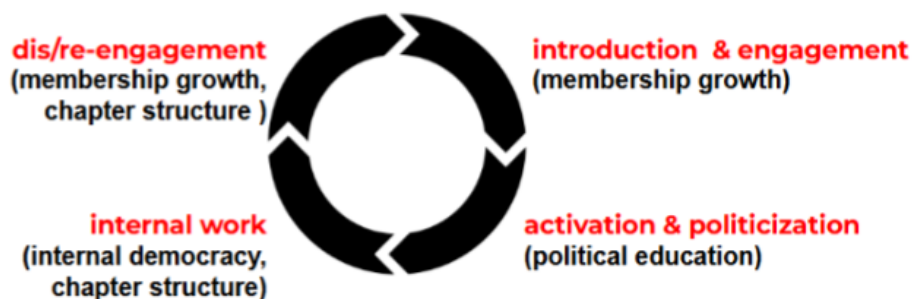


Figure 1

The purpose of this framework is to structure our work such that it gathers information about members at different stages of their lifecycle throughout the organization, from the moment they are introduced to the organization, to the point at which they become deeply involved, or dis/re-engage.

## Quantitative Methods: Member Rolls and Chapter Surveys

Our quantitative methods primarily relied on pseudonymized member records for all members past and present. For each member, we had access to their initial join date, current dues status, current dues payment method, current dues expiry date, current DSA/YDSA chapter membership, and current Zip Code. No names or contact information (phone numbers, email addresses) were shared with the research team.

We also had access to recent chapter surveys performed by the Growth and Development Committee. These surveys ask chapters about a wide variety of topics relating to their current chapter’s internal and external organizing as well as basic statistical descriptors. We were particularly interested in chapters’ self reported outreach and engagement practices.

Finally, we used the officially published aggregate membership statistics to describe high-level trends.

### Limitations of Quantitative Methods

Our primary data source, a snapshot of our membership rolls, is rich in breadth but limited in depth. We have access to all member records past and present (over 175,000 members) but can only see the crudest outline: when a member joined, if and when their dues expired, their most recent dues payment method, and their most recent chapter.

In addition to our inability to track changes to an individual member over time, we are also unable to directly peer into a member’s engagement or disengagement. We do not have accompanying records on whether a member ever attended a meeting or why they chose to leave DSA.

Further, most memberships lapse when their dues expire, meaning that we do not have a clear view on a definitive “end date” to their membership. Rather than a clear “I quit” date (and reason), we only have a “your dues have lapsed and you have not renewed.” This limits the fidelity of our understanding of member tenures: while “I joined DSA” is an active point of engagement and precise datapoint, “dues expired” remains a passive artifact of previous dues payments.

The chapter survey data is entirely self reported which can also skew results. In recent years, the survey received responses from ~60% of chapters. This response rate covers the vast majority of membership which is a strength in itself. On the other hand, we do not control for factors which may lead chapters to be unresponsive which is another aspect of self-reporting bias in our data.

## Possible Sources of Errors and Discrepancies

Because our snapshot of member rolls only contains a member’s current Zip Code, chapter, and dues expiry, we are unable to track historic changes to these values. As a result, we cannot attribute recruitment of a given member correctly if they moved and changed chapters – we only know their current chapter, not the one they joined originally.

For example: if a member joins in 2018 in chapter A, moves to chapter B in 2020, and finally settles in chapter C in 2021 and lapses in 2023, our data only tells us that this lapsed member joined in 2018, dues expired in 2023, and was most recently a member of chapter C. That means we attribute this member toward chapter C’s membership for their entire tenure in DSA from 2018 to 2023. This also means we cannot identify temporary lapses in membership: we only have a member’s original join date and current dues expiry.

Notably, our own aggregations of member rolls yielded a 10-15% discrepancy higher than the officially published aggregate data. We hypothesize that part of this discrepancy can be attributed to our inability to identify gaps in members’ Good Standing status but we cannot eliminate this error entirely. Unless otherwise noted, our analyses rely on our own aggregations of membership rolls for uniformity.

## Qualitative Methods: Listening Sessions and Case Studies

Whereas quantitative data gives us a big picture of “what” is happening, qualitative data gives us the how and why of what is happening. How are certain structures or processes leading to success or creating challenges? Why do some organizing strategies work in big cities but not in rural chapters?

Our quantitative methods took two primary forms: **listening sessions** and **case studies**.

The listening sessions were designed to gather insights from a broad swath of chapters across the country, and the subsequent case studies were held for deeper analysis based on notable listening session findings that warranted further attention.



The content and agendas for the listening sessions and case studies were informed by the framework in the previous section, ensuring that each of the internal and external areas of power were explored, and each section of the lifecycle framework was touched upon.

## Listening Sessions

We conducted two categories of listening sessions conducted based on sections of the member lifecycle described in the qualitative framework: *Recruitment & Retention* (5 sessions) and *Activation & Politicization* (3 sessions). To recruit participants, we issued broad calls for attendance from all chapters, OCs, and at-large members as well as targeted one-on-one outreach to chapters we identified as notable by various metrics depending on the topic. We were successful in recruiting attendees from a variety of chapters and local conditions.

- Total unique attendees: 76 (11 attended both categories of sessions)
- Chapter representation: 44 different chapters & organizing committees (OCs)
  - 90% from chapters, 10% from OCs
  - Size distribution: ~40% small, ~25% medium, ~35% large chapters
- Roles:
  - 80% held leadership positions (chapter co-chairs, member coordinators, committee co-chairs)
  - 20% rank-and-file members

Each listening session was assigned a facilitator who guided discussion and a note-taker to document it. All sessions were recorded. After the meetings, sessions were transcribed and a “coding team” used the notes and transcriptions to summarize key themes in each session using a method called qualitative coding. Qualitative coding is a process of organizing and interpreting qualitative data in order to identify key themes, concepts, and patterns. Coders marked these themes based on the contents of our framework above, noting successes or challenges in internal and external areas of organizing. These themes were collected in documents which were then summarized in the *Findings* section.

## Case Studies

After conducting listening sessions, we identified specific chapters to explore in more depth based on notable themes from the sessions and additional quantitative analysis (documented in *Findings*). State of DSA researchers reached out to chapters through a variety of channels including leadership email addresses, member coordinator lists, and direct communication with members involved in chapter activity at the time and place of the case to be studied. Interviews were conducted with a number of current and former chapter leaders in each chapter and were subsequently transcribed. Each set of interviews were summarized by either the interviewer or another researcher before being integrated into the findings of this report.

## Limitations of Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research offers tools to guide a deep dive into the real life experiences and stories of organizers in DSA, capturing the nuances and context otherwise lost in quantitative work. At the same time, it is inherently limited in its statistical representativeness and objective rigor.

Qualitative research is more easily influenced by researcher bias and interpretation. Its small sample sizes mean results may not apply broadly. Personal or political differences can result in contradictory representations of events. By utilizing multiple methods of study (such as both listening sessions and case studies), and being transparent in our methodology, we mitigate but cannot eliminate these limitations.

Further, while this study aims to report on success and challenges, the research methods and resource limitations used are insufficient to draw concrete conclusions about how the internal dimensions of power (membership growth, chapter structure, internal democracy) truly shape and interact with external power (electoral, labor, tenant organizing). The listening sessions and case studies can only gesture at such relationships generally. Future work should be done to tease out these relationships with more depth and rigor.

Example research questions to pursue include:

- How does internal capacity (e.g., membership size, leadership stability) shape external campaign success?
- What external tactics most effectively recruit and politicize members?

## Findings

### Trends in Membership Gains and Losses

For decades, DSA hovered between five and ten thousand members. Then from 2016 to 2020, DSA's membership ballooned to about 50,000. An average of about 2,400 new members joined every month with over 125,000 members joining over the period. In 2021, DSA topped out at just under 79,000 members in good standing. In the doldrums of the Biden presidency, DSA slowly declined to about 51,000 members in October 2024. Since Trump's second election victory in November 2024, DSA's membership has surged alongside the accompanying resurgent resistance movement. As of June 2025, DSA has 71,000 members in good standing. Preliminary data for July and August suggest that DSA is rapidly approaching our all-time membership peak. Figure 2 shows the history of DSA's dues-paying membership at a glance:

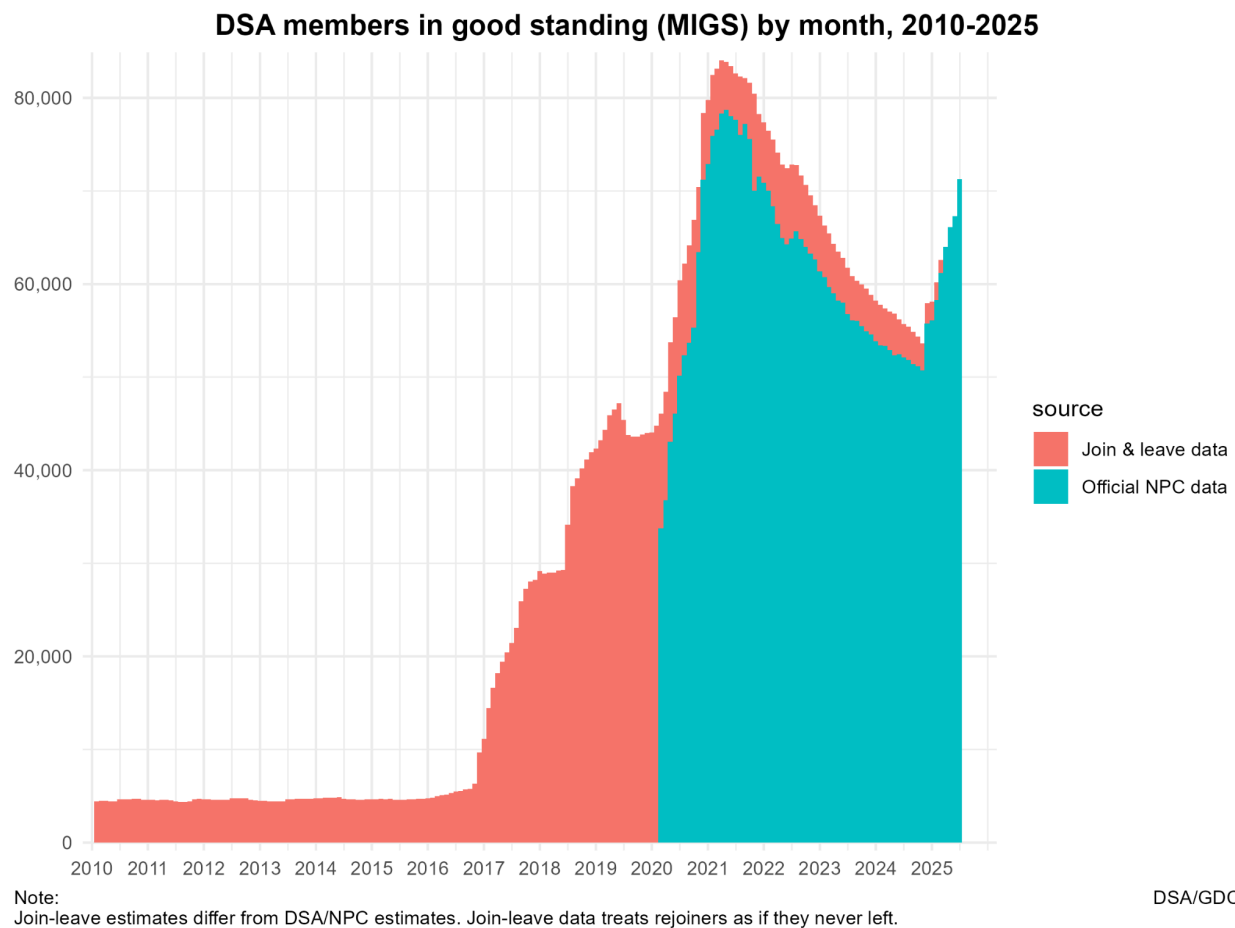


Figure 2

There are several well-known events which have triggered large national membership increases including:

- 2016: Bernie's campaign and Trump's election
- 2018: The victory of AOC and other oppositional left-progressive congressional candidates
- 2020: Bernie's campaign, the COVID pandemic lockdowns, George Floyd uprisings, and DSA's 100k membership campaign
- 2022: Roe v. Wade overturned
- 2024-25: Trump's second election, resurgent resistance movement, and NYC DSA endorsed mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani

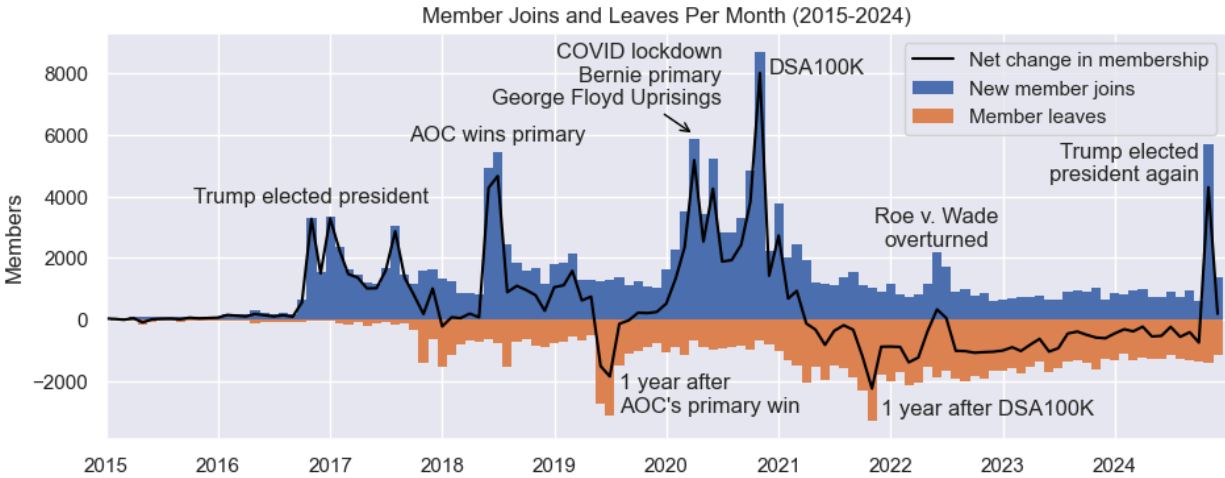


Figure 3

These events drove both national and local chapter membership trends. Although cross-chapter differences exist in both members joining and leaving, large changes tend to uniformly impact chapters. We find a relatively small and steady variation between chapters throughout the past nine years, particularly 2018-present.

Figure 4 below plots the distribution and variation of monthly joins, leaves, and net growth (joins minus leaves) as a percentage of members in good standing from 2015 through 2024. As a percentage of MIGS, monthly joins is far more dynamic and variable than monthly leaves. This means that large changes in net growth relative to MIGS is mostly driven by changes in new members joining rather than existing members leaving.

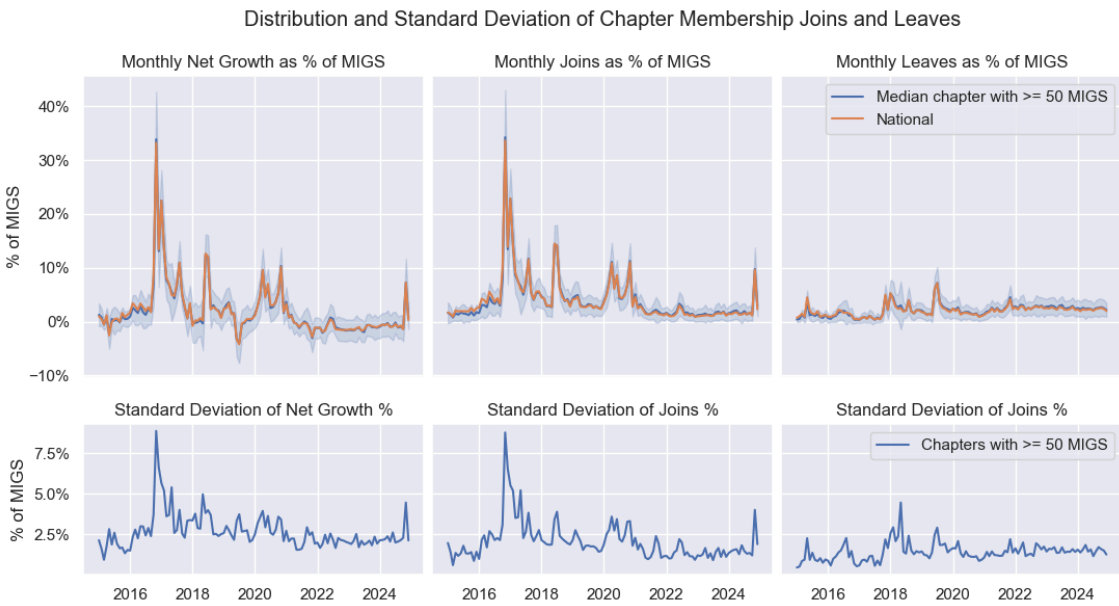


Figure 4

It is more interesting to investigate trends in member joins than leaves because there is both more statistical variation and because the actual signal available in our data is a more clear expression of intention. Members joining DSA is a clear expression of intent at a precise moment in time while, in our data, members typically leave DSA passively i.e. when their dues lapse.

The initial growth spurt in 2016-2017 introduced a spike in monthly joins and net growth as well as an increase in the variation of both metrics (monthly leaves were largely unaffected). As mentioned previously, these large spikes in membership growth are largely attributable to external events.

Monthly leaves as a percentage of MIGS is relatively static and has less variation between chapters. Notably, the few prominent spikes in leaves are easily attributable to members lapsing exactly one year after a large influx of new members, indicating that many members who joined in these surges of interest were not converted into long-term DSA members. This also reflects the “passivity” of member’s lapses. Relatively few members (~20% of leaves in 2024) actively quit the organization.

Low variation implies that chapters have not been able to differentiate themselves from each other in finding more effective recruitment strategies: members join and leave DSA at similar rates across the entire organization regardless of which chapter they belong to. Variation increases when member joins increase quickly, indicating that some chapters benefit more from these membership spikes than others. Similarly, variation in member leaves increases with overall increases in member leaves. We investigate factors which relate to membership recruitment and retention in the following sections.

## **Trends in the Composition of Chapters and Membership**

Over the last eight years, the composition of our organization and its chapters have changed significantly. The early growth period in 2016 and 2017 featured a rapid rate of chapter formation as new members were joining and creating new chapters simultaneously. Even faster membership growth in 2018 and 2019 bolstered existing chapters. 2020’s intense period of membership growth was even more concentrated in large chapters with over 1000 members. Since then, a slow and steady decline in membership has evened out the distribution of new members across chapters of different sizes. Figure 5 shows the concentration of post-2020 membership growth in larger chapters:

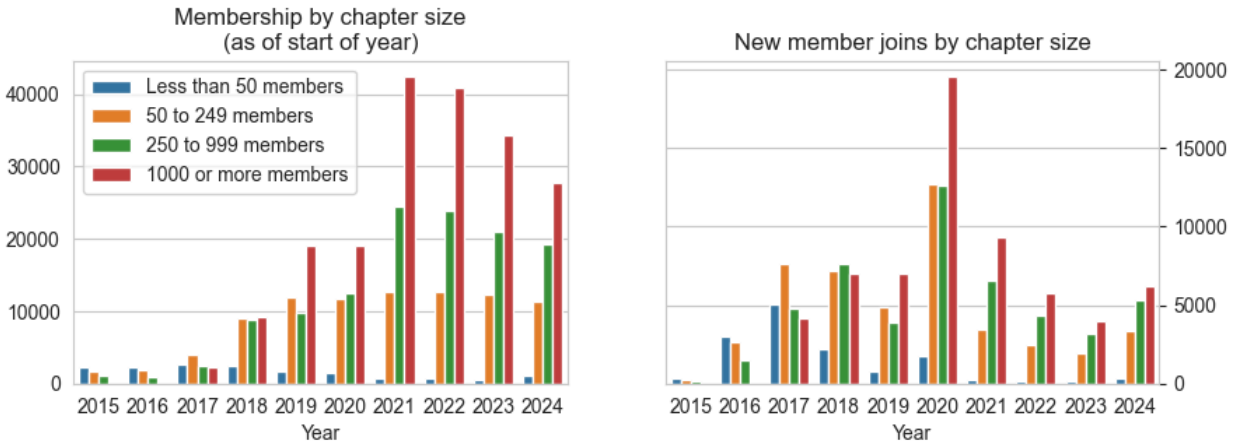


Figure 5

At the end of 2024, most chapters (greater than 70%) have fewer than 250 members. On the other hand, the 10 largest chapters (top 5%) range from around 1,200-7,000 members each and are home to almost 40% of members. At-Large membership (members without an affiliated chapter) represents about another 3,400 members (or 5.6%) and would be the second largest chapter.

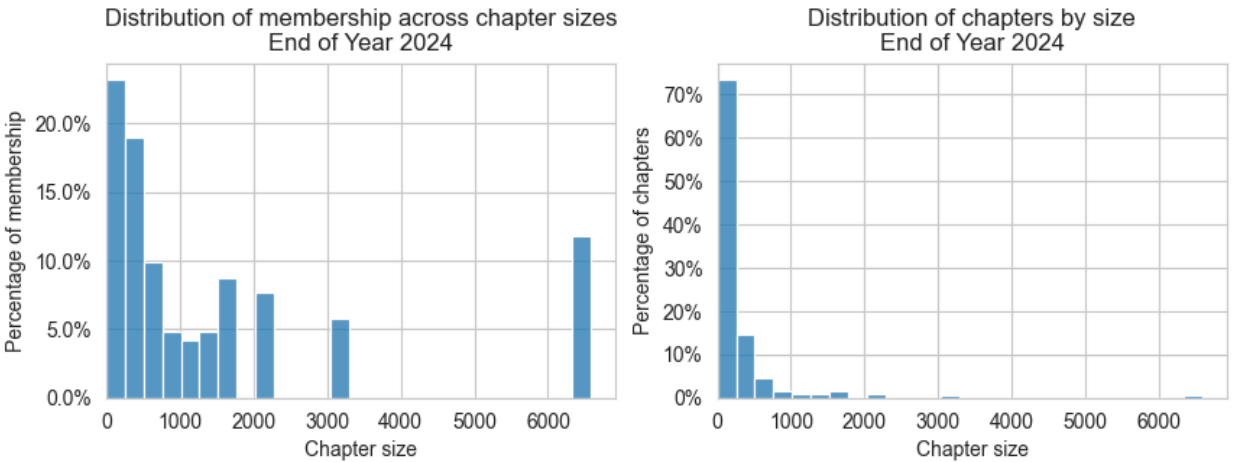


Figure 6

The post-2016 membership growth completely upended the distribution of member tenure in the organization, shifting it from a predominantly long tenured (10+ year) membership to a brand new membership with average tenures under four years. From 2016 to 2020, the largest group of members nationwide were first-year members. Since 2021, our average membership tenure has steadily increased.

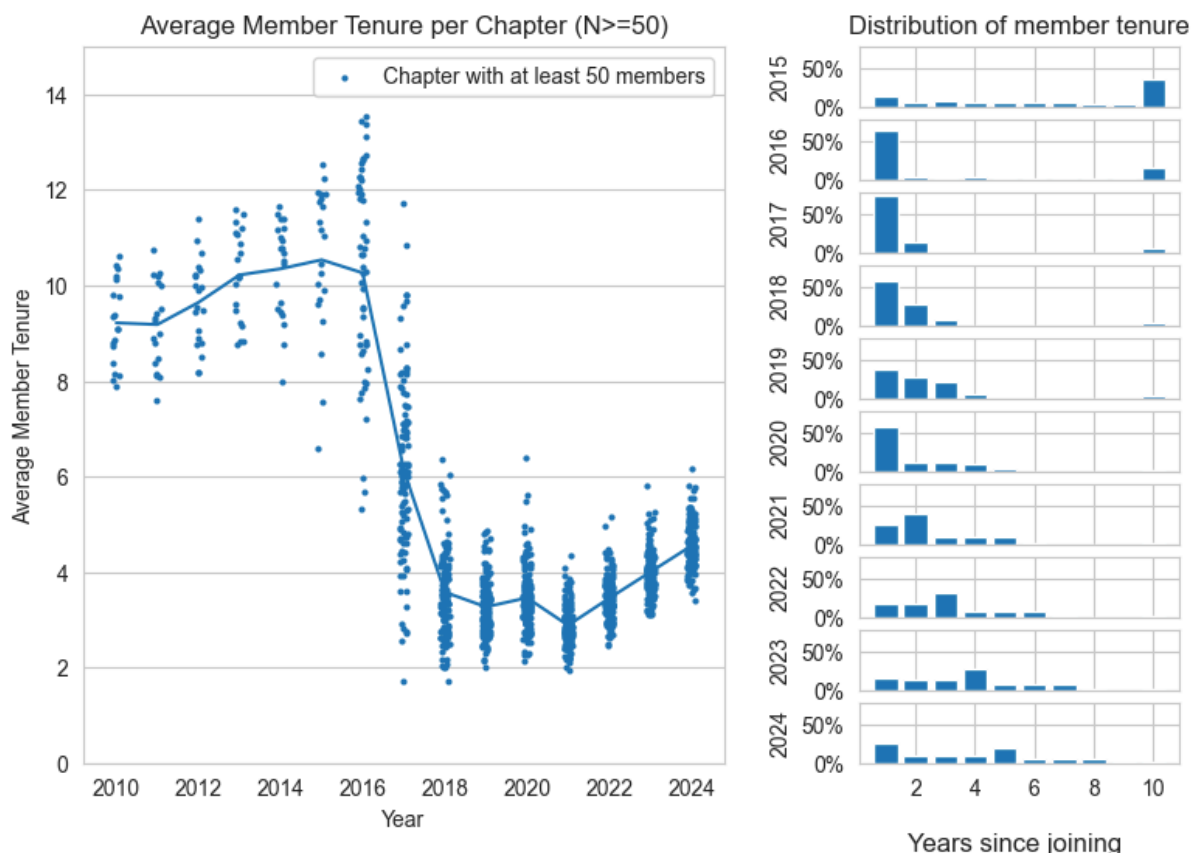


Figure 7

## Membership Recruitment

As a member-led and member-funded organization, our membership is our identity and completely defines what we do and how we organize. 2016's explosive growth completely transformed the face and nature of the organization. Ninety-seven percent of the current membership joined after 2016, mostly in periods of intense growth. A majority of members joined after 2019. In this section, we analyze cross-chapter variation in membership growth.

Some chapters overperform and recruit more members, proportional to chapter size, than their peers. We wanted to know: are there any common attributes or patterns for successful recruitment? Can we identify common challenges faced by chapters who are unable to recruit as well?

Ultimately, we were not able to statistically identify chapters which consistently underperformed or overperformed the overall organization's recruitment rates. Our analysis comparing chapters by membership size, across time, and self-reported recruitment and outreach methods did not yield any meaningful results.

We started by comparing larger and smaller chapters on their ability to recruit new members. We compared relative recruitment rates (i.e. new members as a proportion of existing members) in order to normalize the dataset and make apples to apples comparisons across chapters of different sizes.

Since 2016, we have not found any meaningful differences between smaller and larger chapters' ability to recruit new members. In Figure 8 below, we compare relative recruitment rates across chapter size segments over time and find significant overlap between all segments.

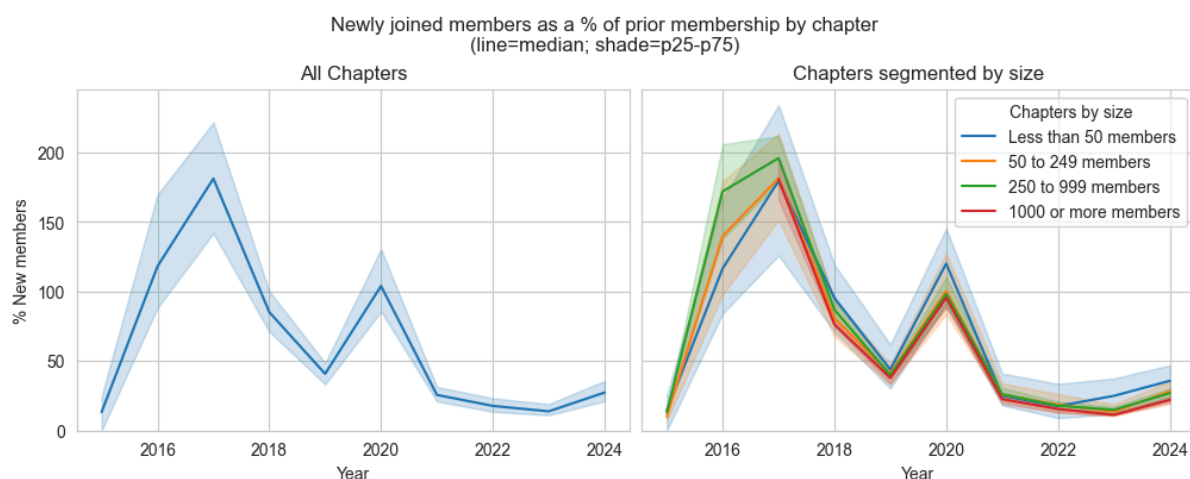


Figure 8

Disaggregating the segments allowed us to identify outliers. This was useful in identifying specific chapters for additional follow up via qualitative research but did not yield any statistically interesting results. In Figure 9 below, see the same dataset of relative recruitment rates broken out by chapter size segment (excluding the smallest chapters with less than fifty members in good standing).



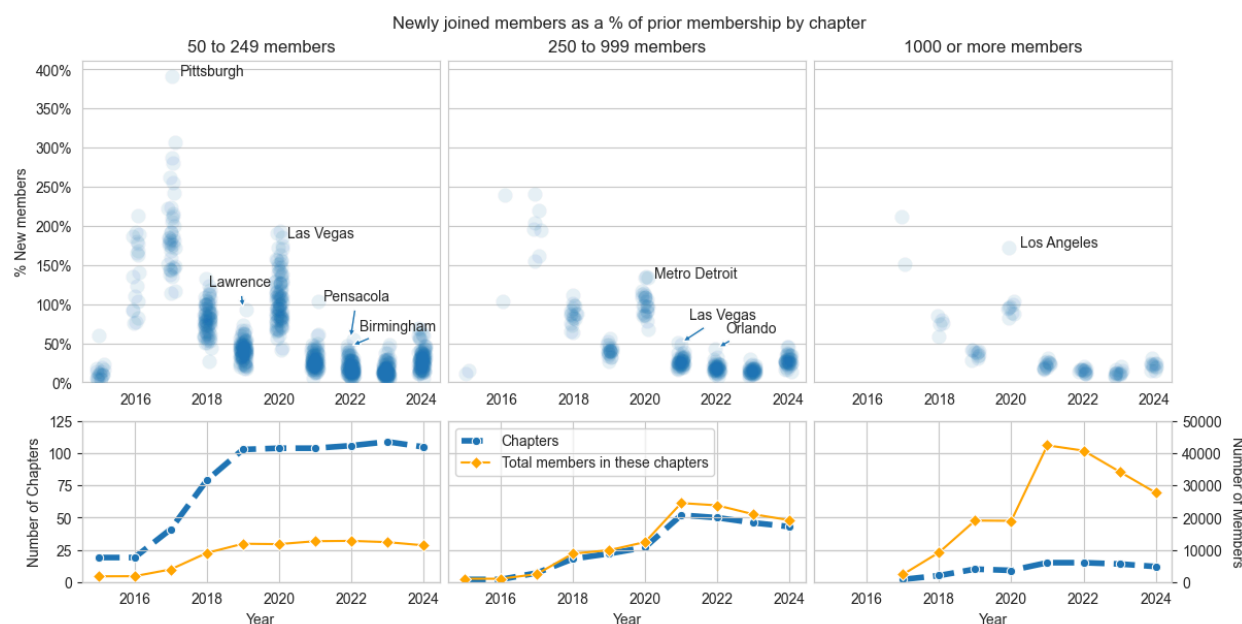


Figure 9

This means that larger chapters have not been able to use their larger membership to develop more effective recruitment strategies than those available to all chapters.

Similarly, our analysis of self-reported recruitment and outreach methods from the 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 chapter surveys yielded no statistically significant relationship between methods and actual recruitment rates.

This can be partially attributed to inherent weaknesses in self-reported survey data: Chapters which are struggling may be rapidly trying many methods while other chapters are only focusing on a few effective methods. Additionally, available survey data does not determine if methods were implemented effectively or consistently, only that chapters implemented methods. Taken together, this muddles the data and limits our ability to isolate meaningful factors. This task is additionally difficult due to the overall low variation in recruitment rates across all chapters: it's difficult to correlate factors that lead to higher or lower recruitment rates when all chapters are recruiting at roughly the same rate.

The correlations between chapter recruitment methods and chapter growth were both small and not statistically significant. In addition, even if these methods were statistically significant, it is difficult to say whether these methods improve chapter functions and recruitment performance, or if improved chapter performance automatically produces these kinds of behaviors (e.g. posting join DSA links).

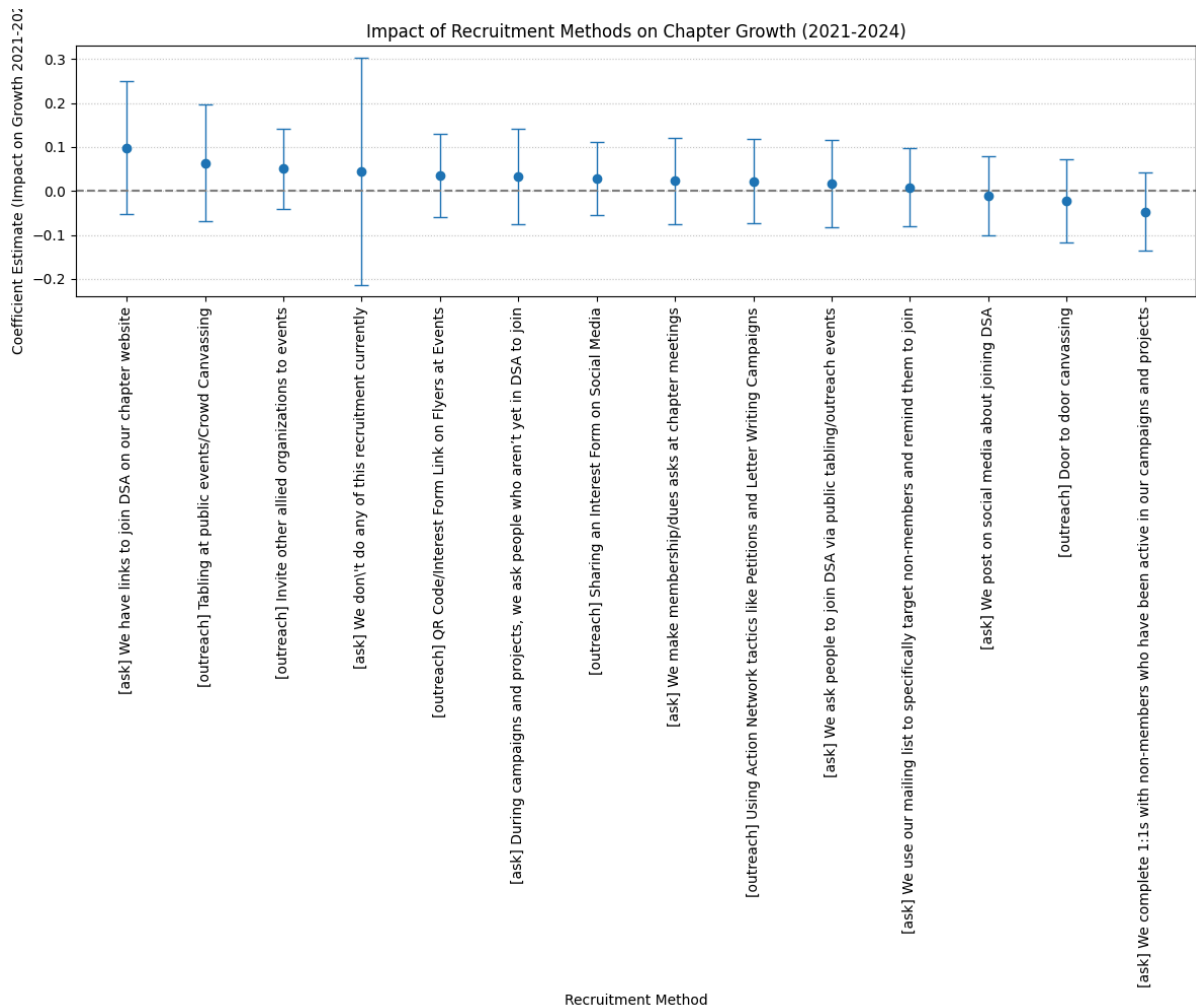


Figure 10

## Membership Retention

Recruiting new members is only the start. For us to grow our membership, we also need to retain them. For us to grow our power and organize a party, we also need to engage (retained) members in active struggle and develop them as socialists and organizers.

This section focuses on DSA and chapters’ ability to retain members. We find that retaining members past their first year of membership has a disproportionately high impact on their likelihood of remaining a member long term. We then document trends in member tenure across time and across chapters as well as explore various factors that correlate with first-year membership retention.

## The Importance of First-Year Retention

Recruitment brings in new members and retention keeps them around. If you are a long-time member of DSA, think back to when you joined and the other folks who joined around the same time. What percentage of them do you think are still around?

Grouping DSA's members in “annual cohorts” by the year they joined, we can chart the number of remaining members over time. We find that the steepest drop off is right at the end of the first year: the most dramatic attrition happens at the beginning of a member's tenure in DSA. This is the *freshmen retention challenge* in DSA.

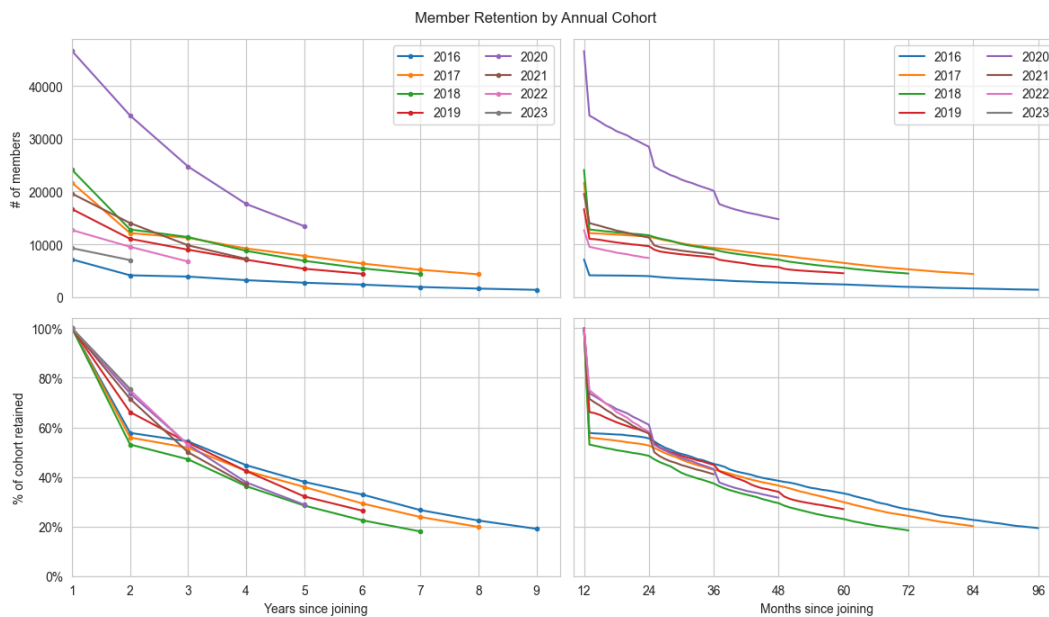


Figure 11

In fact, almost half of former members left after a single year in the organization.

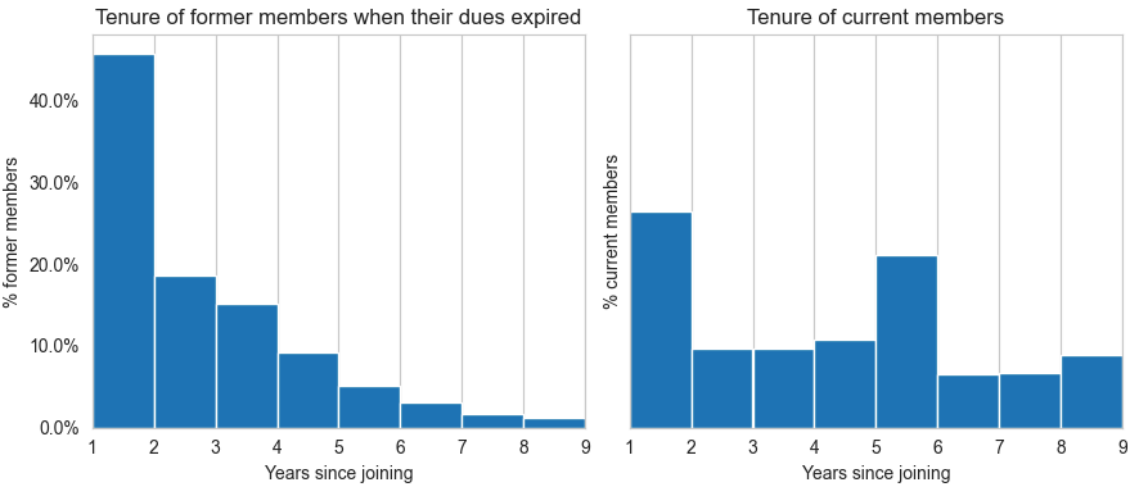


Figure 12

The disproportionate impact of first-year retention on long term retention is even more clear when we examine year-over-year retention. In Figure 13 below, we plot year-over-year and cumulative retention over time by chapter along with trendlines following the overall National rates. First-year retention is dramatically lower than subsequent years’. Members who stay in good standing past their first year are far less likely to leave DSA in subsequent years (15-20% YoY attrition for 4-9th years vs. 25-45% attrition in the first year).

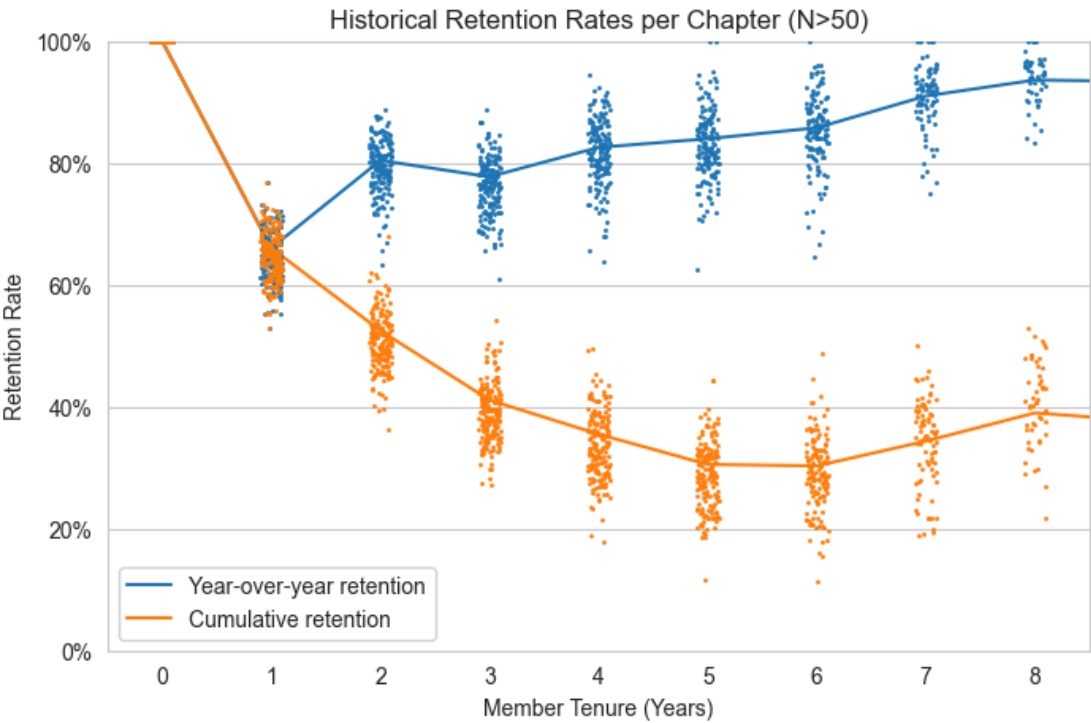


Figure 13

And there's good news! First-year retention has been gradually improving since 2018. Below, we can see that first-year retention has increased from a low of ~50% in 2018 to ~75% in recent years. Cross-chapter variation has increased in recent years as well, something that we will investigate further in the following sections.

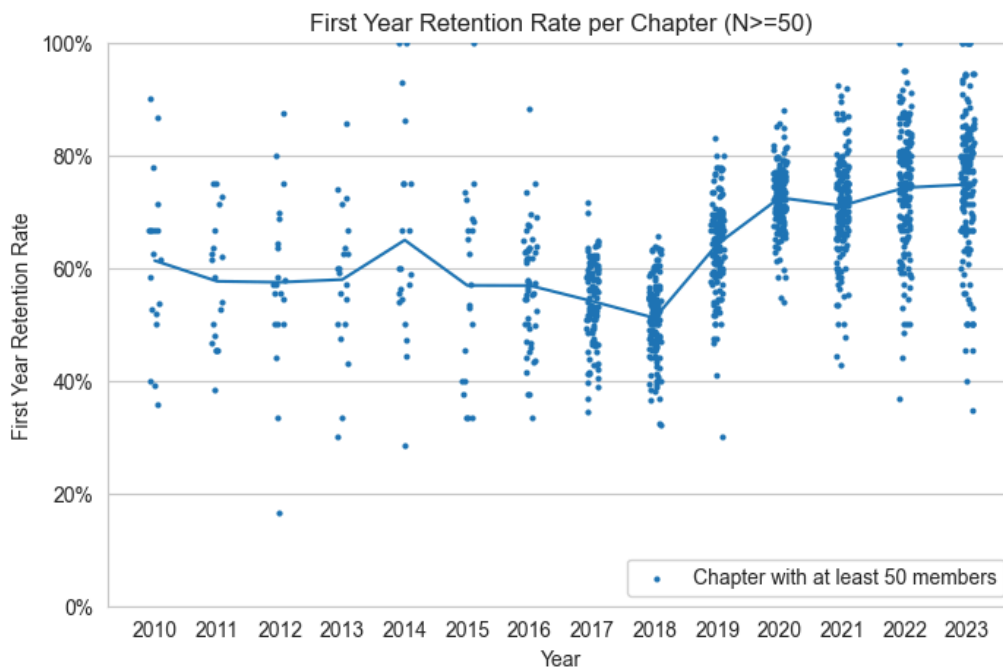


Figure 14

## Possible Contributing Factors on First-Year Retention

We found three factors which correlate with chapter's first-year retention:

1. Recurring dues vs. one-time dues payments
2. Relative size of the new member cohort (i.e. how many new members joined in a given year as a percentage of existing members)
3. Average tenure of existing members

In Figure 15 below, we compare chapters' 2023 cohorts (members who joined in 2023). After filtering for chapters with at least 50 members in good standing at the start of the year, we chart the percentage of cohort members who are enrolled in recurring dues against the percentage of cohort members who remained members one year later.

Doing this, we find a strong (linear regression coefficient = 0.75, R-squared = 57%) relationship between the proportion of recurring dues payers and first-year retention. This logically makes sense since membership status (and therefore retention) is determined by dues payments. This likely explains at least some of the overall increase in retention over recent years as recurring dues are featured as the default dues payment method and dues drives specifically encourage members to convert from one-time dues to recurring dues.

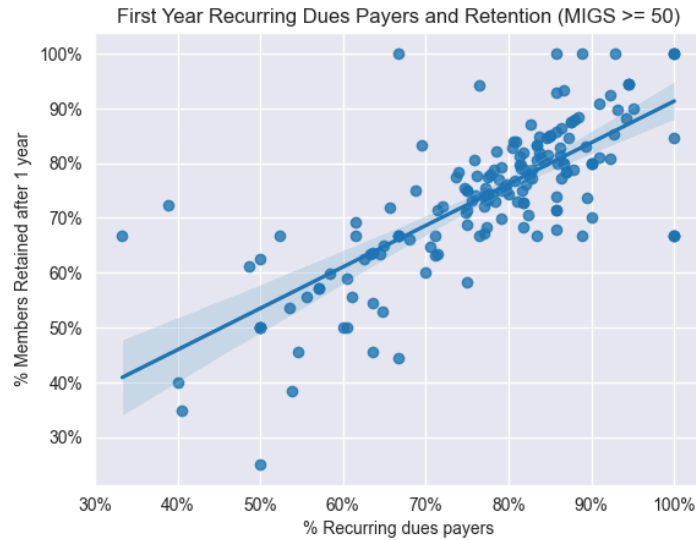


Figure 15

Relatively larger new member cohorts are correlated with lower first-year retention rates for those new members. In other words, chapters with a larger influx of new members relative to their existing membership size are less likely to retain those new members than chapters with slower recruitment. This relationship was stronger after omitting chapters with fewer than 250 members. This pattern has remained consistent for the 2021, 2022, and 2023 cohorts. In addition, the two largest periods of monthly membership leaves (June/July 2019 and November 2021) were both exactly one year after record breaking monthly membership joins.

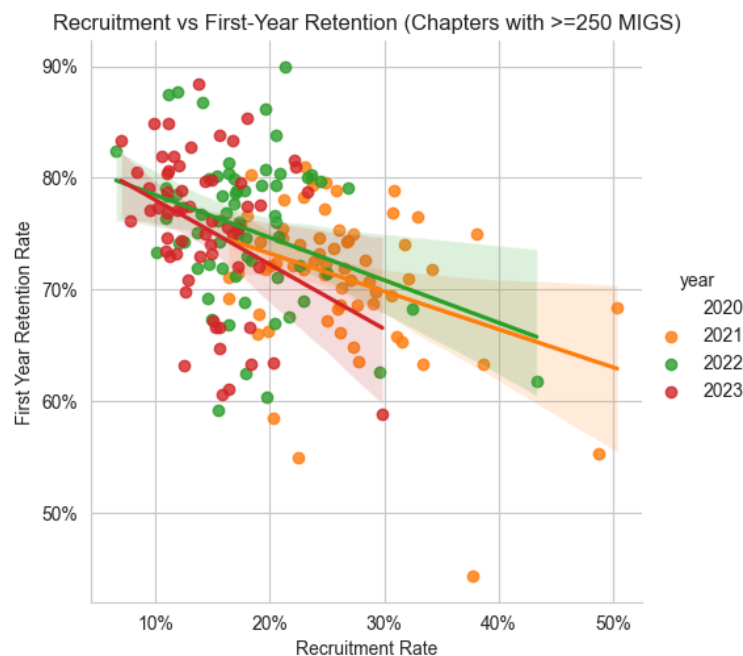


Figure 16

We also observe that the average tenure of existing members is slightly positively correlated with first-year retention. This effect is very weak but consistent from 2020 to 2023 inclusive. Below, we can see the slight positive correlation in the 2023 cohort (linear regression coefficient = 0.03, R-squared value = 2%).

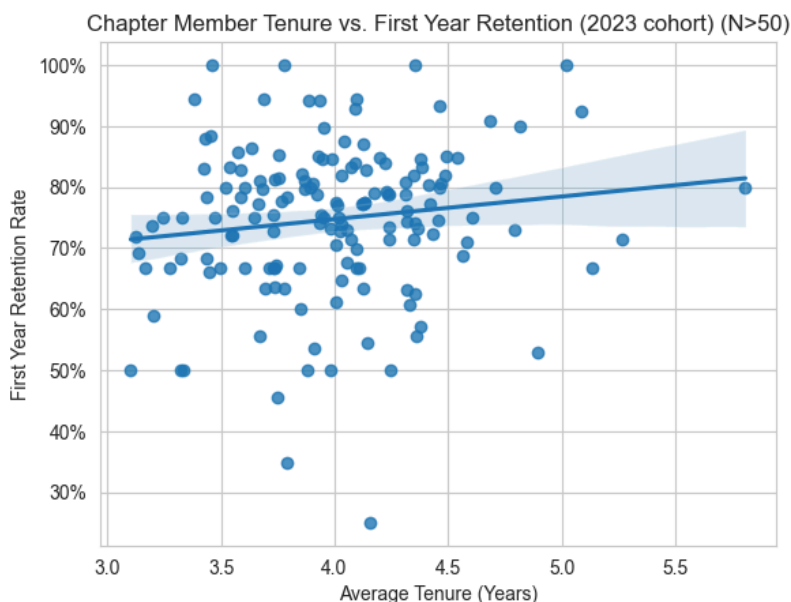


Figure 17

We did not find any relationship between chapter size and retention rate.

## Listening Sessions

We facilitated a series of listening sessions from February to April 2025 for chapter leaders across the country.

- The first round aimed to identify common challenges and best practices in the recruitment and retention of new DSA members. We highlight interventions that have enabled certain chapters to overcome these hurdles.
- The second round focused on challenges and best practices in developing new members into effective socialist organizers: specifically chapter political education, leadership development, and the nature of chapters' internal democracy.

Attendees were drawn from chapters in every region of the United States and included leaders from both large urban chapters and smaller chapters in rural areas. This section summarizes the information shared by these participating chapter leaders regarding the challenges they faced and highlights the interventions that have enabled certain chapters to overcome these hurdles.

## Challenges and Best Practices in Member Recruitment

Participants broadly described recruitment of new members to their chapters as being driven by three factors: 1) the occurrence of salient media events, such as the re-election of Donald Trump, that drove people to seek out their closest DSA chapter; 2) the availability of structured campaigns or onboarding opportunities that provided a clear entry point for prospective members, and; 3) chapter visibility within physical and digital spaces frequented by members of their community.

Nearly all chapters reported occasional surges of membership driven by news events that agitated community members and drove them to seek out organizations like DSA to join. Some chapters reported that such periods were the primary source of new members for their chapter. In most cases, such news events were tied to national developments outside the control of individual chapters and were thus not possible to replicate in a consistent fashion.

Outside of these infrequent cycles of engagement, chapters reported a wide disparity in recruitment. Generally, chapter membership declined outside of these media-driven periods of recruitment, but the extent of this decline varied widely. For example, small chapters, often located in rural or dispersed suburban areas, often saw little-to-no recruitment outside of such periods. Listening session attendees from such chapters attributed their recruitment challenges to an absence of public gathering places in their chapter areas, preventing them from engaging in practices like informational tabling or flyering to recruit new members. Some chapters reported that they did not mount public campaigns that served in other chapters to increase visibility and provide opportunities for recruitment outside of the national news cycle. Many chapter leaders also described their chapters as in competition for new members with single-issue groups, such as environmental organizations, who absorbed potential DSA recruits that might otherwise have been able to contribute to the creation of a public campaign within a DSA chapter.

In contrast, chapters that saw sustained membership growth tended to engage in a common set of practices that allowed them to bring in new recruits. Such chapters generally were distinguished by their facilitation of public events that provided a clear entry point for new members. Examples of such events included New Member Orientations that were publicized via social media and physical means such as flyers and tabling. These events were often held either monthly or quarterly to generate a consistent flow of new members.

Some chapters reported that they were able to recruit new members through their public campaigns, whether by seeking to elect a new Socialist in Office or by supporting a particular ballot initiative or other issue-based campaign. Campaigns that drove membership growth tended to be clear, victory-focused campaigns oriented toward achieving a particular goal in a set period of time. Depending on the nature of these campaigns, listening session attendees observed that campaigns oriented around a particular issue, such as BDS or tenants rights, successfully recruited new members who were interested in that particular issue.



Chapters that succeeded at recruiting a substantial number of new members also invested more heavily in their digital presence to allow interested community members to learn about the chapter and get in contact with a chapter's membership committee. For example, a number of chapter leaders reported that their chapter maintained a regular presence on the social media platform that was popular in their chapter area, such as Instagram or Reddit, to build local visibility. Another successful strategy was increasing the 'search engine optimization' of chapter websites by including search terms that ensured the chapter's website would appear in search engine queries like "leftist orgs near me." In addition to increasing the visibility of a chapter's social media and website, chapters that excelled at recruitment tended to use those digital sites to direct new members to interest forms, often hosted on Action Network, that allowed chapter membership bodies to identify prospective new members and quickly follow up with them directly to walk them through the process for joining DSA. Such digital infrastructure was especially important in chapters with a large chapter area because it allowed prospective members to make contact with a DSA chapter without traveling a long distance to an in-person event.

Chapters with positive membership growth also tended to regularly utilize external events to generate new recruits. Examples of such events included tabling at rallies, running organizing fairs, and even creating neighborhood-based subgroups run by the chapter to give prospective members a way to connect with DSA in their own neighborhood.

Overall, chapters that succeeded in recruiting a significant number of new members tended to have developed membership practices facilitated by a membership committee with a dedicated base of volunteers capable of recruiting and onboarding new members. The presence of such bodies and their facilitation of the practices described above allowed certain chapters to make the most of salient media events that drove new members toward DSA, but also to consistently recruit new members outside of favorable news cycles.

## Challenges and Best Practices in Member Retention

Aside from recruitment, listening session attendees also identified unique challenges and opportunities for retaining new members once they were recruited. Many chapters reported that a major cause of membership decline was newer members lapsing into inactive status and ending their participation in the chapter.

Listening session attendees reported several common issues that limited their capacity to retain new members and meaningfully involve them in the life of their chapter. One such issue was that the media-driven cycle in recruitment tended to result in large surges of new members at a particular time, which quickly overwhelmed chapter capacity to onboard new members in a meaningful way. Another was that members brought into a chapter by a particular campaign often lapsed into inactivity when that campaign ended and was not replaced by another such campaign that provided easy opportunities for members to engage with chapter organizing.

Issues of cultural and political alignment also hampered membership retention. Some chapters observed that new members often dove into chapter work at an unsustainable pace, taking on more work than they could handle until they burned out and left the chapter entirely. Other chapters reported that new members were alienated by certain aspects of DSA's culture, such as the use of Roberts Rules of Order at meetings, which new members felt were not easy to understand and prevented them from participating in chapter deliberation. Some participants in the listening sessions noted that new members were exposed to contentious arguments between chapter members, or between DSA members in online spaces, that made them uncomfortable with participating in DSA. In some cases, chapters were successful at recruiting new members mainly from a liberal political background who did not mesh well with a chapter's political orientation and were therefore harder to retain.

Some chapters reported the accessibility and frequency of chapter events was an issue for member retention. Some leaders observed that meetings were scheduled at times that did not allow working class members to participate. In rural chapters, the difficulty of coordinating in-person events with a critical mass of participants led new members to feel the chapter was not successful or worth participating in.

As with the patterns observed in chapter recruitment, chapters that succeeded at retaining new members tended to do so via a structured member retention program. The same New Member Orientations that listening session participants reported helped lead to higher recruitment rates were also noted to support the retention of new members by providing them with a basic foundation that enabled them to participate more fully in chapter activities. Such orientations were observed to be most effective when they were structured as a multi-event sequence that provided a natural progression toward organizing in a chapter. For instance, a common pattern reported by listening session participants was to start with a basic orientation that defined basic socialist concepts and described how a DSA chapter operates, invite orientation attendees to a social event to meet other members, and then invite new members to a political action or other external event.

Many chapter membership leaders reported that building relationships between new and experienced members was key to the long-term retention of new members. A common practice employed by many of the chapters surveyed was to develop a system of one-on-one meetings, in which new members were offered a meeting with a more established chapter member to orient the new member and point them to activities in the chapter relevant to the new member's interest. These meetings were regarded as a successful retention strategy and it was also noted that this practice helped prevent new member burnout by giving them the model of a long-term DSA member to demonstrate how they could participate in chapter activities at a sustainable pace.

In addition to the one-on-one system, many participants described chapter-sponsored social activities as an important contributor to member retention. Chapters reported a wide range of social activities, from roller derby potlucks to hikes, which helped create a chapter community that new members could join. Some participating chapters reported that such

socials could be ineffective if not promoted appropriately and that making socials a consistent, recurring event was an important aspect of their successful implementation.

Some chapters reported that they integrated political education activities into their retention programs. These programs were observed to be particularly important for avoiding political misalignment with new members by introducing them to core Marxist concepts, such as through reading groups. Such political education also focused on DSA's Workers Deserve More program, which allowed chapters to give new members a more unified sense of what DSA stands for. In a few cases, this type of political education was also combined with a social outing in the form of a "radical history tour" that taught new members about past episodes of socialist history in their community and helped make socialist theory more concrete. Some political education programming related directly to the operations of chapters themselves, such as training new members on Roberts Rules of Order or the strategy created for a particular campaign. Chapters that engaged in these practices reported that they were successful in increasing new members' confidence to participate in chapter deliberations and campaigns, respectively.

Aside from the formal structure of their membership retention programs, chapter leaders also reported that aspects of chapter governance could play an important role in retaining new members. For example, some participants reported that chapter campaigns that were based on a transparent campaign plan with clear benchmarks for evaluating the campaign's success helped retain participating members by maintaining their enthusiasm as the benchmarks were met. Chapter campaigns were also noted to be more effective as an avenue for retention when they included simple, modular tasks like making a few phone calls or posting a few flyers as these tasks could engage new members with minimal training and time commitment.

The leadership development practices employed by chapters were also frequently referenced by listening sessions attendees. Many noted that the loss of a chapter leader, often due to burnout, was particularly harmful to member retention because it both destabilized the chapter and often represented the loss of a familiar face to many newer members. In addition to the practices aimed at addressing burnout already discussed, some chapters reported success from structured leadership development programs that both gave chapter leaders the necessary skills to lead and also helped distribute workloads to a wider number of leaders.

Taken together, our listening sessions revealed a wide range of successful member retention practices across chapters that tended to coalesce around a few core interventions. Chapters that were most successful at retaining membership tended to concentrate on giving new members a structured onboarding program that provided a clear pathway to participate in chapter activities and a basic education in core socialist concepts. Such chapters also focused on creating strong social bonds between new and current chapter members through one-on-one meetings and social events that created an accessible chapter community. Lastly, chapters with high rates of membership retention intentionally organized to reduce

burnout by modeling sustainable organizing commitments in their chapter leadership, creating transparent plans for chapter campaigns, and breaking chapter organizing into many modular tasks that could be performed easily by newer members whenever possible.

## Challenges and Best Practices in Political Education

Every listening session attendee recognized political education as an important chapter activity. Many attendees noted that new members often came to DSA without a strong foundation in socialist concepts and were therefore both eager to learn more about socialism and at risk of political misalignment with their chapter if political education was not provided to them. Others noted that political education was necessary to cohere their chapter's community and to help include new members in questions of chapter democracy and chapter leadership.

However, many chapter leaders who attended the listening session regarding political education as a weak point for their chapter. In many cases, attendees' chapters were either not providing political education to members or had recently restarted political education programming. Attendees from chapters that did offer such programming identified a number of challenges to conducting effective political education. Many attendees reported that their chapter's political education programming was ad hoc and centered around infrequent reading groups. It was noted that these reading groups were often sparsely attended and struggled to retain participants across multiple reading sessions. Some attendees reported that new members had difficulty understanding assigned readings from core socialist thinkers like Marx because the readings included unfamiliar concepts or used antiquated language.

Some chapter leaders also reported frustration with having to constantly revisit introductory socialist texts for the benefit of new members, rather than progressing to more theoretically sophisticated works that would be of interest to existing members. Attendees also reported that it was difficult to select readings that appealed to DSA members across ideological tendencies.

Attendees that reported their chapter was successful in providing political education to their membership attributed that success to a common set of practices that increased the accessibility of political education to chapter members and provided a structured introduction to socialist concepts. These chapter leaders noted that, when their chapters did organize a reading group, they did so with particular attention to the accessibility of the reading group. For example, it was noted that picking dense theoretical works or assigning homework for reading groups tended to discourage participants who were not able to understand these works or complete the assigned tasks. Instead, these attendees suggested that reading groups should generally be organized as a single session, rather than multiple sessions over time. They further noted that such groups should read a short text of around 20 pages at most and that the text should be read and discussed in the meeting to eliminate the need for participants to read prior to the meeting. Listening session attendees

characterized this approach as particularly successful because it helped ensure maximum engagement with the material and created a space for members to work through a text together with the aid of an experienced chapter member.

Some chapter leaders also attributed the success of their political education programming to the existence of a structured political education committee that was elected or appointed. Attendees reported that such political education committees helped ensure that political education programming was offered on a recurring basis and was widely advertised within a chapter to encourage higher attendance. In addition, it was noted that some political education committees allowed chapters to democratically adopt a common curriculum of readings that increased in complexity from simple, introductory texts to more complex theoretical works. In some chapters, these curricula included competing perspectives from different tendencies that helped members understand different perspectives on controversial topics within DSA. The existence of such committees also helped build up a number of experienced political educators in a chapter who could help newer members unpack complex terminology and connect readings with individual experiences to help make chosen texts more approachable.

Some attendees also reported success with tying readings from their chapter curriculum to live political questions within the chapter. These attendees noted that member interest in political works often increased when those works seemed salient to a political issue the chapter was engaged with. This approach supported chapters both in increasing the political education of their membership and in generating member enthusiasm for chapter initiatives.

The results of this listening session suggest many chapters experience difficulties in organizing regular political education programming that is accessible and relevant to their members. Chapters that overcame these difficulties tended to focus on making reading group-based political education more accessible to new members by limiting the length and complexity of readings to texts that could be read and discussed during a single meeting. Chapters with successful political education programming tended to delegate that programming to a designated political education committee that conducted regular political education events oriented around a common curriculum that allowed members to gradually improve their understanding of socialism over time and connect socialist concepts to chapter organizing.

## Challenges and Best Practices in Leadership Development

Similar to the state of chapter political education practices discussed above, chapter leaders who participated in the listening session regarded leadership development as a crucial task for their chapter but noted that it was often deprioritized or limited to informal mentorship. Almost all attendees reported that they felt their chapter was not doing enough to prepare members to take over leadership positions in their chapter.

Attendees identified several common challenges that limited their chapters' capacity to develop new leaders. It was generally noted that chapter leadership generally was responsible for a large number of administrative duties like filing taxes, running meetings, and answering chapter emails that were both uninspiring to members and required some specialized knowledge. Attendees reported that members' lack of enthusiasm for this work often made it difficult to recruit new candidates for chapter leadership because capable members preferred to engage in more substantively engaging work like running chapter campaigns. Some chapter leaders also described their chapters as lacking a 'middle layer' of regular members who could readily transition into leadership roles within the chapter that were not suitable for a new member. As a result, some attendees described a cycle in which leaders would be unable to locate their replacement and would eventually end their participation in their chapter entirely due to burnout, resulting in a loss of institutional knowledge on how to administer the chapter.

Many chapter leaders also reported that their chapter had no formalized training for new leaders and instead relied on existing leaders to identify promising members of their chapter and teach them the basics of chapter governance. Some of these chapter leaders were also unaware of the relevant trainings offered by the Growth and Development Committee to prospective chapter leaders, such as the Leadership Intensive. Attendees from chapters that did offer leadership training similarly noted that these trainings were not well attended and did not automatically attract capable candidates for chapter leadership.

Listening session attendees suggested a number of interventions to help address gaps in chapters' leadership development practices. Some attendees reported that their chapters had made progress in improving the desirability of chapter leadership for prospective leaders by delegating some administrative tasks to chapter officers so that chapter leaders could focus on more substantive political questions. Some chapter leaders also reported success in developing future chapter leaders by conducting regular one-on-one meetings with chapter members to both identify prospective leaders and gradually prepare them for leadership roles.

Those chapters that did provide formal leadership training reported that these trainings were most successful when they were provided to leaders of working groups or chapter committees as soon as they were elected and when they were made a component of a chapter's external organizing. These interventions helped ensure greater participation in the training by making them an expected component of leading a chapter body.

## Case Studies

For more in depth investigation, we carried out targeted case studies in which we interviewed 8 chapter members and leaders with deep experience across 3 chapters. We selected chapters which had interesting statistical attributes for further investigation, focusing on their ability to retain new members. We identified chapters which were most and least

effective at retaining new members, examining historic performance and as compared to their respective recruitment rates.

We ultimately selected 3 chapters which had either very high or very low first-year retention rates, including two neighboring chapters with very different retention rates.

## Chapter Selection Criteria

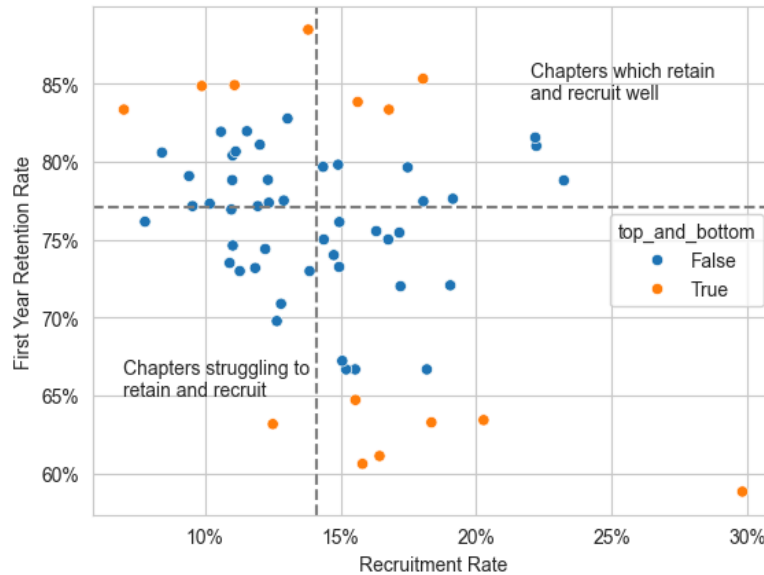
First, we omitted chapters with less than 250 members because the small sample sizes produce noisy data. This leaves us with 60 out of ~200 chapters. Then we looked at which chapters had the highest and lowest first-year retention rates for the 2023 cohort and compared that with the overall distribution across all chapters with at least 250 members. Finally, we compared chapters' retention and recruitment rates and identified which chapters stood out in both measures.

Figure 18 below plots first-year retention rates over the last 4 years starting with the 2020 cohort. 2023's highest retention and lowest retention chapters are plotted along with the overall historical median and 25th-75th percentile (middle blue line and shading).



Figure 18

We can clearly see that all of our outliers, both over and underperforming chapters, started in 2020 in the middle of the pack. Chapters have taken different paths to where they are in 2023-2024: some consistently improved while others have consistently struggled year-over-year. Another set of chapters saw wide variations in their ability to retain new members over the years.





Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2's experiences in Chapter A paint a detailed picture of a chapter grappling with persistent structural challenges, evolving demographics, and both internal and external disruptions. Interviewee 2 joined DSA in mid-to-late 2018 and quickly became active in the chapter, serving on its steering committee during a critical period from September 2019 to August 2020. This era saw a surge in membership driven by the Bernie Sanders campaign, followed by the destabilizing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. After a brief hiatus, Interviewee 2 returned in 2022 to contribute to electoral campaigns, but ultimately stepped back due to the difficulty of organizing remotely from school in a different geographic region of the US. Interviewee 2 observed significant transformations within the chapter, including the departure of founding members and a strategic shift toward more autonomous campaigning. However, efforts to establish lasting onboarding and membership processes repeatedly failed, and shifting demographics, most notably the aging of the chapter membership base, complicated recruitment and retention.

Interviewee 1, who joined DSA and the chapter in 2020, took on numerous chapter leadership roles, including work on housing and a current campaign supporting Palestinian solidarity through state-level divestment efforts. He entered the chapter amid the political tumult of the Black Lives Matter uprisings and shortly before the deeply divisive debate over a chapter endorsed official, which caused a mass exodus of members and long-term damage to morale and organizing momentum. Both Interviewee 1 and 2 underscored the chapter's persistent recruitment difficulties, especially within a suburban context marked by long commutes, few young residents, and a perceived lack of diversity. Political education efforts, once promising in 2019-2020, had become sparse and irregular post-2021. Interviewee 1 noted that aside from semi-regular DSA 101 events, the chapter lacks a structured political education committee, and these 101s often fail to plug new members into sustained involvement.

Internally, the chapter has struggled with leadership turnover, low participation in general meetings, and minimal coordination between working groups. Both interviewees highlighted the lack of a democratic culture and structured mentorship, with most leadership development occurring informally. While the chapter has occasionally seen upticks in engagement, particularly during the 2022 midterm electoral campaign and more recently with Palestine and immigrant solidarity work, chapter capacity remained limited. Interviewee 1 described the chapter's leadership model as top-down, with little room for member input and frequent siloing among teams, committees, and working groups. Communication breakdowns, member and leader turnover, and a lack of in-person events further hindered continuity, momentum, member development, and engagement. Moreover, the chapter's geographic sprawl has exacerbated disparities in engagement, with many members opting to participate in more active neighboring chapters, some of whose events may involve a shorter commute.

Despite these pervasive systemic issues, both interviewees discussed cause for optimism. Interviewee 1 expressed cautious optimism about the chapter's future, noting recent successes in campaign work and a slight post-2024 Trump re-election bump in engagement. However, both members agree that the chapter must urgently strengthen its internal

infrastructure, improve member engagement, and foster a more democratic and collaborative culture if it hopes to build sustainable momentum. Their reflections provide a valuable roadmap for chapter renewal through careful cultivation and harnessing of the current political moment, grounded in hard-won lessons from years of organizing through political struggles and challenges.

## Case Study: Chapter B

Chapter B neighbors Chapter A and has experienced much higher membership growth in recent years, ending 2024 with 500-1000 members in good standing. Chapter B has recently demonstrated both high first-year retention as well as high recruitment rates.

We interviewed 4 former Steering Committee and Membership leads for Chapter B. Interviewee 1 was a Steering Committee member from 2024-2025 and also focused on membership work. Interviewee 2 is currently co-chair of the chapter. Interviewee 3 has been involved in membership work in the chapter in recent years and is a long time DSA member, and Interviewee 4 is also current co-chair of the chapter.

The summary below combines the observations by all 4, which means some statements may contradict each other. Observations should be interpreted as subjective observations on the part of interviews rather than those of the report authors.

Interviewees stated that membership work is the responsibility of both the steering committee and a membership/political education committee. The chapter focuses a lot on external work and assigns specific roles within campaigns to develop new leaders, utilizing a ladder of engagement model combined with efforts are made to make engagement as accessible as possible.

Members who are less active are still encouraged to engage in chapter social life, and the chapter's Slack serves as an informal social space for news, updates, and asks. One lesson noted by interviewees is that recommitment drives for members who are disengaged are worth it and feature a high efficiency for the labor expended. Social events are viewed as an important part of recruiting and maintaining engagement, and efforts are made to host socials across the geographic jurisdiction of the chapter

Political education is relatively small scale. Most of the consistent poli-ed is focused on onboarding members into norms and providing them with training. Education that focuses on socialist analysis of specific issues is more sporadic. The chapter holds DSA 101's, where it aims to model healthy chapter culture on a smaller scale.

In addition to the observations made above, some interviewees noted specific challenges. One interviewee identified that relatively few members are active within the chapter, and that monthly meetings have very low attendance. In addition, monthly meetings function as a venue for updates and recruitment rather than political decisions. Elections and decisions are instead typically made at yearly conventions or within working groups and campaigns.

Some interviewees noted a lack of conflict, but also a culture where disagreement is discouraged. Some noted that a lack of democratic culture made it harder for members to stay engaged, somewhat attributed to lack of technical and practical knowledge about how democracy functions and how it is useful. One structural concern was that working groups do not have a common structure and it's unclear how the campaigns interact with them.

Another critique surfaced is that recruitment drives tend to be focused on the immediate social circles of members. The chapter has been successful at recruiting many new dues paying members but struggles to engage and develop them as active members. The interviewee noted that this recruitment strategy makes it difficult to expand beyond DSA's "downwardly mobile professional whites" core demographic.

### Case Study: Chapter C

Chapter C is a smaller chapter on the West Coast with under 250 members in good standing at the end of 2024. Chapter C has seen lower-than-median recruitment rates in recent years while their first-year retention rate has fluctuated from very-low to very-high among DSA chapters.

We interviewed 2 former chapter leaders: interviewees 1 & 2 both joined the chapter in 2017 and have been in various leadership positions in the chapter, 1 being the political education lead and 2 being a former co-chair of the chapter and heavily involved in labor and tenant work.

The interviewees paint a chapter that has gone with the ebb and flow of broader political events that have brought people in but struggles with the infrastructure of the chapter and a weak internal democracy led by newer leaders who stepped up to keep the lights on in the chapter.

Both interviewees conveyed a similar narrative of a chapter struggling with its electoral program. Interviewees described a tension of tactical differences between a "class struggle basebuilder wing" and a "progressive electorally focused wing." Both interviewees also thought the last three electoral campaigns made the chapter weaker.

The 1st interviewee recounted a situation in which a chapter leader ran for office sparking tensions within the chapter about conflict of interest when they were perceived as using their position in the chapter to benefit their campaign. After that event, those who the interviewee identified as the "progressive wing" is described as having left the chapter. The 2nd interviewee recounted another electoral story where they elected someone to office who they feel went rogue. Both interviewees discussed tendency differences between the more radical active membership and progressive-leaning inactive membership.

Both interviews expressed hope in the labor working group and Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC) work. The chapter has been developing labor leaders in their region and in local YDSA work. Their labor group meets weekly and is focused on new

organizing for unions: helping local campaigns and hosting workshops with union members. The chapter has seen strong momentum in campus organizing where socialists have integrated with worker organizing. YDSA members are active contributors to the chapter, including taking leadership roles.

## Discussion

### A Note on Interpreting Findings and Metrics

We must not overindex on metrics alone, even membership metrics. Our power does not come from any single quantitative measure: strictly increasing the number of members in good standing does not necessarily yield a strong, capable organization.

For example: we do not want to conflate the effects of technical improvements in dues collection automation (such as increased adoption of recurring dues payments) with a genuine increase in engaged membership or developed socialists. While increased adoption of recurring monthly dues is self-evidently good for our finances and helps alleviate a common pain point for members, it in and of itself does not indicate any qualitative member development or organization.

The path to socialism will not be charted with an ever-increasingly complex set of formulas and measurements even if these are indispensable tools in our organizing. Above all, we must be able to contextualize these findings and synthesize them with our politics to create more effective strategies.

### Distinct Phases from 2016-Present

As a membership organization, the Democratic Socialists of America has completely changed since 2016. The enormous increase in membership over the past decade has resulted in an organization with dramatically different member demographics and organizational tenure from previous years. Throughout this rapid expansion, several distinctive trends in membership growth, tenure, and retention rates are clearly identifiable across chapters in the national organization. Taken together, we can identify several clear phases of development over the past decade.

1. 2016 to 2020 brought successive periods of concentrated membership growth, largely triggered by external events.
  - a. (November) 2016 and 2017 saw the initial surge in membership, starting the modern era of DSA. Starting in earnest after the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, monthly member joins increased from around sixty new members per month to over one thousand. By the end of 2017, our membership had 6x'd from around five thousand to just under thirty thousand. Dozens of

new chapters were chartered in this period as members joined from all across the country, many in areas without preexisting chapters.

- b. 2018 to 2020 saw more member growth, often in newly established chapters. Steady, aggressive growth continued to be the theme. 2018 saw the average member tenure stabilize to around 3.75 years, a dramatic change from 2016's average tenure of over ten years.
2. 2021 to 2024 was a recent period of membership decline. While new member joins continued at a steady rate, they had fallen from the dramatic surges of 2016-2020 and were outpaced by members disengaging and leaving DSA. In this time, chapter memberships collectively matured as DSA's average member tenure finally increased above four years for the first time since 2017.
3. November 2024 to present (August 2025) brings a new period of rapid membership growth, with many chapters seeing record new member interest. This surge in membership is too recent for in depth study in this report and warrants further research in future work.

Here we can see the trajectory of an aspiring mass membership organization grappling with the necessary work of organizing together to establish individual and collective capacities. Contained in this brief data sketch are the experiences of thousands of socialists, members past and present, meeting each other for the first time, establishing norms, and learning to work as one. These are our stories of struggling together for a better world.

## **Recruitment is Predominantly Passive and Externally Driven**

At scale over the past nine years, very little of DSA's overall recruitment trends have been the product of successful interventions to actively bring in new members. The largest spikes in membership manifest across all chapters. These influxes of new members are driven by events external to DSA. For example: DSA saw huge increases in new members after each of Trump's presidential election victories, but DSA had little-to-no effect on that event. DSA has not been able to actively create the conditions for attracting new members.

Chapters across the organization reported that external political events such as national elections and crises were the largest drivers of recruitment. While these surges attracted large numbers of members, they were unpredictable and discrete, leaving chapters in a reactive posture.

Larger chapters have access to more members and typically have longer histories than smaller chapters. If larger chapters were generally more capable than smaller chapters and had developed more effective recruitment strategies, we'd see larger chapters growing faster at relative rates than smaller chapters. This does not happen. Instead we see larger chapters growing at generally the same rates as smaller chapters.

Some chapters are more effective than others at taking advantage of opportunities, although we have not been able to statistically isolate and identify specific tactics of note. This does

not mean that organizing best practices do not exist. Instead, it reveals a combination of shortcomings in the fidelity of the data available and possibly a lack of consistency in chapters' ability to implement and sustain successful tactics over time. More intimate research should be done at the chapter level to investigate specific conditions, strategies adopted, and their resulting effects.

From our interviews, chapters that self-reported breaking out of a reliance on external events tended to develop proactive infrastructures: regular orientations, a strong digital presence, visible public campaigns, and persistent onboarding pipelines. In other words, while external events constitute a significant trigger, internal organizing can shape whether and how chapters effectively capitalize on surges or sustain growth independently of them.

## **Retention is the Result of Quickly Integrating New Members**

Unlike with recruitment, we were able to identify stronger trends and more decisive factors related to member retention at the chapter level. These findings indicate that, unlike recruitment, retention is an area where chapters' can build more of their own "momentum" and create environments that are more likely to retain members over the long term. This process happens in local chapters on a member-to-member level with existing members (acting as chapter leaders, organizers, and as peer rank-and-file members) integrating new members into the organizational and social fabric of their chapter.

We believe that chapters need to quickly activate and engage new members in order to systematically retain them in the long term. We urge chapters to work toward creating structures which make new members feel welcome and capable of meaningfully contributing to DSA's work.

Chapters interviewed consistently cited new member orientations and other structured programs as cornerstones in their strategy for engaging new members. These touchpoints offered organizers the opportunity to steadily onboard new members into the chapter and establish basic familiarity with chapter processes and norms, as well as political education and ongoing organizing.

We found that the average tenure of chapter members is positively correlated with new member retention. New members benefit from more experienced (tenured) chapter peers. This could range from clear internal chapter structures and better organized projects offering initial points of engagement to more developed norms creating a more welcoming space for new members. Data from the past few years is promising: both first-year retention and average member tenure are increasing.

This creates an interesting challenge when we consider that new members often join as the result of external-driven events, not the product of internal organizing. In order to take advantage of these opportunities, chapters need to be ready to respond quickly and create space for new members to plug in, connecting experienced members to new members. Our

analysis of membership rolls found that higher first-year retention is correlated with lower recruitment rates.

Our findings suggest that this is an area of improvement with clear negative relationships between retention and recruitment levels across chapters (i.e. larger cohorts of new members had lower retention rates). In interviews, chapter leaders consistently reported that externally-driven membership spikes often overwhelmed established chapter onboarding processes, leading to large cohorts of new members joining the chapter without meaningful onboarding or guidance.

Many chapters recognized the significance of political education as both an onboarding tool and a mechanism of ideological cohesion. However, they also frequently cited inconsistent and underdeveloped political education programming. They struggled to maintain attendance and teach socialist material, citing lack of centralized support, curricula, and experienced facilitators. Some strategies that helped mitigate these challenges included selecting shorter texts more directly relevant to the practical work of organizers, and integrating political education into the social activities and the political priorities of the chapter.

While recruitment and retention are often discussed as discrete domains, our findings indicate they are best understood as part of a continuum. Chapters reported that they retained new members by treating recruitment not as a one-off response to external events but as part of an integrated process. These chapters provided a structured pathway to political engagement, combining orientations, social connection, and ideological grounding through political education. Without such pathways, new members drawn in by external events were often left with little to anchor them, leading to predictable patterns of drop-off and burnout. In this way, political education, social engagement, and clear entry points into work were not optional add-ons but constituent elements of sustainable recruitment.

## **Leadership and Chapter Development: Structural Factors**

Members cited organizing infrastructure as critical across all topic areas. Chapters that made strategic investments by developing structured membership committees and fostering a strong democratic culture were better equipped to incorporate new members across changing conditions and develop a more politically coherent and sustainable organizing culture.

Members and leaders across a wide variety of chapters identified a healthy internal chapter democracy (or a lack thereof) as an important factor for consistent membership engagement by cohering chapter organizing. Interviewees discussed both structural-procedural and cultural aspects of chapter democracy. Consistent structures and appropriate collaboration processes such as establishing consistent sub-group (i.e. working group and committee) definitions and coordination norms between Steering Committee and sub-groups helped create shared understandings and expectations which led to productive collaboration.

Interviewees also identified challenges establishing healthy cultural norms for handling conflict, often citing a baseline of conflict-aversion as an impediment to genuine comradely struggle. Most chapters interviewed in listening sessions and case studies self-identified areas of improvement in their chapter democracy.

There was near-unanimous concern about leadership development as a weak point in chapter organizing. Even chapters with strong campaign infrastructures often lacked a pipeline for leadership succession, resulting in burnout and organizational discontinuity. Members noted a leadership vacuum created by the burden of administration, lack of leadership training, and the absence of a “middle layer” of engaged members. This had strategic ramifications as chapters to struggle with long-term campaign planning or consistent political orientation.

Chapter size and geography played a significant role in the severity of challenges members faced. Smaller rural and suburban chapters experienced more significant structural barriers than larger, urban chapters didn't, citing things like limited public space, lower population density, and difficulty achieving critical mass for chapter events. As a result, they struggled to replicate practices larger chapters found successful, highlighting the need for tailored solutions adaptive to local conditions versus a one size fits all approach.

Taken as a whole, our interviews suggest that organizational capacity and infrastructure is a central element in developing successful political strategy. Where well-designed structures exist, chapters are able to absorb and activate new members, build ideological alignment, and sustainably develop leaders. Without these structures, members drift away, leaving chapters hollowed out. This indicates that national support for chapter infrastructure via trainings, technological tools, and hands-on guidance may be among the most strategic investments the organization can make.

## Future work

Future work should be done to better understand relationships between internal organizing and external campaign success. We believe that pursuing more chapter case studies with higher levels of detail will yield deeper insights. Example research questions to pursue include:

- How does internal capacity (e.g., membership size, leadership stability) shape external campaign success?
- What external tactics most effectively recruit and politicize members? Interviews with new and prospective members could establish more complete narratives than we were able to draw.
- What are common hurdles with coalition work? What kinds of coalitions are more or less conducive to developing chapter capacity?



In addition to more in depth interviews, our statistical analysis of membership trends could also be improved by partnering to analyze chapter-specific data relating to engagement and outreach. Most organizing happens at the local chapter level, which means that is where associated attendance data and outreach records resides.

More work can be done to better understand Organizing Committee (OC), pre-OC, and chapter formation dynamics as well as the conditions of newer and smaller chapters. Gathering and iterating on our collective understanding of new chapter formation and the early stages of chapter development will allow us to expand into new geographies. A better understanding of the At-Large membership could help more systematically seed chapter formation as well as spur the development of more sustainable forms of membership engagement.

One area that warrants further analysis is that of Small and Rural Chapters (SRCs). The original State of DSA Resolution called for special attention to the challenges and circumstances facing rural and small chapter DSA organizing, and while we did ensure small and rural chapters were integrated into our qualitative and quantitative analysis, and that we spoke specifically to their conditions where we could, we did not have the resources to develop the materials needed to dedicate a comprehensive special section of the report to that area of study.

Another limitation is that we could have spent more time exploring external areas of organizing in our listening sessions. While these topics did come up, we did not dedicate entire sessions to them. More space could be made for this in future work.

Finally, we encourage future work to incorporate data we were unable to include in our analysis:

- National DSA's new member survey
- National DSA's quit survey
- US Census Bureau data on demographics as well as living and working conditions.

This report only scratches the surface: broadly describing common trends and characterizing a few narratives at the chapter-level. Much more work can and should be done to better understand our present organizing moment in order to better organize in the future.

## Conclusion

We studied chapters by comparing their ability to recruit and retain members using both quantitative and qualitative methods: analyzing membership rolls and interviewing chapter leaders past and present. Many of our findings confirm and reflect conventional wisdom within DSA for organizing best practices. Our findings also describe areas where we've improved over time and where we are still struggling. We found that:

- Chapters have not yet cracked the code on consistent organizing-driven recruitment: ebbs and flows in new members are often driven by external events and follow national trends. We were not able to isolate and identify tactics which were more effective than others nor were larger chapters more or less effective at recruiting new members.
- Chapters are able to create effective structures for engaging new members. These practices integrate new members into the life of the organization and ultimately retain them in the long run. Investing in new member engagement may be disproportionately impactful since first impressions have been shown to yield a strong impact on members' long term retention in the organization.

Chapters large and small across the country face many similar challenges in internal and external organizing. While much of our research surfaces existing organizing best practices, chapters have not generally been able to implement them sustainably over time. We believe that increasing cross-chapter exchanges can yield more effective experimentation, learning, and peer-support. Chapters are the bedrock of our national organization, and effective organizing at the chapter level builds the foundation of a strong DSA able to fight for collective liberation.

If this work of facilitating chapter development speaks to you, then [join the GDC](#)! Help us create more support for chapter organizing. We also invite chapters to partner with the GDC for in-depth study! We want to do deep dives to understand what's working and what isn't for you. And finally, we encourage everyone to take a scientific approach to organizing. We are all working together on a historic, global group project. Do your part by reflecting critically on your own organizing experiences and collectively applying those lessons when planning for the future.

This research sought to understand the real, tangible experience of thousands of comrades organizing for a better world. Our efforts are toward the same ends: we hope that these findings and scientific approach yield practical applications in your chapter's organizing. Socialist theory belongs to the organizers. After all, the point is to change the world.

**iHasta la victoria siempre!**

*State of DSA 2024-25 Research Team, Growth and Development Committee*

## Further Reading

- [Reviving the mass organization for social movements? The meaning of membership in the Democratic Socialists of America](#) (2024) by DSA member David Purucker investigates many related topics with a specific focus on the Portland chapter. This article also includes more references and comparisons with existing literature on social movements and other organizations. Purucker notes that members often join DSA via “virtual-individual” means (i.e. learning about DSA online and making joining as an individual) instead of joining as an organized bloc with preexisting connections with other people. Purucker also observes a distinction between active and inactive membership and suggests that developing less-intensive forms of member participation could be crucial to sustainably growing the organization’s membership.
- [“A Mass Conspiracy To Feed People”: Globalizing Cities, World-Class Waste, and the Biopolitics of Food Not Bombs](#) (2013) by David Henry Galen Boarder Giles is a deep dive into Food Not Bombs (FNB). Of particular interest are his observations on local group structures and participant engagement and retention. He notes an extremely high turnover rate within the active participants: “... during the five years or so in which I was actively and regularly embedded in the group... there were at least three moments in which I realised I was one of only one or two people regularly attending the kitchen who remembered anyone who had been in the kitchen a year or two prior.” This implies a total turnover and attrition rate of almost 100% per year. Comparisons with DSA cannot be made 1-to-1 because FNB and DSA have dramatically different structures but we are both almost entirely volunteer-based organizations in the broader left ecosystem.

# Appendices

## Listening Session Materials

### Outreach Methods

Our outreach strategy took two forms: broad calls for attendance from all chapters, OCs, and at-large members, and targeted calls for attendance by chapters that we identified as notable based on their status as outliers.

Broad outreach for listening sessions started promoted 2-3 weeks in advance via the following methods:

- GDC & NPC newsletters
- National DSA discussion forums
- Membership coordinator phonebanks and emails
- GDC members' chapter-level communications (Slack, Discord, Signal)
- Word of mouth (encouraged by GDC liaisons)

In addition to the outreach methods above, we identified chapters to target directly based on their status as outliers. Outlier status was determined by whether chapters saw far more growth than the median chapter in their size-segment in a given time period. We determined that the following chapters met that criteria:

- Los Angeles
- Seattle
- Pittsburgh
- Portland

These chapters received targeted outreach in the form of phone calls, texts, or emails to specific chapter leaders or leadership bodies.

### Listening Session Agendas

*Recruitment & Retention* sessions began with an introduction of the project, a presentation on quantitative findings, followed by sessions guided by the following questions:

1. Recruitment Questions: (20 min)
  - a. What's the biggest challenge for your chapter in recruiting new members? What factors do you think play a role in making that so challenging for your chapter?
  - b. What have been the most effective ways of recruiting new members? And why were they effective?
  - c. What recruitment strategies were unexpected, innovative, creative?

2. Retention Questions: (20 min)

- a. What's the biggest challenge for your chapter in retaining and activating members? What factors do you think play a role in making that so challenging for your chapter?
- b. What have been the most effective ways of retaining and activating members? And why were they effective?

Each session ended with a group discussion to share back to the full group.

*Activation & Politicization* sessions followed the same structure with the following questions:

1. Political Education (20 min)

- a. What does political education look like in your chapter?
  - i. What form do they take? (official courses, ad hoc reading groups, chapter-wide vs working group-wide events, etc.)
- b. What has success looked like?
  - i. How do you measure or think about success when it comes to political education? What makes an education event successful?
  - ii. What types of poli-ed tend to feel the most effective?
- c. What challenges have you faced when it comes to political education?

2. Leadership Development (20 min)

- a. What does leadership development look like in your chapter?
- b. Are there formal trainings? Is there informal leadership knowledge sharing?
- c. What has worked well in developing leaders?
- d. What challenges have you faced?

3. What do your chapter's democratic processes look like? (20 min)

- a. How do you "do" democracy in your chapter? How are decisions made in working groups, committees, priorities, on the Steering Committee, and as a chapter?
- b. Do you use Robert's Rules? If so, do you do Robert's Rules trainings (and are you aware that national offers them?)
- c. What does success look like? How do you know when democratic processes succeed?
- d. What challenges do you face in making democratic decisions or building democratic processes in your chapter?

## **Additional Analysis on Member Joins and Lapses: Joining Is Intentful, Leaving Is Not**

Our report argues that member joins clearly express intent, while member leaves do not:

Members joining DSA is a clear expression of intent at a precise moment in time while, in our data, members typically leave DSA passively i.e. when their dues lapse.

This latter fact – that members mostly leave passively – is easily visible in the monthly join-and-leave data, where one can see a spike in leaves 1 year after a spike in joins. It is even more strikingly visible in the daily join-and-leave data. In the graph below, we plot joins (shifted 365 days ahead) against leaves, which yields a strikingly symmetric pattern in Figure 20 below:

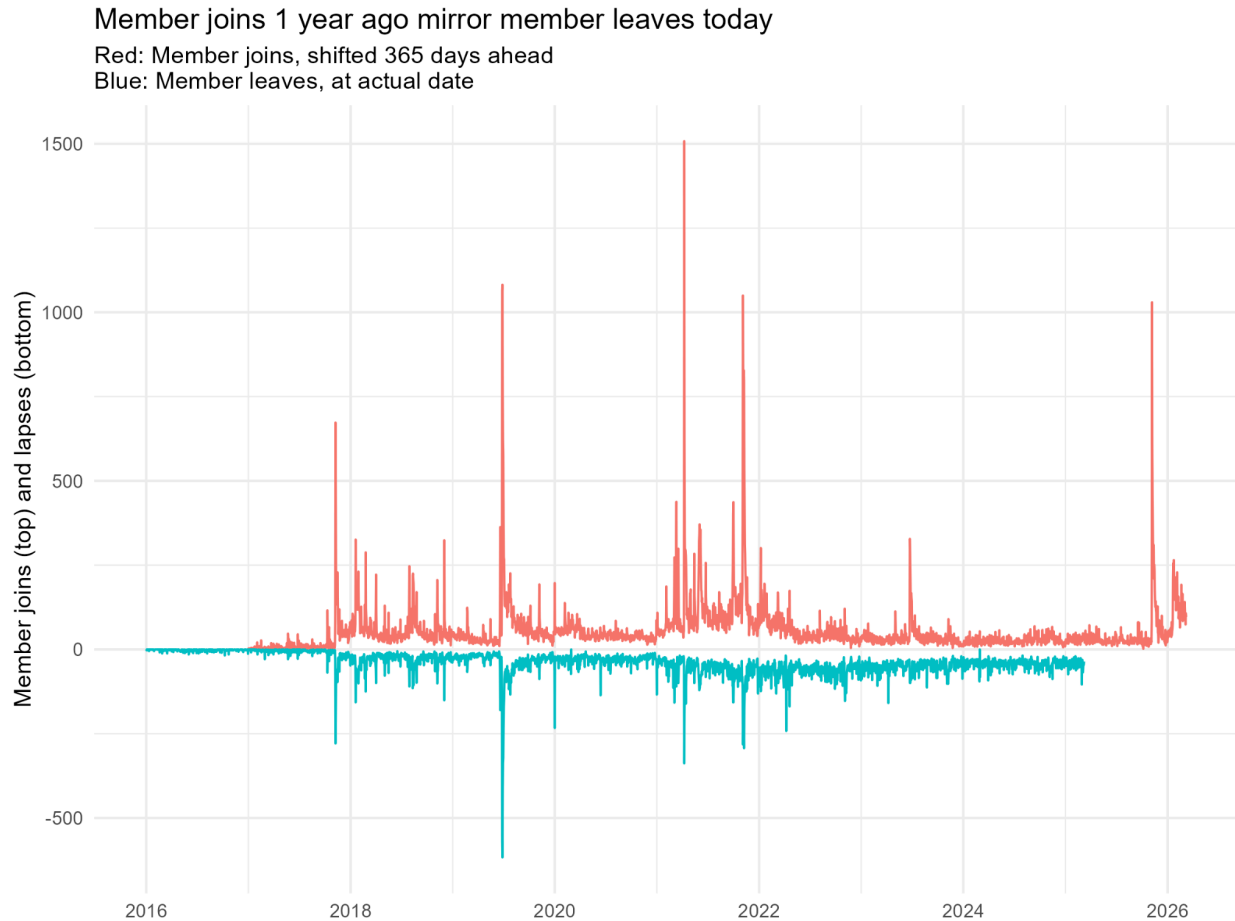


Figure 20

High joins last year probably means high leaves today.

This relationship is very strong. For example, in linear regression, “joins 1 year ago” explains 61% of the variation in “leaves today”. This strongly suggests that most leaves are “passive”, the result of a member who failed to renew their dues, rather than an intentionally-chosen date. (Members become “lapsed” one year after last paying dues.) However, if we plot this relationship in Figure 21 below, we see that the relationship is not quite linear. Why?

### Member joins 1 year ago predict member leaves today

Read this plot: The fit line (blue) suggests that, if ~1000 members joined 1 year ago (X), then ~500 members will leave today (Y)  
 Note: Plot is in log-log scale, fit is LOESS

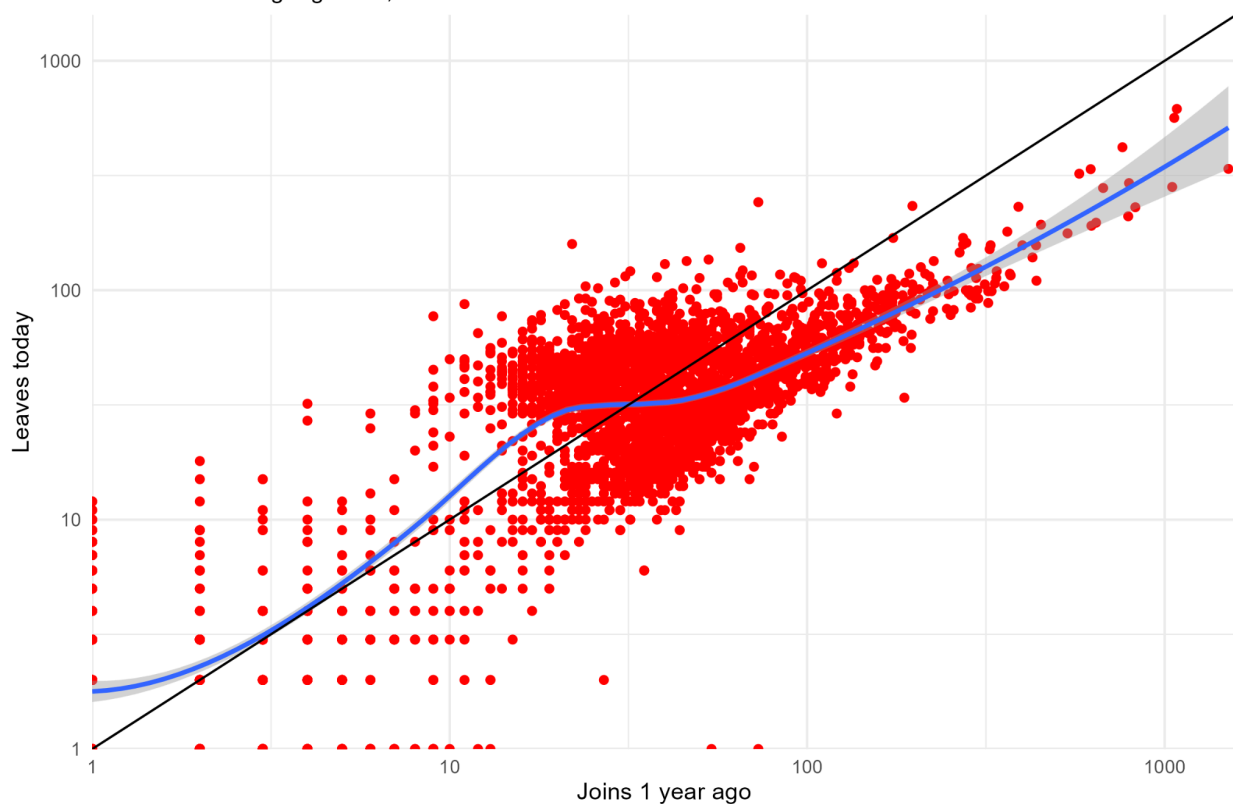


Figure 21

The reason is simple: Figure 21 combines all years of data. DSA's "first-year retention rate" has dramatically improved over time, as seen in Figure 14 earlier. As a result, the slope of this relationship has declined, as seen in Figure 22:

The slope of the relationship between joins 1 year ago and leaves today has declined

Read this plot: The 2016-2021 fit line (blue) suggests that, if ~1000 members joined 1 year ago (X), then ~500 members will leave today (Y)  
 Note: Plot is in log-log scale, fit is linear OLS

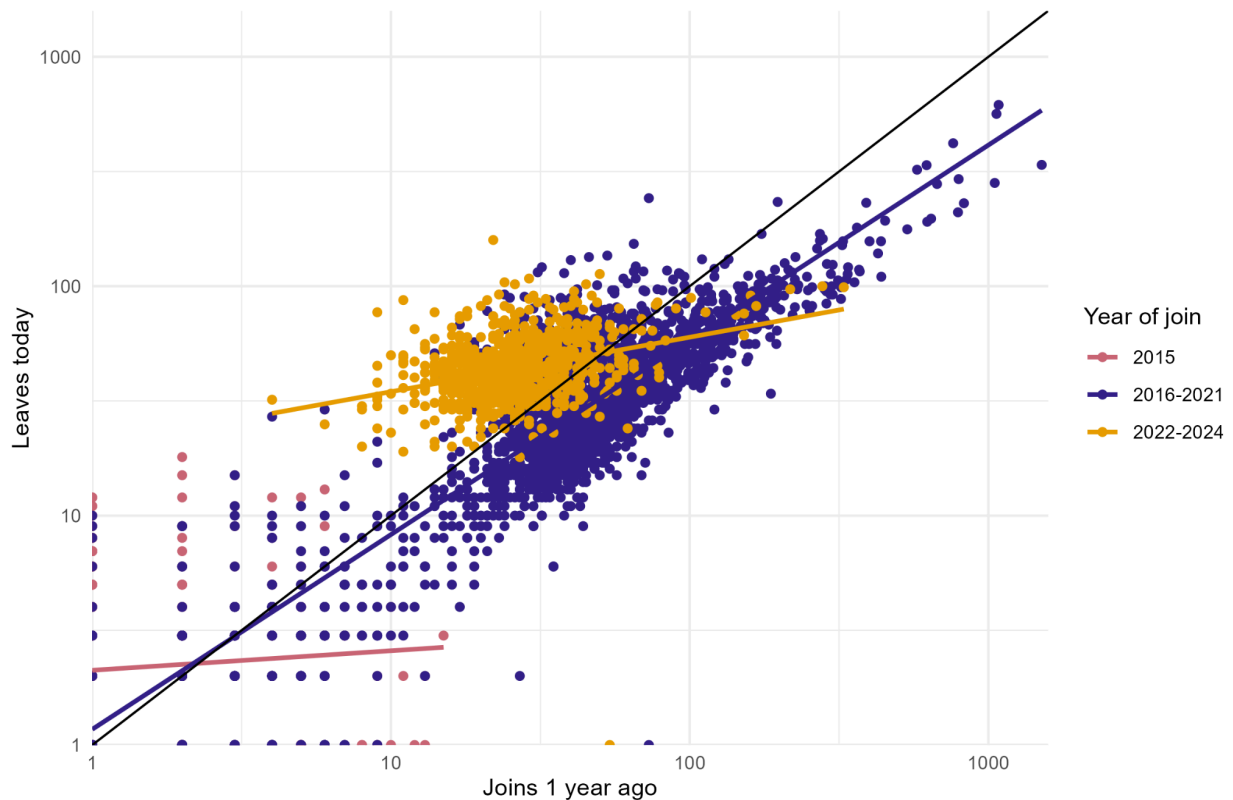


Figure 22

In summary: Daily join-and-leave data strongly suggests that most member leaves are the “passive” result of a failure to renew their dues, rather than an “active” quit from the organization. This suggests that, if DSA wants to increase member retention, we should be more worried about reducing yearly member attrition due to lack of engagement than worried about reducing angry quits. This also suggests that it is difficult-to-impossible to read leave dates as signals of member behavior. Instead, the join-and-leave dataset is useful for analyzing join dates.