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“Agents of Change”: Progressive Democratic ‘Diffusion’ Across U.S. House and State
Legislative Elections in 2018

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Introduction

The congressional midterm elections in 2018 marked a major turning point in the direction of electoral, legislative, and party politics in the United States. Just two years after the election of President Donald Trump and a Republican-dominated Congress, Democrats gained 40 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives.¹ This electoral shift signified two important implications for the trajectory and future of the national Democratic Party and American politics. First, this electoral shift, characterized as a “Blue Wave,” allowed Democrats to achieve majority control of the U.S. House with 235 Democratic seats over 199 Republican seats.² In achieving majority control, the Democrats curbed the legislative power of Republicans in the U.S House of Representatives and reoriented the course of national public policy in Congress.

However, a second important implication of the 2018 midterms is the distinct ideological fracture among the Democratic members in the U.S. House of Representatives. One of the most contentious elections of that year that highlights this ideological fracture occurred in New York’s 14th congressional district. Joe Crowley, a ten-term and high-ranking Democratic incumbent in the U.S. House, lost his seat after being challenged by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who had no previous political or electoral experience.³ Although this election can be characterized as a unique case study, Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s electoral feat demonstrates the rise and conflict between two wings of the national Democratic Party competing to secure influence over state and national public policy: progressive and moderate Democrats. Although this paper will explain the characteristics that differentiate these separate wings of the Democratic Party, in general,

¹ Larry Sabato and Kyle Kondik, *The Blue Wave: the 2018 Midterms and What They Mean for the 2020 Elections* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ Benjamin Ginsberg and Kathryn Wagner Hill, “Congressional Elections,” in *Congress: The First Branch* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2019), 91.

progressive and moderate Democrats diverge into two factions because of their contrasting ideological commitments and electoral strategies in Congress. This ideological fracture among U.S. House Democrats has undoubtedly reshaped the nature and trajectory of Congress, legislation, and American politics at the national level.⁴

However, despite their nationwide significance and heightened interest, the study and coverage of congressional midterm elections and the national Democratic Party obscures an equally (if not more) crucial dimension of American politics: state legislative elections. During the 2018 midterms, 46 state legislatures held elections.⁵ In these elections, citizens vote for state representatives to advocate for their political interests and directly shape public policies within each state legislature.⁶ Although most state elections occur concurrently with congressional elections, and often hold greater political implications for citizens, Congress and the national Democratic Party are the central focuses of study on the 2018 midterm elections. Less scholarly research has been conducted across states to examine how the national political trends of the “Blue Wave,” and the subsequent ideological fracture among the U.S. House Democrats, diffused across state legislatures. Although they are conceived as separate political institutions with distinct priorities and purposes, scholarly research suggests state legislatures and state parties are influenced by the policy positions and political behavior of Congress and national political parties.⁷ Thus, this study examines these political trends with the core research question: How do the electoral results and the ideological fracture of the U.S. House Democrats in the

⁴ Hans Noel, “Ideological Factions in the Republican and Democratic Parties,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667, no. 1 (September 2016): 166-168.

⁵ “2018 Legislative Races by State and Legislative Chamber,” National Conference of State Legislatures, February 23, 2018, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/2018-legislative-races-by-state-and-legislative-chamber.aspx#Seats%20Up>.

⁶ Malcolm E. Jewell, *Representation in State Legislatures* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1982): 15-16.

⁷ Joshua N. Zingher and Jesse Richman, “Polarization and the Nationalization of State Legislative Elections,” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (July 2018): 1036.

2018 midterms reflect across state legislative elections? This paper argues that, although the “Blue Wave” did not diffuse across state houses, the ideological fracture of the Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives had greater diffusion across state houses. States with elections that were overall less expensive in campaign costs and included high-profile progressive Democrats gaining congressional seats experienced a greater proportion of progressive Democrats winning state legislative elections.

To fully explore the diffusion of the national “Blue Wave,” and the ideological fracture of the U.S. House Democrats, to state houses in the 2018 midterm elections, this paper is constructed into six sections. First, this paper will further define the “Blue Wave” and the key characteristics that differentiate the progressive and moderate factions of the Democratic members in the U.S. House of Representatives. Secondly, state and national Democratic Parties will be compared to examine their key institutional similarities and differences as political parties. State legislatures and the Congress will also be compared to determine their key institutional similarities and differences. These state and national institutions will be assessed to show that, despite their different priorities and purposes in the political landscape, their institutional similarities demonstrate they have a fundamental basis of comparison. Furthermore, this paper will also analyze two specific examples—the nationalization of policy positions and state legislative electoral results—that demonstrate how national political trends influence state parties and legislatures. Afterwards, quantitative and qualitative data will be analyzed to show how, and to what extent, do the results of the congressional midterm elections for the U.S. House Democrats reflect across state legislative elections in 2018. This paper concludes that, although high campaign costs and diverging political cultures act as institutional barriers that limit the elections of progressive Democrats in state houses, substantial campaign finance reform and the

media coverage of national progressive Democrats are key factors required to increase the rate of progressive Democratic diffusion in state legislative elections. Furthermore, the emergence and conflict between two factions of the Democratic Party vying for political power and influence demonstrates the volatile status and future of the Democratic Party as an institution in American politics.

2018 Midterm Elections: Defining the National “Blue Wave” and the Ideological Fracture of the Democratic Party

Despite generally receiving less media recognition and lower voter turnout than presidential elections, midterm elections are vital for re-orienting the direction of public policy and the legislative makeup of national and state governments. Midterm elections are held every two years after each presidential election, and midterm election results can reflect the public’s assessment of the direction and performance of the presidency. Research shows that voters select candidates running for Congress, governorships, and state legislatures in midterm elections based on their assessment of the president.⁸ Although midterm election results are a limited measurement of public opinion and can be influenced by a wide number of factors, the midterm election results in 2018 reflect a distinct electoral mobilization against the Trump administration that benefited the Democratic Party. Not only did 50.3% of the American eligible voting population turn out to vote, which marked the highest voter turnout rate for any midterm election since 1914, but the electoral results in the U.S. House constitute a “Blue Wave,” or a widespread victory of the Democratic Party across elections.⁹ The “Blue Wave” was the most evident in the U.S. House of Representatives where Democrats gained a 40-seat majority over Republicans. Thus, the Democratic Party won a higher number of elections and congressional seats in the U.S.

⁸ Larry Sabato and Kyle Kondik, *The Blue Wave*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid*, 16-17.

House due to the dissatisfaction of the presidency and the Republican Party among American voters.

Furthermore, the 2018 midterm elections also underscore a distinct political phenomenon among the Democratic members in the U.S. House of Representatives: the ideological fracture of the national Democratic Party. This ideological fracture is characterized by two wings of the Democratic Party—moderate and progressive Democrats—vying for political power and influence in national politics. Although they belong to the same political party, progressive and moderate Democrats diverge into separate factions due to their contrasting political ideologies on issues, strategies, and goals. For example, moderate Democrats are characterized by their pro-establishment inclinations that favor compromise and slow, incremental change to secure their re-electability in future elections.¹⁰ In contrast, progressive Democrats distinguish themselves as activists and so-called “agents of change” who advocate for populist policies, such as Medicare-For-All and a \$15 federal minimum wage, that challenge the status quo.¹¹ Raúl Grijalva, a Representative from Arizona’s 3rd congressional district, articulates these ideological differences in his article published in the *Washington Post*:

For progressives, the central questions of public policy revolve around who has power, why they have that power and how it can be more fairly distributed [...] We also question the system that granted anyone those powers in the first place, and ask whether a better way of doing things is possible [...] Any politics that accepts such harmful power imbalances, or denies some Americans their full rights in the name of moving cautiously, is not “liberalism.”¹²

Thus, according to Rep. Grijalva, progressive Democrats promote themselves as challengers to the political establishment and unbalanced power structures that exist in American

¹⁰ Hans Noel, “Ideological Factions,” 170.

¹¹ Larry Sabato and Kyle Kondik, *The Blue Wave*, 69.

¹² Raúl Grijalva, “Be progressive, Democrats, not merely liberal,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/be-progressive-democrats-not-merely-liberal/2018/04/28/4c9ff5a4-4a54-11e8-827e-190efaf1f1ee_story.html.

politics and government, which include moderate Democrats that are resistant to rapid institutional change. Accordingly, in this paper, House Democrats in Congress and state legislatures will be measured as progressive or moderate by examining three key components of their campaign styles: 1) the rejection of large-dollar campaign contributions, 2) populist policy platforms, and 3) grassroots campaigning. These three measures reflect the strong ideological commitments formed by progressive Democrats to prioritize funding their grassroots-based political campaigns with small-dollar individual donations and advocating for public policies that favor the American people; through these campaign strategies, progressive Democrats circumvent the corporate influence that they claim moderate Democrats favor to finance their election campaigns.¹³ Based off of these three measures, only seven U.S. House Democrats that won the 2018 midterm elections meet these qualifications: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY), Raúl Grijalva (AZ), Ayanna Pressley (MA), Ilhan Omar (MN), Rashida Tlaib (MI), Ro Khanna (CA), and Pramila Jayapal (WA).¹⁴ Although the progressive wing of the Democratic Party in the U.S. House is small and new, its emergence from one electoral cycle and the campaign strategies of progressive Democrats challenge moderate Democrats and exemplify the ideological evolution and struggle that the Democratic Party is undergoing.

Yet, the national interest and media coverage of the “Blue Wave,” and the subsequent ideological fracture of the Democratic members in the U.S. House, minimizes the potential role and impact that state political parties and state legislative elections played in enhancing or deflecting these national political trends across states. The structure of federalism has caused the

¹³ Aída Chávez, “Small Dollar Donors Are Playing A Growing Role in Congressional Campaigns,” *The Intercept*, March 6, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/03/06/house-democrats-small-dollar-donations/>.

¹⁴ David Freedlander, “There Is Going to Be a War Within the Party. We Are Going to Lean Into It,” *Politico*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/02/04/the-insurgents-behind-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-224542>.

national and state governments to be conceived and studied as separate political institutions with different priorities and features. As a result, political parties and elections are decentralized and spread out across the national and state levels of politics and government.¹⁵ Likewise, Congress and state legislatures are studied as separate and independent political institutions.¹⁶ However, this approach of study overlooks an inherent feature of American federalism: national and state political institutions coexist within the same political system; therefore, national and state political institutions dynamically influence one another at different capacities.¹⁷ Although there are clear institutional differences between national and state parties, Congress, and state legislatures, which will be outlined below, the political reality is that these institutions function with similar purposes and features and are not confined into distinct, independent, and static political realms.

The Institutional Characteristics of State and National Political Parties

Political parties are a vital aspect of American elections and legislatures. The dominating view of state and national parties is that they function as coalitions that congregate individual voters together to build political strength and capital. As coalitions, political parties contain members with a potentially broad range of political interests, platforms, and strategies within their membership.¹⁸ Furthermore, the structure of federalism has decentralized political parties to operate as separate entities across the state and national levels of politics and government. Despite their decentralization, state and national parties operate with the same political purposes and strategies of winning elections and moderating extreme ideological forces in the political

¹⁵ Joel Paddock, *State & National Parties & American Democracy* (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005), 2.

¹⁶ Peverill Squire and Keith E. Hamm, *101 Chambers: Congress, State Legislatures, and the Future of Legislative Studies* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2005), 1-2.

¹⁷ Douglas D. Rose, "National and Local Forces in State Politics: The Implications of Multi-Level Policy Analysis," *The American Political Science Review* 67, no. 4 (December 1973): 1162.

¹⁸ Hans Noel, "Ideological Factions," 167.

realm. To win elections, political parties will strategically nominate candidates seen viable to win, mobilize their electoral base to vote for those candidates, and encourage their newly-elected party member to create legislation that reflects the interests of the party and their constituents.¹⁹ In addition to providing a voter base, political parties also supply funds and infrastructure, such as campaign expertise and volunteer networks. These additional resources increase the likelihood of their nominated candidates winning their campaign elections.²⁰ As a result, political parties reduce the amount of money and influence that candidates take from outside sources, which often incentivize candidates to take more extreme positions in their campaigns and policymaking.²¹ Thus, national and state political parties share institutional characteristics due to their overlapping political purposes and strategies of winning elections and moderating ideologically extreme political forces in Congress and state legislatures.

Despite their shared institutional similarities, state and national political parties ultimately function as separate entities due to the different types of elections that they prioritize and how they strategically position themselves in national and state politics and government. The most apparent difference is that state parties prioritize state and local elections and national parties focus on congressional elections. However, the greater differences between state and national parties stem from their contrasting political priorities and levels of polarization. Previous scholarship demonstrates that the members of state legislatures and parties are less polarized, or ideologically extreme, than those in national parties and Congress.²² Thus, state political parties will nominate moderate candidates over those seen too ideologically extreme to win state

¹⁹ Joel Paddock, *State & National Parties*, 2.

²⁰ Raymond J. La Raja and Jonathan Rauch, *The State of State Parties—and How Strengthening Them Can Improve Our Politics* (Washington, DC: Center for Effective Public Management, Brookings Institution, 2016), 3-5.

²¹ Raymond J. La Raja and Jonathan Rauch, *The State of State Parties*, 4.

²² Raymond J. La Raja and Brian F. Schaffner, "Ideological Polarization in State Legislatures," In *Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 92.

elections.²³ In contrast, national political parties and congressional members are far more ideologically polarized than voters and state legislators, leading to less opportunities for moderate membership.²⁴ As a result of their unique political environments that require distinct electoral strategies, state and national political parties will modify their campaigns and platforms to reflect the most viable strategy to win state or congressional elections, which often moderates political candidates and legislators. However, as it will be demonstrated in this paper, the direction and policy positions of state political parties are also amenable to their national party counterparts.

The Institutional Characteristics of State Legislatures and Congress

In the American political landscape, state legislatures and the U.S Congress share three key institutional characteristics: bicameralism, electoral representation, and campaign financing. The first characteristic, bicameralism, refers to the constitutional design of legislatures being divided between an upper chamber (the Senate) and a lower chamber (the House or Assembly). With the exception of Nebraska having a unicameral structure, the U.S. House of Representatives in Congress and the lower house chambers in state legislatures function as similar institutions due to their larger membership sizes, shorter term limits, and constitutional powers to introduce and craft legislation.²⁵ These similarities are further highlighted through the nature of elections and electoral representation in American politics. State and national legislators are elected into their positions to represent the political interests of their voters. Furthermore, American federalism has also caused elections to be decentralized across local, state, and national politics. Although federalism allows states to hold their own elections and

²³ Raymond J. La Raja and Jonathan Rauch, *The State of State Parties*, 4-5.

²⁴ Raymond J. La Raja and Brian F. Schaffner, "Ideological Polarization," 91-92.

²⁵ Peverill Squire and Keith E. Hamm, *101 Chambers*, 41-42.

shape their legislatures, the U.S House of Representatives and 46 state houses hold their elections during the same electoral cycle.²⁶ Moreover, a third similarity between state legislatures and Congress is the role of campaign financing. Running campaigns and winning elections is an expensive endeavor. However, state and national legislators are often criticized for accepting campaign donations from wealthy donors and organizations; in general, the public perceives receiving large-dollar campaign contributions as a form of corruption that leads legislators to ignore the public's needs and craft legislation that benefit corporate and private interests.²⁷ Although congressional campaigns are far more expensive to run than state legislative elections, the role of money and campaign financing is a key institutional feature shared by state and national elections.

However, despite their shared institutional characteristics, state legislatures and the U.S. Congress also diverge due to their political priorities and levels of polarization that result from their contrasting political environments. The first significant difference is that state legislatures are designed to prioritize the interests of the citizens within their states. In contrast, Congress is focused on national interests and issues, which may not reflect the interests of citizens within some states. Due to this, the legislation that state legislatures and Congress craft reflect the respective state and national interests within the United States. Although this leads to conflict between states and Congress over certain issues, this arrangement allows state legislatures and Congress to concentrate on their separate political priorities. Moreover, the second important difference between state legislatures and Congress is their contrasting levels of ideological polarization in relation to their electorate. Research demonstrates that Congress, like national

²⁶ "2018 Legislative Races by State and Legislative Chamber," National Conference of State Legislatures.

²⁷ William M. Salka, *Reforming State Legislative Elections: Creating a New Dynamic* (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 5.

political parties, experiences greater levels of polarization than state legislatures as a direct result of the funding sources that they receive.²⁸ This, like state political parties, state legislatures are designed to prioritize state-level issues and legislation and are far less polarized than their national counterpart. However, despite these institutional differences, state legislatures are also prone to the national political trends of Congress.

The Potential Conflict Between State and National Parties, State Legislatures, and Congress

All in all, the structure of federalism has led political parties and legislatures to be decentralized, institutional entities that operate across state and national levels of politics and government in the United States. The important distinctions between these institutions stem from their contrasting political priorities and levels of polarization. State political parties and state legislatures, which are less polarized, prioritize state-level elections and issues; national parties and the U.S. Congress, in turn, are more polarized and focus on national issues. However, these institutions also share remarkable similarities in their characteristics and purpose in the American political realm. Furthermore, these institutions also exist and operate within the same political system and among an overlapping base of voters that participate in both congressional and state legislative elections. However, the disproportionate coverage of national politics and government in the media causes national political trends to have a greater impact in voting behavior and electoral outcomes. When they are directly asked, many voters state that national issues and events are the most important factors in the voting decisions that they make for congressional elections.²⁹ Thus, despite their institutional differences, state Democratic parties and state legislative elections are prone to the influences of the national Democratic Party and

²⁸ Raymond J. La Raja and Brian F. Schaffner, "Ideological Polarization," 91-92.

²⁹ Benjamin Ginsberg and Kathryn Wagner Hill, "Congressional Elections," 119-120.

congressional elections, which can potentially lead to conflict because of their contrasting priorities and levels of polarization that result from state and national politics.

Two examples that demonstrate how state political parties and state legislatures are influenced by national political trends are the nationalization of policy positions and the electoral outcomes of state legislative elections. The first example, the nationalization of policy positions, refers to how the platforms of state political parties are malleable and conflated to the policy positions taken by their national party counterpart. As demonstrated beforehand, state and national political parties will adjust their campaign platforms to viably win elections. Although state political parties are less polarized and moderate their platforms to appeal to a broader range of voters, conflicts arise due of the disproportionate media coverage of national political parties. The policy positions taken by national Democratic Party, which tend to be more polarizing than the average voter, are highlighted among voters and shape how they vote in state legislative elections.³⁰ Voters assume that the Democratic candidates running in state legislative elections also take the same policy positions as the national Democratic Party, regardless if analysis shows that they take opposing positions on issues.³¹ Thus, as a result of greater media coverage that nationalizes the policy positions of political parties, many voters will vote in state legislative elections based on their perceptions and assessment of the national political party.

Moreover, the second example that demonstrates how state political parties and state legislatures are prone to national forces is the electoral outcomes of state legislative elections. As shown and analyzed previously, the results of midterm elections can reflect the voters' assessment of the presidency. The "Blue Wave" in the U.S. House after the 2018 midterms can be characterized as voters' expressing their general dissatisfaction of the Republican presidency

³⁰ Joshua N. Zingher and Jesse Richman, "Polarization and the Nationalization of State Legislative Elections," 1039.

³¹ *Ibid*, 1039.

and Congress by voting for the Democratic Party. However, state legislatures are also prone to this effect. As shown by the research of Zingher and Richman, American voters associate members of the national party to their state party counterparts. Given this information, voters will choose legislators in state elections based off their presidential level of approval and whether they belong to the same political party. Steven Rogers demonstrates that, in nearly all elections, the political party that gained seats in state legislatures had concurrently gained seats in Congress.³² Furthermore, state legislators who belonged to the same party as the president were held to the same level of scrutiny; state legislators were three times more likely to be challenged in elections based on voters' negative approval rating of the president.³³ These electoral results demonstrate how, although they are thought to be separate political institutions, state legislative elections and legislatures are malleable to national political trends.

These two examples that underscore the impact of national political trends on state parties and state legislative elections demonstrate that the “Blue Wave,” and the ideological fracture of the U.S. House Democrats, have the potential to diffuse across state legislatures in the 2018 midterms. However, we can also hypothesize that these national forces can sources of conflict for state and national Democratic parties, state legislatures, and Congress. Although the outcomes of state legislative elections can result from the general dissatisfaction of the Republican presidency and Congress, the lower levels of polarization and contrasting political priorities within state legislatures can also impede the diffusion of the “Blue Wave” and the ideological fracture of Democratic Party members in state houses. Furthermore, the three measures established earlier to define progressive Democrats—the rejection of large-dollar

³² Steven Rogers, “National Forces in State Legislative Elections,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667, no. 1 (September 2016): 208.

³³ Steven Rogers, “National Forces,” 218.

campaign contributions, populist platform, and grassroots campaigning—are also potential sources of conflict for Democratic state house candidates in whether or not they are viable strategies to win state legislative elections.

Data Analysis

This section explains how, and to what extent, did the national “Blue Wave” and the ideological fracture of the Democratic Party diffuse across state legislatures in the 2018 midterm elections. This diffusion will be examined using three metrics. First, the state legislative seat composition between the 2016 and 2018 midterm elections will be compared to determine how many Democrats gained seats to achieve majority control of state houses after the 2018 midterms. This will demonstrate how many state legislatures experienced a “Blue Wave” within their state houses. This analysis focuses on state houses because they are the most institutionally structured like the U.S. House of Representatives, and generally hold elections at the same time. For this data component, the independent variable is the number of state legislative seats that Democrats gained or lost in state house elections, and the dependent variable is if the individual states experienced a “Blue Wave.” If Democrats gained more state house seats in the 2018 midterms than they held in 2016, then the “Blue Wave” diffused across state legislatures.

Secondly, this data also examines how, and to what extent, did the ideological fracture of the Democratic members in the U.S. House of Representatives diffuse across state houses. To assess this, the electoral campaigns of state house Democrats will be measured against three key measures: 1) the rejection of large-dollar campaign contributions, 2) populist platform, and 3) grassroots campaigning. These measures will determine if state house Democrats qualify as progressive or moderate. To explore this, the sources of campaign funding that state house Democrats accepted during the 2018 electoral cycles will be examined. Democrats that accepted

\$10,000 or more of funding from non-individual sources will not be measured as progressive Democrats. In addition to this, Democrats that self-financed their campaigns with more than \$6,000 of funding will not be measured progressive; candidates that primarily self-financed their campaigns suggest that they will represent their private interests rather than their small-dollar, individual donors. Afterwards, we will qualitatively examine the Democrats in state houses that did not accept large-dollar campaign contributions to determine if they qualify as progressive Democrats by running populist platforms through grassroots campaigning during the 2018 midterms. This study analyzes the state legislative elections and state house Democrats in 45 states.³⁴

As shown in Table 1, there was a clear lack of a “Blue Wave” that diffused across the houses in state legislatures after the 2018 midterms. After the 2016 presidential elections, 15 out of the 45 state houses were controlled by Democrats. However, after the 2018 midterms, 14 of those same state houses remained in the majority control of Democratic state legislators.

Although Democrats lost the state house in Kentucky, the state houses of Nevada and New Mexico flipped to the control of Democrats in 2018. This data shows that Republicans retained the majority control of most lower house chambers in state legislatures between 2016 and 2018. Although there are avenues of research that detail the political tactics utilized by Republicans to maintain their majority control in state houses, the data considered here show that the “Blue Wave” did not diffuse across state houses as it did in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018.

Table 2 presents the number of Democratic house members in state legislatures that have, or have not, accepted large-dollar, non-individual campaign contributions during the 2018

³⁴ Five states are excluded from this study. Virginia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Jersey are not included because their state legislative elections are held in alternating years. Nebraska is also excluded for its unicameral structure.

midterm cycle. As shown by the data, the overwhelming majority of state House Democrats accepted this type of funding. Although nearly all state houses had at least one Democratic member that accepted this funding, state legislatures vary in the total amount of state house Democrats that accepted campaign contributions from large-dollar, non-individual sources. In 15 state houses, all Democratic legislators accepted this funding. Most state houses contained a mixture of state house Democrats that accepted other forms of campaign funding, such as public funds, individual donations, and self-financing. However, there are a few outliers, such as Connecticut and Maine, whose campaign financing systems rely entirely on public funds. This leads to most state house members to reject funding from large-dollar, non-individual sources. However, this is not a uniform pattern across all states with public financing systems. Minnesota also had a public fund, yet their Democratic house members also accepted campaign contributions from large-dollar, non-individual sources. Although there are a variety of factors that can explain how and why state legislators did or did not accept large-dollar, non-individual campaign contributions, such as the varying costs to run campaigns in smaller and larger states and state political cultures, high campaign costs is a major institutional barrier in elections. Thus, the campaign strategies implemented by progressive Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives may be a more viable political strategy in state legislative elections where campaign costs are lower than congressional elections or have available public funding.

Furthermore, the campaigns and policy platforms of state house Democrats that did not accept more than \$10,000 of campaign contributions from non-individual sources were systematically examined to determine if they qualify as progressive Democrats. This is crucial to determine because, even if a Democrat is primarily funded by small-dollar individual donations, that does not necessarily mean that they identify or function as a progressive Democrat.

According to the last column of Table 2, most state houses did not have any progressive Democrats elected after the 2018 midterms. However, there were a greater number of progressive Democrats elected in seven state houses based on three potential factors: the availability of public funding, state political cultures, and high-profile progressive Democrats in the U.S. House. Connecticut, Maine, and Minnesota have public financing of campaigns that lead to a disproportionate number of progressive Democrats winning their state legislative elections relative to other states. The state political cultures of New Hampshire and Vermont, which have some of the lowest campaign costs in the nation, also lead to a greater number of progressive Democrats being elected. Three states with high-profile progressive Democrats that ran for congressional seats—Rep. Raúl Grijalva in Arizona, Rep. Ayanna Pressley in Massachusetts, and Rep. Ilhan Omar in Minnesota—also demonstrate a greater rate of progressive Democratic diffusion to their respective state houses. Thus, this study demonstrates a moderate but evident correlation of progressive Democrats winning state legislative elections that had less barriers in campaign costs and had the presence of progressive Democrats running and winning congressional elections for the U.S. House of Representatives.

Conclusion

At this moment, the national Democratic Party is at a critical juncture. The progressive and moderate wings of the Democratic Party are vying to control the direction and platform of the party at a national level, which holds important political implications for the representation and nature of Congress, state Democratic parties, and state legislatures. These institutions are conceived to be separate and static entities divided between two levels of American politics and government. Yet, the disproportionate media coverage of the national Democratic Party and congressional elections has a cumulative impact in voter choices during state elections. Although

the “Blue Wave” of the U.S. House did not diffuse across the state houses after the 2018 midterms, there was a moderate rate of progressive Democratic diffusion across seven state houses. This diffusion occurred in states that either had public campaign funds, lower campaign costs, or featured prominent progressive Democrats winning congressional elections for the U.S. House of Representatives. Thus, despite the conventional arguments among academics, media, and legislators that state electorates are far too moderate to vote for progressive candidates, this study shows how the campaign strategies and platform implemented by progressive Democrats are viable in certain states and districts. This study also shows that state campaign financing systems need to be reformed towards public funds, which will counteract the burden of high campaign costs and allow progressive Democratic candidates with less resources and funding to run in state legislative elections.

However, an important point to underscore for this research is that this ideological fracture of the national Democratic Party is a recent political phenomenon. This fracture occurred in one electoral cycle and after one of the most contentious presidential elections and administrations that the United States has experienced in recent time. In addition to this, midterm elections generally garner less media coverage and voter turnouts. The 2020 election, which will be held during a presidential election year and after two more years of a polarized Trump presidency, will lead to greater political and electoral engagement from the American public. The ideological fracture of the national Democratic Party in the U.S. House signifies a new political direction among American voters who are resonating with the campaigns and platforms advocated by progressive Democrats. The 2020 election results in the national and state houses will be a potential avenue of research to demonstrate if the campaign strategies and platforms of progressive Democrats are viable and grow in the next election. Furthermore, the greater media

coverage that progressive Democrats have received since 2018 may lead to greater rates of progressive Democratic diffusion in 2020 state legislative elections. However, if members of the progressive faction of the Democratic Party are committed to implementing their populist messages into substantive policies, they ought to adjust their campaign political strategies from focusing solely on running in Congress to also run in state legislative elections for systematic progressive change to take root.

Table 1: 2016 and 2018 State Legislative Seats in Lower House Chambers

State	2016 Dem. Seats	2016 Rep. Seats	2018 Dem. Seats	2018 Rep. Seats	Did Dems. Maintain or Held Majority Control?
AL	33	70	32	70	No
AK	16	23	17	21	No
AZ	24	36	25	35	No
AR	35	64	24	75	No
CA	51	28	52	25	Yes
CO	34	31	36	29	Yes
CT	86	64	80	71	Yes
DE	25	16	25	16	Yes
FL	39	81	40	75	No
GA	61	117	64	116	No
HI	44	7	46	5	Yes
ID	14	56	11	59	No
IL	71	47	67	51	Yes
IN	29	71	30	70	No
IA	43	57	41	59	No
KS	28	97	40	85	No
KY	50	46	37	63	No
ME	78	69	74	70	Yes
MD	91	50	91	50	Yes
MA	123	34	121	34	Yes
MI	46	61	46	63	No
MN	61	72	57	77	No
MO	45	117	47	115	No
MT	41	59	41	59	No
NV	17	25	27	14	Yes
NH	160	239	175	218	No
NM	33	37	38	32	Yes
NY	104	43	103	37	Yes
NC	45	74	45	75	No
ND	23	71	13	81	No
OH	34	65	33	66	No

State	2016 Dem. Seats	2016 Rep. Seats	2018 Dem. Seats	2018 Rep. Seats	Did Dems. Maintain or Held Majority Control?
PA	84	119	81	120	No
RI	63	11	64	11	Yes
SC	46	78	44	79	No
SD	12	58	10	60	No
TN	26	73	25	74	No
TX	51	98	56	93	No
UT	12	63	13	62	No
VT	85	53	83	53	Yes
WA	50	48	50	48	Yes
WV	36	64	36	64	No
WI	36	63	35	63	No
WY	9	51	9	51	No

Sources: Heather Perkins, "Chapter 3: State Legislative Branch," in *The Book of the States 2016* (Lexington, KY: The Council of State Governments), 2016.

Heather Perkins, "Chapter 3: State Legislative Branch," In *The Book of the States 2018* (Lexington, KY: The Council of State Governments), 2018.

Table: Campaign Contributions and the Number of Progressive Democrats in State Houses in 2018

State	Total Dems. in State House	Dems. that Accepted Large Campaign Contributions	Dems. that Rejected Large Campaign Contributions	Progressive Dems.
AL	28	28	N/A	0
AK	17	28	N/A	0
AR	10	8	2	0
AZ	19	9	10	5
CA	61	61	N/A	0
CO	41	41	N/A	0
CT	92	13	79	50
DE	26	26	N/A	0
FL	19	19	N/A	0
GA	77	75	2	0
HI	46	44	2	1
ID	14	14	N/A	0
IL	74	73	1	1
IN	33	30	3	0
IA	46	46	N/A	0
KS	40	37	3	3
KY	39	38	1	1
ME	89	4	85	37
MD	99	93	6	1
MA	127	107	20	13
MI	54	52	2	0
MN	75	62	13	7
MO	48	44	4	1
MT	42	4	38	4
NV	29	29	N/A	0
NH	234	3	231	39
NM	46	45	1	0
NY	106	106	N/A	0
NC	55	51	4	0
ND	11	5	6	1
OH	37	36	1	0
OK	13	10	3	0
OR	38	38	N/A	0

State	Total Dems. in State House	Dems. that Accepted Large Campaign Contributions	Dems. that Rejected Large Campaign Contributions	Progressive Dems.
RI	66	48	18	1
SC	44	39	5	2
SD	11	2	9	0
TN	26	26	N/A	0
TX	67	67	N/A	0
UT	16	15	1	0
VT	100	4	96	18
WA	57	57	N/A	0
WV	41	39	2	0
WI	37	27	10	0
WY	9	5	4	0

Source: "Tools - FollowTheMoney," National Institute on Money in State Politics,
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