

Generational Change in the Democratic Party and the Rise and Challenges of Progressives and Democratic Socialists

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Abstract

This paper examines generational change within the Democratic Party and the parallel rise of progressives and democratic socialists in contemporary American politics. Focusing particularly on developments surrounding the 2026 midterm elections, it argues that generational turnover should not be equated automatically with an ideological shift to the left. Rather, Democratic politics currently reflects three overlapping but distinct forces: generational insurgency against long-serving incumbents, progressive demands for stronger economic and social reforms, and democratic socialist efforts to restructure economic and political power. The paper traces the historical development of American democratic socialism from Eugene V. Debs and the New Deal era through Michael Harrington, the Democratic Socialists of America, Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the resurgence of socialist politics since 2016. It further assesses whether progressive and democratic socialist candidates can expand beyond safe Democratic districts into statewide and battleground-state elections. Finally, the paper examines growing foreign-policy divisions within the Democratic left over Israel-Palestine, defense spending, military intervention, China, and “working-class foreign policy.” It concludes that the central challenge for the new Democratic left is reconciling movement-based ideological commitments with electoral expansion and the institutional responsibilities of governing.

Keywords: Democratic Party, Generational Change, Progressivism, Democratic Socialism, U.S. Foreign Policy

I. Introduction

As of late August 2026, what is happening in the Democratic Party is not simply the “rise of progressives.” It also involves three broader changes: generational turnover, growing economic populism, and the renewed institutionalization of democratic socialism. These three developments overlap, but they are not the same thing. The 2026 primary results make this especially clear. Democratic voters are indeed replacing a number of long-serving politicians, but those defeating them are not all AOC-style — *i.e.*, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — leftists. The Associated Press summarized this year’s Democratic primaries as showing that voters want change, but not necessarily a simple leftward shift.

A broader question, then, is this: as the Democratic Party moves from an older generation of liberals to a younger generation of progressives, does generational change also mean an ideological shift to the left?

II. Generational Change in the Democratic Party

First, what exactly is at stake in the 2026 congressional elections? In the November 3, 2026, midterm elections, all 435 seats in the House of Representatives will be contested. In the Senate, 35 seats will be up for election, including 33 regularly scheduled races and additional special-election seats. Republicans currently control the Senate by 53-47, so Democrats would generally need a net gain of four seats to regain the majority.

The Senate map is especially difficult for Democrats because they cannot focus only on challenging Republican-held seats; they must also defend their own vulnerable seats. For example, Jon Ossoff in Georgia holds one of the Democrats’ most important defensive seats. Michigan has become an open-seat race because of Gary Peters’s retirement, while New Hampshire and Minnesota have also become more competitive to varying degrees because of the retirement of senior Democratic senators. At the same time, Democrats are targeting Republican-held seats in North Carolina, Ohio, Alaska, and even Texas. Recent ratings from organizations such as the Cook Political Report and Sabato’s Crystal Ball have also moved several states that had previously leaned Republican somewhat toward the Democratic.



Figure 1. What Is at Stake in the 2026 Congressional Elections?

Source: DepositPhotos.

The most relevant case here is Michigan. The Democratic establishment had initially supported Representative Haley Stevens for the Senate, but progressive candidate Abdul El-Sayed defeated Stevens in the August 4 primary by roughly 48.5% to 47.5%. El-Sayed was endorsed by Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, AOC, Rashida Tlaib, and others, and he still won despite outside groups and his opponents spending far more money than his campaign did. This is an important test of whether progressives can move beyond deep-blue House districts and compete in statewide elections. A similar result occurred in Minnesota, where progressive Peggy Flanagan defeated the more moderate Angie Craig to win the Democratic Senate nomination. In 2018, the main breakthrough for progressives came in deep-blue House districts. The real new development in 2026 is that progressives are beginning to expand from safe House districts into statewide politics.

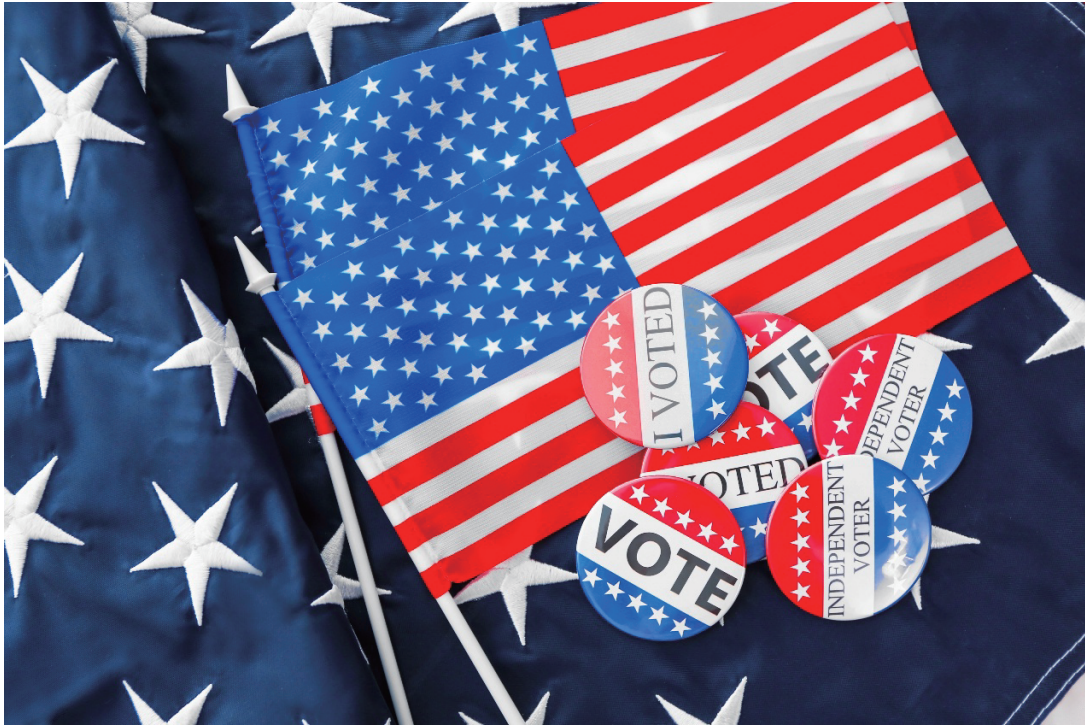


Figure 2. Does Generational Change Also Mean an Ideological Shift to the Left?

Source: DepositPhotos.

The bigger story in 2026, however, is that the Democratic Party’s “politics of aging” is beginning to loosen. By mid-August, a considerable number of incumbent Democratic House members had already been defeated in the primaries, and many of them represented very safe Democratic districts. According to Axios, by the time John Larson lost his primary, seven incumbent Democratic House members had already been defeated, which is an unusually high number for this century.

They include:

1. John Larson of Connecticut, age 78, who had served in the House since 1999, was defeated by former mayor Luke Bronin, who is around 47 years old.
2. Diana DeGette of Colorado, age 68, was defeated by democratic socialist newcomer Melat Kiros, who is around 29.

3. Adriano Espaillat of New York, age 71, was defeated by Darializa Avila Chevalier, a democratic socialist community organizer in her early 30s.
4. Dan Goldman of New York, age 50, was defeated by Brad Lander, age 57, the former New York City comptroller who had stronger support from progressives than Goldman.
5. Shri Thanedar of Michigan, age 72, was defeated by Donavan McKinney, a progressive state representative in his early 30s.
6. Al Green of Texas, age 78, was defeated by fellow Democratic Representative Christian Menefee, who is also in his early 30s. Because of redistricting, the two incumbents were forced to compete against each other in the Democratic primary.

At the same time, there has been an even larger wave of “voluntary generational turnover.” Senior Democratic members such as Nancy Pelosi of California, Jerry Nadler of New York, Steny Hoyer of Maryland, Nydia Velázquez of New York, Jan Schakowsky of Illinois, and Danny Davis of Illinois are no longer seeking reelection. In the House alone, by mid-August at least 30 incumbent Democrats had already decided that they would not return to the next Congress. Across both parties, the number was at least 70.

The same pattern can be seen in the Senate. One example is senior Democratic figure Dick Durbin of Illinois, who has announced his retirement and described it himself as “it’s time to pass the torch.” Durbin served as the Senate Democratic Whip. The departure of politicians like him does not simply open up a Senate seat. It also frees up committee seniority, party leadership positions, fundraising networks, and agenda-setting power.

However, “generational turnover” does not mean “democratic socialist transformation.” For example, when John Larson was defeated by Luke Bronin, Bronin was not an AOC-style democratic socialist. His main message was simply that Larson had been there for twenty-seven years and that it was time for a new generation. Therefore, the Democratic revolt of 2026 includes at least three different forces.

The first is generational insurgency. This is mainly opposition to older politicians who have held their seats for a long time and are seen as lacking energy or renewal. The second is progressive insurgency. This camp calls for policies such as Medicare for All, stronger labor rights, a higher minimum wage, more aggressive housing policies, opposition to corporate PAC money, and limits on the power of large corporations. The third is democratic socialist insurgency. This goes beyond simply demanding more left-wing policies. It argues that capitalism itself produces unequal economic and political power and therefore seeks changes in ownership and in the structure of economic power.



Figure 3. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

Source: Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, “Thank you to all of the constituents who joined our town hall last week,” February 12, 2026, *Facebook*, <<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1475560993929421&set=pb.100044266037709.-2207520000&type=3>>.

These three forces often overlap, but they are not the same. Making this distinction helps avoid describing all younger Democrats simply as members of the “AOC wing.”

AOC is a key figure in this discussion, but her role today is very different from what it was in 2018. In 2018, AOC was a 28-year-old challenger who was almost completely unknown when she defeated Joe Crowley, then the fourth-ranking Democrat in the House. That was a classic case of insurgent versus establishment. Eight years later, however, AOC in 2026 has become part of the incumbent establishment of the left. In the NY-14 Democratic primary this year, she received 84.71 percent of the vote, or about 30,189 votes. Felipe Garcia came in second with only 6.55 percent, while Marty Dolan received 5.77 percent. NY-14 itself is also an extremely safe Democratic district. The Cook Political Report rates it as Solid Democratic, with a Cook PVI of D+19. Therefore, when she faces Republican candidate Diamant Hysenaj in November, the real question is not whether AOC can win reelection.

More important is her fundraising strength. By the end of June 2026, her campaign account still had about US\$15.96 million in cash on hand and no debt. Federal Election Commission (FEC) data also show that AOC is one of the strongest fundraisers among House candidates in the 2026 midterm elections. In other words, AOC’s political capital in 2018 was based on the message that “I am not part of the Washington establishment.” By 2026, the political question has become whether she can maintain an insurgent identity after becoming part of the Washington establishment herself.

There are also now subtle tensions between AOC and the democratic socialist movement. Many media reports tend to group together AOC, Bernie Sanders, the Squad, the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Justice Democrats, and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). But they are not the same organization or political force. Bernie Sanders, for example, describes himself as a democratic socialist but is not a formal member of DSA. *Reuters* also made this distinction in its coverage of DSA this year.



Figure 4. Democratic Socialists of America

Source: Democratic Socialists of America, “We have a world to win,” August 20, 2026 accessed, *Democratic Socialists of America*, <<https://act.dsusa.org/donate/membership/?source=election-website>>.

AOC was once one of the most visible DSA-linked figures in Congress, but in recent years there has been growing friction between her and the organization. In 2024, DSA openly debated whether it should continue to endorse AOC. The disagreement focused especially on Israel and Palestine and on whether she had compromised too much with the Democratic establishment. This has important theoretical implications.

Once an outsider wins office, wins reelection, joins congressional committees, takes part in legislative bargaining, and begins thinking about national elections, that politician inevitably faces the responsibilities of governing. At that point, movement logic begins to conflict with institutional logic. This is exactly what we can now see in the relationship between AOC and DSA.

III. The History of Democratic Socialism in the United States

The history of democratic socialism in the United States should not begin with Sanders. It should go back at least to the early twentieth century. This history can be divided into five stages.

1. Stage One: Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Party of America

American socialism did not suddenly appear in 2016. In the early twentieth century, the Socialist Party of America under Eugene V. Debs had a substantial base in local politics and the labor movement. One of its most important differences from revolutionary communism in Europe was its combination of electoral politics, the labor movement, and democracy.

This tradition also produced what became known as Sewer Socialism, most famously in Milwaukee. The name sounds negative, but the basic idea was actually very practical: socialism should not talk only about revolution. It should first make sure that cities provide functioning sewers, clean water, housing, public transportation, and public health services. This tradition is actually quite similar to Mamdani's current emphasis on affordability, public transportation, and housing.

2. Stage Two: The New Deal Absorbs Socialist Issues

After the 1930s, American socialism faced a special problem: Franklin D. Roosevelt adopted many of its policy concerns. Social Security, labor rights, public works, and government intervention in the market all became part of the New Deal. As a result, the United States did not develop a powerful Socialist Party or Labour Party comparable to those in Europe. Many American leftists eventually moved into the Democratic Party and labor unions. This became the historical foundation for the later relationship between democratic socialism and the Democratic Party. Michael Harrington is also one of the most important figures for understanding today's DSA. In 1962, Harrington published *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*. The book had an important influence on the intellectual environment surrounding the Johnson administration's War on Poverty. Harrington later founded the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) in 1973.

His basic strategy was not to create a third party to defeat the Democratic Party. Instead, he chose to work within the Democratic Party and push it to the left. This later became known as the realignment strategy. DSOC hoped to bring together labor, civil rights activists, feminists, anti-war activists, and left liberals to build a left-wing coalition inside the Democratic Party. There is a direct historical connection between this strategy and AOC's political approach today. DSA was formally established in 1982. That year, two organizations merged: DSOC + New American Movement (NAM) = Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). DSA's own official history also treats the 1982 Detroit merger as the formal beginning of the organization. The merger itself was highly symbolic. DSOC was closer to the Old Left, organized labor, social democracy, and Democratic Party electoral politics. NAM came more from the New Left, the legacy of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), feminism, and grassroots movements.

This helps explain why DSA remains so internally complicated today. It was diverse from the beginning. It has never been an ideological monolith.

3. 1989-2015: DSA Becomes a Marginal Organization in American Politics

From 1989 to 2015, DSA became almost a marginal organization in American politics. Harrington died in 1989, only a few months before the fall of the Berlin Wall. After the end of the Cold War, socialism became almost a political dirty word in the United States. For much of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, DSA remained a small organization of only a few thousand left-wing intellectuals and activists.

4. 2016-2026: The Resurgence of Democratic Socialism

The real turning point, therefore, was not AOC. It was Bernie Sanders in 2016. Sanders did something very important: he made the word socialist politically acceptable again, especially among Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, and Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012.

This development was closely connected to the 2008 financial crisis and the issues that followed from it: Occupy Wall Street, student debt, housing affordability,



Figure 5. Bernie Sanders

Source: Σ, "Sanders campaigning for president in San Jose, California, March 2020," March 1, 2020, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernie_Sanders#/media/File:Bernie_Sanders_-_Rally_at_San_Jose,_CA_-_2.jpg>.

inequality, Sanders's 2016 campaign, and Sanders's 2020 campaign. Together, these developments formed a very clear chain of generational politics. *Reuters* has described a similar pattern: DSA remained relatively obscure for many years and only entered national politics after Sanders ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016.

In 2018, AOC became the second critical juncture. Sanders showed that a socialist could win millions of votes. AOC showed that a socialist could defeat an incumbent from the Democratic establishment. In 2018, she and Rashida Tlaib became the most visible DSA-linked members of Congress. DSA itself described this as the return of an American socialist movement after decades of decline.



Figure 6. Zohran Mamdani

Source: Metropolitan Transportation Authority, “Mamdani attending a rally at McBurney YMCA on January 5, 2026,” January 5, 2026, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zohran_Mamdani#/media/File:Zohran_Mamdani_Congestion_Relief_One_Year_Anniversary.jpg>.

After that came a new generation of progressive politicians, including Cori Bush, Jamaal Bowman, Summer Lee, Greg Casar, and Delia Ramirez. But one distinction is important. Not all members of the Squad or the Congressional Progressive Caucus are DSA members. The Congressional Progressive Caucus today has nearly one hundred members and is already a major caucus within the Democratic Party. It was co-founded by Bernie Sanders, who is now a senator. The actual DSA presence in Congress, however, is much smaller.

The year 2024 briefly created the impression that the “era of the Squad” might be coming to an end. Jamaal Bowman lost his primary, and Cori Bush also lost hers. Both primaries saw very large amounts of outside pro-Israel spending. At the time, many observers therefore concluded that the progressive insurgency had peaked in 2018-2020.

But developments in 2025-2026 changed that assessment. The key figure was Zohran Mamdani. Mamdani's importance goes beyond simply being another left-wing politician. He showed that DSA-style politics may not be limited to winning House primaries in D+30 districts, meaning extremely safe, deep-blue districts. In the past, politicians such as AOC, Jamaal Bowman, and many DSA-backed candidates won office by defeating Democratic establishment candidates in primaries in districts where Democrats were almost guaranteed to win the general election. In these districts, winning the Democratic primary was effectively the same as winning the seat.

The problem was that the influence of these far-left politicians often stopped at the borders of those districts. Mamdani is different because, although he is similarly left-wing, he has shown that this political style may also be able to win executive office.

In 2026, *Reuters* reported that DSA membership had again risen above 100,000, while some other recent estimates placed it at around 120,000. The historical development can therefore be summarized in the following way:

Sanders 2016: popularization → AOC 2018: congressional breakthrough → Bowman/Bush 2020: Squad expansion → 2024: backlash → Mamdani 2025 + 2026 primaries: institutional expansion.

DSA's congressional strength could even expand further in 2026. This is one of the most important new developments this year. In its own 2026 election coverage, DSA listed several candidates who could enter or return to the next Congress (see Table 1).

Table 1. DSA Candidates Most Likely to Enter Congress

Candidate	State
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez	New York
Rashida Tlaib	Michigan
Chris Rabb	Pennsylvania
Darrializa Avila-Chevalier	New York
Claire Valdez	New York
Melat Kiros	Colorado
Donavan McKinney	Michigan

Among them, Donavan McKinney's defeat of incumbent Democratic Representative Shri Thanedar is a very typical example of a combination of generational change, class politics, and a left-wing primary challenge. AOC's most important historical impact may not be whether she herself can become president. It may instead be that she made it possible to see challenging Democratic incumbents from the left in safe Democratic districts as a repeatable career path.

At the same time, 2026 also clearly shows the electoral ceiling of democratic socialism. In other words, although the left has developed a clear career path in American politics, it has not yet become a mainstream political force. For example, Francesca Hong in Wisconsin is a democratic socialist and came close to winning the Democratic nomination for governor, but she was ultimately defeated by the more moderate David Crowley. Cori Bush also tried to return to Congress in 2026 but again lost to Wesley Bell.

A clear geographic pattern therefore seems to be emerging. DSA is strong in deep-blue urban districts, and progressive candidates are now beginning to win statewide Democratic primaries. But the real unresolved test is whether they can win general elections in "purple states."

This makes Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan especially important. If El-Sayed ultimately wins the general election in Michigan, that would be much more significant than another AOC victory in NY-14. It would suggest that: democratic socialism or hard-progressive politics may be moving from a "safe-seat primary strategy" to a "battleground-state electoral strategy." This is one of the most important indicators to watch in November 2026.

IV. Foreign Policy Divisions Within the Democratic Party

Finally, in foreign policy, many of the internal conflicts within the Democratic Party come from the same basic tension: progressive internationalism versus the anti-imperialist left, with both also confronting traditional liberal internationalism. These tensions can be seen in five areas.

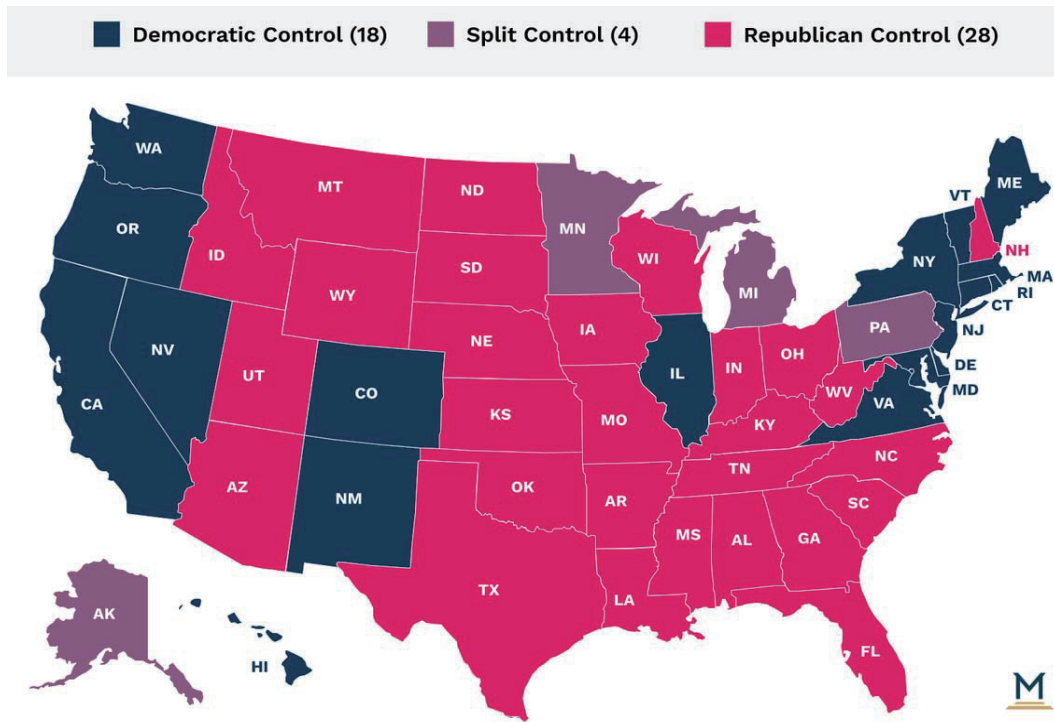


Figure 7. 2026 State Legislatures

Source: MultiState, “2026 State Legislatures,” August 20, 2026 accessed, *MultiState*, <<https://www.multistate.us/resources/2026-state-legislatures>>.

1. Israel-Palestine: Human Rights Diplomacy vs. the Traditional Pro-Israel Position vs. the Anti-Imperialist Position

Traditional Democrats have long supported the U.S.-Israel alliance while also supporting a two-state solution and humanitarian assistance. Progressives, however, increasingly argue that military aid should be tied to human rights conditions. Sanders, AOC, and others have even called for stopping certain weapons transfers.

Further to the left, the DSA/Tlaib position argues that the problem is not only the Netanyahu government, but also U.S. military and diplomatic support for Israel. This is also one of the clearest sources of conflict between AOC and DSA. In 2024, DSA withdrew its national endorsement of AOC, and one reason was that the organization believed her position on anti-Zionism was still not strong enough.

2. Defense Spending: Maintaining U.S. Global Leadership vs. Guns-or-Butter

Traditional Democrats generally accept a large defense budget, NATO, overseas military bases, and continued U.S. military superiority, while calling for greater efficiency or stronger human rights restrictions.

Progressives are more likely to emphasize the large opportunity costs of military spending. From this perspective, every additional dollar spent on the Pentagon is one less dollar available for housing, education, health care, climate policy, or social welfare. AOC's official foreign policy position directly connects her opposition to the *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA) with the imbalance between very high military spending and insufficient investment in areas such as housing and education.

3. Foreign Military Intervention: Liberal Interventionism vs. Restraint

The Democratic tradition associated with Clinton, Obama, and Biden places greater emphasis on multilateralism, but it has never completely rejected military intervention. When necessary, it has continued to accept air strikes, sanctions, military support for allies, and humanitarian intervention.

The new left has been deeply shaped by the experiences of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. It therefore places greater emphasis on the War Powers framework, congressional authorization, diplomacy, and opposition to "forever wars." AOC's official position directly describes her foreign policy as moving away from interventionism and forever wars.

But this immediately creates another internal contradiction. What happens if Russia invades Ukraine, or if China uses force against Taiwan? If the left supports both anti-imperialism and national self-determination, should it oppose "U.S. intervention," or should it support countries resisting aggression? Ukraine and Taiwan therefore make traditional left-wing non-interventionism much more difficult to maintain.

4. China: Opposing the China-Threat Narrative vs. Taking a Hard Line on Labor and Human Rights

China is not as easy as Israel to divide into a simple pattern in which “the left is more dovish.” Democratic progressives oppose turning China into a new Cold War enemy and are also concerned about an arms race and the militarization of Asia.

At the same time, however, they can be very critical of China on Xinjiang, human rights, Hong Kong, labor rights, offshoring, and Chinese state capitalism. Democratic support for a tougher approach toward China had already become increasingly bipartisan during Trump’s first term.

AOC’s development in recent years is especially interesting. Her earlier political identity was strongly associated with anti-interventionism. By 2026, however, when



Figure 8. U.S.-China Relations

Source: DepositPhotos.

discussing foreign policy she has had to address classic great-power security issues such as Taiwan.

The new left therefore faces a difficult dilemma: how can it oppose a new Cold War without appearing indifferent to authoritarian China, security in the Taiwan Strait, or the security of U.S. allies? This will be a major test if these politicians want to move beyond safe deep-blue districts and compete for national governing power.

5. “Working-Class Foreign Policy”: Who Should Foreign Policy Serve?

This may be the best concept for connecting Sanders, AOC, and the new Democratic left. Traditional foreign policy usually begins with questions of geopolitical leadership: NATO, Taiwan, the Middle East, the rules-based order, and the balance of power. A working-class foreign policy turns the question around and asks: what does this foreign policy mean for American workers? It therefore brings trade, offshoring, industrial policy, union jobs, energy, drug prices, military spending, and the costs of war into the discussion of foreign policy. This also explains an apparent contradiction. The new left can be more restrained than the Democratic establishment on military policy while at the same time being more economically nationalist on trade and industrial policy than the old Clinton-style Democratic Party.

In short, less military globalization, less neoliberal economic globalization, but not necessarily isolationism. This is also one of the most interesting areas of overlap between the MAGA right and the new left. Both criticize the globalized foreign policy that developed after the 1990s. The difference is that Trump approaches the issue from the perspective of national interest, while the Sanders/AOC left approaches it from the perspective of class interest.

V. Conclusion

In 2026, the Democratic Party is going through a clear generational restructuring, but generational turnover and an ideological shift to the left only partly overlap. The greatest success of democratic socialists and progressives has been to bring economic inequality, housing, health care, labor unions, and the cost of living back to the center of Democratic politics.

Their long-term challenge, however, has changed. The main question is no longer simply whether they can defeat Democratic establishment candidates in deep-blue districts. It is whether they can expand this political model from safe districts into battleground states, and whether they can reconcile the purity of political movements with the responsibilities of governing once they enter political institutions.

Another important development is that some of the largest divisions between the new generation of the Democratic left and the traditional Democratic Party are no longer only about Medicare for All. They increasingly involve Israel-Palestine, defense spending, foreign military intervention, China policy, and the idea of a “working-class foreign policy.” The conflict between AOC and DSA itself is a clear example of these internal tensions within the American left.

