On the morning of July 25, 2016 the California Democratic Party held the first of four Delegation Breakfasts, daily events held for the state’s delegation on each of the four mornings of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, PA. Throughout the morning, much of the Sanders delegation, which comprised almost half of the state’s pledged delegates, interrupted speakers with chants of “Bernie, Bernie” and “count our votes,” the latter referring to accusations by Sanders supporters that the California Secretary of State’s office had failed to count some of the state’s provisional and absentee ballots. Throughout the week, the California Sanders delegates were regularly highlighted as the leaders of dissent and protest amongst the various Sanders delegations from around the country (Malone, 2016). The raucous environment at the 2016 convention is inconsistent with long-standing scholarship on recent (post-1968) political conventions in the U.S. (Karabell, 1998) that has shown these events in most cases serve largely as “scripted infomercials” (p. 3) rather than the sites of contention that people associate with the outlier conventions such as the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago or the 1980 attempt by Senator Ted Kennedy to unseat President Jimmy Carter.

Much of the popular press coverage of Sanders delegates at the national convention depicted them as out-of-touch ideological zealots, clinging to the hope that Sanders could somehow be nominated at the convention despite his clear disadvantage in the delegate math (e.g. Mehta, 2016). These portrayals by both political elites and the popular press described the Sanders contingent as characterized by counterproductive antagonism towards the would-be nominee and naiveté with regard to the political process. House Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat who was one of many booed by the Sanders supporters at the delegation breakfast, when asked about the Sanders delegates in a post-event interview, echoed this feeling when she said “some people are not familiar with how things work” (Hains, 2016). This one-
dimensional view of these delegates presumes that their protests were only in service to the unlikely political outcome of nominating Bernie Sanders rather than at protesting flaws they saw as inherent in the political process. Through interviews with members of the California Sanders delegation and examination of their online materials, this paper attempts to broaden this narrative and show that while these delegates did indeed cling to a shred of hope that an opportunely timed scandal or negative poll about presumptive nominee Hillary Clinton would lead to the nomination of Sanders, their disruptive acts at the convention were grounded in larger concerns about process, democratic ideals, and alienation from the political system.

Sanders delegates, most of whom had minimal experience in party politics, developed ideals of democratic practice during the primary campaign, the delegate election process, and the process of self-organizing their delegation via social media in advance of the convention. In the months preceding the convention, these ideals were challenged by what they perceived as unfair treatment of Sanders by the Democratic Party and the media, leading delegates to view themselves in opposition to the party rather than as part of the party. Coming into the convention, these experiences led them to see themselves not only as representatives of Sanders’ voters back home, but also as activists fighting against flaws in the Democratic Party and the broader political system. For them, the convention served as a stage to play out their discontentment with the party and the political system in the form of protest.

Using Isin's (2009) concept of “activist citizens” (p. 368), I argue that Sanders delegates attended the conventions to carry out “acts of citizenship”—protest, resistance, and organizing—by making broad claims to political justice. To facilitate these acts, activists amongst the Sanders delegates used new media technologies combined with traditional organizing tactics to leverage a
tight-knit network of delegates that formed on social media in the months preceding the convention.

This paper adds perspective to recent scholarship on convention delegates (Kreiss, Meadows, and Remensperger, 2015) by examining the motivations and practices of activist delegates in the context of a divided convention. It also provides a counter-case to the “managed citizen” literature (e.g. Howard, 2006) by analyzing the digital media practices of 200 delegates to a major political convention who created a network of communication independent of the campaigns and the party that helped activists carry out acts against the party.

**Literature Review**

**Citizenship**

The way in which “citizenship” is practiced in the United States is complicated and has changed significantly since the nation’s founding in the late 18th century (Schudson, 1998). Many scholarly works, particularly those following Putnam (2000), have looked to understand the arguably declining levels of civic participation in the U.S. Recently, a variety of studies have argued for broadening our conception of civic or political participation to include alternative forms of political action beyond voting, campaigning, and involvement in traditional civil society. In generation-based studies about conceptions of citizenship, there is a prevalent dichotomy of the dutiful citizen (DC), whose voting-centric and traditionally obligatory civic life is based in civil society organizations and political parties, and the actualizing citizen (AC), who is motivated to follow her own pursuits, is less engaged in traditional politics, and prefers “loosely networked activism to address issues that reflect personal values” (Bennett, 2008, p.14). Other studies of citizenship look at its relationship to demographic characteristics like race,
gender, and education, as well as formative experiences, like whether or not a person grew up for many years in a single community (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

However, these studies of citizenship are largely carried out by looking at a population, operationalizing citizenship in a specific way, and then examining different variables within that population that result in increased or decreased levels of citizenship. Isin (2009) criticizes such conceptions of citizenship as “script[s] for already existing citizens to follow already existing paths” (p. 383). He proposes the concepts of “activist citizens” (p. 384) that are created through “acts of citizenship,” a process through which actors make claims to justice, break habitus and act in a way that disrupts already defined orders, practices and statuses.” This conception of citizenship is concerned less with the role an actor plays in society but rather with the changes brought to society via his “acts of citizenship” carried out in “sites” of contestation. Examining Sanders delegates as potential activist citizens making claims to justice is appropriate for two reasons. First, taking as a given that structural incentives surrounding the two-party system in the U.S. effectively prohibit the emergence of a viable third party, a person protesting alienation from the party in which they would most closely align is clearly a claim for political justice. Second, the issues prioritized by Sanders delegates—protecting the environment, opposing unilateral trade deals, and opposing military intervention abroad—can also be examined as their own claims for ecological, economic, and political justice, respectively. Moreover, Isin’s concept of “sites” for acts of contestation is quite fluid, allowing for consideration of the delegates’ claim for political justice in the context of the convention, but also in the context of the party and the political system.
Citizenship and Campaign Technology

Scholarship on the use of digital technologies in electoral campaigns in the United States has focused on a wide range of topics, including the sociotechnical development of campaign technologies (Kreiss, 2012, 2016), the construction of models for targeting voters (Hersh, 2015), and the use of these technologies for issue-based campaigns (Karpf, 2012). There is also a robust literature about the relationship between digital campaign technologies and citizenship. The earliest of these works discussed the potential of these technologies to allow for greater deliberation in online spaces (Dahlberg, 2001). Empirical studies followed, including content analyses of campaign websites and interviews with campaign staffers surrounding the 2000 election. These studies often found that, despite their availability and use in other arenas, campaigns were not offering truly interactive features (message boards, direct e-mail exchanges) via their websites. Campaign staff generally avoided offering such features because of the burdensome workload they caused the campaign, the potential loss of the campaign’s ability to control messaging, and the inability for the campaign to maintain the ambiguity around policy positions necessary to win a general election Stromer-Galley (2000). Other studies found a more nuanced process of digital engagement. In an exhaustive study of U.S. campaign websites, Foot and Schneider (2006) showed that digital tools in campaigns alter the traditional one-way producer/receiver structure of campaign communication in legacy media and instead allow for “coproduction,” a process of increased engagement but less control of messaging than before.

In some cases, technologies were implemented in practice, but not with the democratizing outcomes that early proponents predicted. Howard (2006) argued that the rise of digital campaigning brought about a new elite class of political technocrats whose decisions about the architecture of platforms for online engagement had negative consequences for democracy. He
argued that these systems reduced online participation to those acts preferred by campaigns, restricted certain types of political engagement and effectively created “managed citizens.”

Expanding on Foot and Schneider’s work on co-production, Nielsen (2011) argued that campaigns largely use “mundane internet tools—at the time of his writing this referred primarily to email but Facebook is probably mundane now—in their interactions with supporters and that citizens use these technologies to negotiate their relationship with campaigns in a give-and-take process he refers to as the “coproduction of citizenship” (p. 759). What has not been discussed is the scenario when technology is used to challenge a campaign or party from the inside. While this may seem at first like a unique situation specific only to the 2016 Sanders campaign, reductions in party loyalty among young people (Bennett, 2008) and an increasingly vocal U.S. Left could create regular scenarios where the Democratic Party has to manage two popular candidates that fall at different places on the ideological spectrum.

*Convention Delegates*

Much of the scholarship on modern political conventions describes delegates as content participants in the party’s large scale event. They are seen as members of a studio audience for the convention stage, reduced via changes in party rules from their previous role (pre-1972) as glad-handing deal makers. Pomper (2007), who has been writing about conventions since the 1960s, laments that the delegates of today have “been reduced to (literally) dumb claques who (literally) applaud on cue for the show’s top banana.”

Recent scholarship on conventions and delegates has shown that, contrary to previous studies that identified delegates as passive party loyalists (Panagopoulos, 2007), they enter the convention with individual priorities and identities beyond their party affiliation and participate
in a process of “active spectatorship” in that they mediate and critique the event via social media, but from the position of a spectator (Kreiss, Meadows, & Remensperger, 2015). This work, which focused on the 2012 Democratic National Convention, in which President Obama was unopposed in his re-election bid, found that, while delegates did occasionally act as critics on specific issues, most “embraced their enthusiastic spectator roles at the appropriate moment when they were goaded on by the coordinating work of the event’s producers” (10). Others have argued that while changes to nominating rules and delegate selection have stripped conventions of much of their potential for political crises surrounding nominations, they increase the potential for message crises, or “departure from the planned party script” (Garrett & Panagopoulos, 2007).

The scenes of protest and contentious interactions between the Sanders and Clinton delegations at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, while definitely constituting a message crisis, are at odds with much of the scholarship on recent conventions that describe them solely as sites of legitimation for candidates. As this paper argues, the Sanders delegation at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, specifically those from California, while still technically audience members, worked together via social media to plan protest actions, in advance of the convention, to express their displeasure with party leaders and processes and bring attention to issues they felt were underrepresented in the party platform. I theorize the Sanders delegates as idealist delegates—political individuals, committed representatives of the constituents that elected them, with a strong sense of fairness.

**Case Selection & Method**

A primary characteristic that separated Sanders delegates from those of recent conventions was their lack of long-term commitment to the Democratic Party. Within the California delegation, 71 of the 206 delegates were newly registered in the year after he had announced his candidacy.
(Mehta & Moore, 2016). Even among those who had been registered Democrats, most of the delegates were not the usual long-time party activists, politicians and donors that generally makeup the majority of convention delegates (Green & Coffey, 2007). One first-time delegate described her peers in the delegation:

“I really have to say, my situation was absolutely not rare. It's all of my friends, all of my Bernie people, we’re all the same. You raise your hand—‘how many of you got involved with politics before?’—Zero.”

Most of the delegates that I spoke with described their work with the Sanders campaign as their first experience in party politics. As such, this paper largely focuses on examining the experiences, expectations, and behavior of these first-time delegates before, during, and after the 2016 Democratic National Convention. I did interview three Sanders delegates with experience in party politics, two of which had attended national conventions in the past, one as far back as to 1984. This research shows that they had very different goals and expectations of the convention. These interviews largely function to provide an insider’s perspective about the first-time delegates who whose experiences make up much of the data for this project.

The primary data for this study comes from 23 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with members of the California Sanders delegation to the 2016 Democratic National Convention conducted in February and March of 2017. The subjects of these interviews covered a range of diversity in age, race, area of the state they were from, and political experience. The subjects were promised confidentiality. In addition to their statements lacking identifiable attribution, they also could ask that statements be “off the record.” This distinction allowed them to provide me with context for their statements while also maintaining their confidentiality in regard to comments that would personally identify them as interview subjects. The Institutional Review
Board of the University of Pennsylvania granted this proposal expedited review and approved the study along with consent forms for both in-person interviews and those conducted via video chat services and telephone. Beyond the interviews, web pages relevant to the delegates were also examined, including the public Facebook pages they created for their delegate campaigns as well as the GoFundMe pages they used to fundraise for their travel costs.

**Findings**

*Developing and Practicing Democratic Ideals*

The people who eventually formed the California Sanders delegation came from very different backgrounds and held different views on activism and politics. But, beginning with their involvement in the Sanders campaign, they shared an experience in democratic practice while working on the campaign, running for delegate, and self-organizing their delegation via social media, that came to inform their collective actions at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Specifically, their work on the campaign provided them with a sense of their own political efficacy and a focus on the democratic ideals that were prevalent in Sanders’ rhetoric. As they ran for delegate, they carried these ideals into the practice of politics in local party caucuses, further developing in them a sense of proper democratic practice and an appreciation for process, which they carried into their delegation’s collective efforts at self-organization. At the same time, their use of social media expanded from the individual process of information gathering about the campaign, to playing a role in their delegate elections, and helping build a collective online environment for their statewide delegation.

While the Sanders delegates did have some previous experience in activities like union leadership, local ballot measures, and single issue activism, they had minimal experience in party
politics. In the past, many had either passively supported the Democratic Party’s candidates or voted for long-shot candidates who aligned with their progressive ideologies but had little chance of winning an election. Others had consciously rejected voting for president altogether. One delegate admitted to a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* that for the previous twenty years he had written in “dead yellow dog” on his presidential ballot rather than selecting someone from the available slate of candidates (Mehta & Moore, 2016). Most of these delegates-to-be began hearing about Sanders via traditional media and in messages shared on Facebook. They admitted that they originally saw him as the candidate that most aligned with their views and planned to support him, but did not initially see him as viable in the national primary.

Consistent with Kreiss’ (2016) analysis of Sanders’ rhetoric and messaging, the delegates I spoke to were drawn to the campaign’s use of moral claims and narratives focused on normative ideals of democracy and identity that resonated with their already existing worldviews. Many described connecting with Sanders on policy issues like health care, free education, and corporate regulation, but also on big-picture issues about democracy, representation and the electoral system writ large. For them, Sanders embodied many of these ideals in his rejection of corporate contributions via SuperPACs. One delegate who had been a fan of Sanders for many years and had previous experience on congressional campaigns began volunteering for Sanders’ campaign immediately after he declared his candidacy in late April of 2015. She quickly connected with the campaign online, setup a recurring monthly donation to the campaign, and began recruiting other volunteers from her local area and leading door-to-door canvasses on nights and weekends. Other delegates described hearing about Sanders via their friends’ public posts on social media and slowly learning more and more about the campaign. Many followed the campaign’s social media hashtag #feelthebern, a rallying cry originally
created independently of the campaign by Sanders supporters (Grossman, 2016), joined Sanders-focused Facebook groups, and eventually crafted and shared messages about Sanders with their personal online networks.

Some found out via the campaign’s website or public message boards about local debate watch parties and socially-focused meet-ups to discuss Sanders. One long-time party activist and Sanders supporter who attended events in East Los Angeles described these early meetings as organized, “completely chaotically” with “30 people in [a] house all drinking wine and a few people talking about the revolution.” Delegates explained how the “movement,” as they referred to the campaign, grew as people who were driving 30 minutes to the closest meeting decided to host meetings in their own cities and neighborhoods. Those that could afford to do so also began donating to the Sanders campaign. Others signed up with the Sanders campaign to help with volunteer efforts including phone banks, rallies, and door-to-door canvassing events, eventually leading and hosting these events themselves as they gained confidence and increased engagement with the campaign.

While these experiences on the campaign were unique and exciting to those participating in them, in practice they were very similar to processes of activation and engagement described in previous studies of U.S. electoral campaigns discussed earlier in this paper. (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Nielsen, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2014). However, as they moved on from the day-to-day tasks of campaign work to the process of running for delegate and self-organizing their delegation, they also progressed from the “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley, 2014) of modern political campaigning, in which people feel they have choices but they are limited to those choices the campaign wants them to have, to a more flexible and democratic experience that would inform the actions they chose to take at the convention.
In April 2011, the Sanders campaign issued a call to its supporters seeking delegates to attend the Democratic National Committee in Philadelphia in support of Bernie Sanders. For seasoned party activists, this call referred to a familiar process, but many first-time delegates at the time said they had no idea what a delegate was or how the process of becoming one was to be carried out. In presidential primaries, each candidate is awarded a specific number of pledged delegates from each state based on their performance in that state’s primary or caucus. In California, an individual has four paths with which to become one of these delegates to the national convention. The first way is to be a party leader or elected official, colloquially referred to as a PLEO. The second is to be appointed by a PLEO, each of which has an allotted number of delegate seats to fill, as an at-large delegate. The third way is to be a superdelegate, the controversial long-term party insiders that are not bound to vote for a specific candidate regardless of the outcome of the state’s primary. In California, Superdelegates include longtime members of the Democratic National Committee, members of the U.S. Congress, and the Governor.

The fourth way for a person to become a delegate, which was the path for all but three of the delegates I interviewed, is to run to be a party delegate for the state assembly district in which they live. In this process which is mandated and regulated by the national party, the state party facilitates separate caucuses at the assembly district level for each presidential candidate, with would-be delegates running against others who support their same candidate, voted on by party members in attendance. Because the voting pool for these contests includes any registered Democrat in the assembly district who shows up to caucus, the process effectively requires candidates to both convince those present to vote for them and more importantly, to bring registered Democrats with them to support their candidacy for delegate. In advanced of the
caucuses, candidates experienced some of the more mundane aspects of politics, writing and submitting progressive biographies to local party websites and creating Facebook pages with information about their backgrounds and political priorities. Some formed slates of candidates for voters to identify blocs of like-minded candidates. One long-term party member who attended the 2008 convention as a delegate for then-Senator Barack Obama described his experience running for Sanders delegate:

“I lost and I think that's partly because newcomers to the party did such an excellent job organizing new people to participate. There are some pre-existing social networks that came in and sort of dominated because again these are sort of popularity contests. You have to turn out enough people to vote for you that know who you are. It really helps some of those people that they have those big social networks. That was really the only way they could have won. There were many other [experienced] delegates that also lost when they tried to be Sanders delegates because of that.”

And many of these new delegates found they were winning in spite of being naive to the process. One delegate who earned the most votes in her assembly district explained, “I didn't know these games. I didn't know what a slate was. It was kind of—and I really have to say, my situation was absolutely not rare.” To these newly elected delegates, being selected over long standing party members by local progressives provided them with validation that their movement’s goals were salient with other Democrats and gave them confidence and momentum heading into the convention.

After winning their assembly level elections during the caucuses held statewide on May 1, these would-be delegates returned to the process of campaigning for the upcoming June 7 California primary between Sanders and Hillary Clinton that would effectively decide which
candidate would be the Democratic Party’s presumptive nominee. During this time, delegates self-organized into a private Facebook group specifically for Sanders delegates, a process that is detailed later in this paper. At this point, most delegates knew very little about what to expect from a convention and found little guidance from a party that from their perspective was used to delegates being party regulars who already knew what to do. One first-time delegate explained: 

“And the Democratic Party [was not] ready for us. I think that's what it was. Just so old and entrenched. No need to change anything because no one new was passing through. They didn't explain things well. We had no idea how things worked, even if you look on their website it’s just awkward. We had—we couldn't figure out the system so we were asking each other—and we had to self-organize. I don't know how but somebody started a Facebook group and added us all to it and that's how I started you know, communicating with all the delegates [in California] at once.”

During the three months prior to the convention this Facebook group became a mediated lens through which the Sanders delegation would experience and play out the contentious last months of the primary campaign and work to prepare for the convention. It was also a site for them to collectively experience the conflicts between the democratic ideals and practices they had been experiencing and those of their own national political party. These mediated events, which are the subject of the next section, developed in the delegates a collective distrust of the media and the Democratic Party and a sense of purpose at the convention beyond trying to get Sanders the party’s nomination.
Challenges

After the Sanders delegation was elected, they were excited about their new roles as advocates for Sanders beyond their roles on the campaign. One delegate described the earliest conversations in the newly formed delegation Facebook group:

“How are we going to talk to the Hillary people and really try to open their eyes about Bernie Sanders because that’s what our job is in effect we are supposed to be lobbying for him. That’s what we thought our jobs were as delegates. We need to start getting active and communicating with [superdelegates.] Maybe have meetings with them…where we could have these open conversations about our candidate . . . How should [we] present ourselves? Do we not want to be like, crazy left-wing socialist types that we may or may not have been? How should we dress and what should we avoid saying, you know that kind of thing, just discussions like that.”

But this vision of intra-party deliberation over candidates and issues did not last long as the ideals they had developed and practiced becoming delegates would soon be challenged by what they perceived as unfair party practices and a rigged political system.

In the months prior to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, several political events became formative focal points for the California Sanders delegates on their Facebook groups. First, the Nevada State Democratic Convention on May 18th turned into a 16-hour, raucous event in which Sanders supporters accused Clinton supporters inside the party of utilizing inaccurate “voice votes,” to steamroll Sanders supporters over rules that allowed Clinton to secure extra delegates to the Democratic National Convention. As the event erupted into physical chaos and Sanders supporters rushed the stage, YouTube videos went viral on social media and were picked up by traditional media, with several outlets reporting that the
event had turned violent and chairs were thrown. Democratic National Committee Chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz appeared on MSNBC decrying the behavior of the Sanders supporters at the convention and demanding a condemnation by Sanders of the actions. As additional videos and photos emerged online that called into question the veracity of these reports, the Sanders delegation shared these media via Youtube and fumed collectively that the media and the party leadership that had been so quick to sensationalize the event took no steps to either correct the record or more importantly, to respond to what they saw as undemocratic practices at an official party meeting that had real electoral consequences. As such, they began to see the party as an opponent of their movement that they would have to defend against as delegates. One delegate described the tenor of conversation in the delegate Facebook groups at that time:

“It was a forum for what was going on in the campaign. [People said things like] What did they do to Bernie now? The media is quashing him again as usual. Hillary said this. I can’t believe that. All that kind of stuff and then a little bit of ‘What’s gonna happen in Philadelphia?’”

Conversations like this, in which the delegates began to talk online about the party and the media as the opposition would grow in number. A few weeks later, on the day before the California primary, the Associate Press declared Clinton the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party after surveys of superdelegates indicated that Clinton had exceeded the threshold number of delegates necessary for the nomination. Other networks quickly followed suit and declared Clinton the presumptive nominee. Sanders supporters nationwide called foul, arguing that the media had put its finger on the electoral scale and decreased turnout in California and five other states holding primaries the next day, thus preventing Sanders from achieving the minimum virtual tie in the delegate count that many delegates believed would have allowed him to contest
at the convention the outcome of the primary on electability grounds. The delegates in California saw this move by the media as another example of a system rigged against Sanders and “the movement” more broadly. Months-old YouTube videos immediately circulated amongst the delegates that showed chair Wasserman-Schultz and other staffers at the Democratic National Committee telling news anchors and pundits that delegate counts that included superdelegates in advance of the convention were inaccurate representations of the state of the party’s nomination process. The next day, Clinton won the California, New Jersey and New Mexico primaries and claimed the nomination without superdelegates, but the way the primary process played out in California left Sanders delegates critical of the media and the party.

Despite a nationwide rush by left-leaning organizations that had supported Sanders, such as the Communication Workers of America and MoveOn.org, to endorse and rally around Clinton as the presumptive nominee, Sanders delegates in California, fueled by their candidate’s decision to stay in the race, continued to hold out hope that something would happen to create an opening for Senator Sanders to contest the nomination. The state’s slow post-election process of counting 2.4 million provisional and mail-in ballots (Myers, 2016) fueled theories that Sanders had performed better in the election than had been reported in initial vote tallies. In the void left by the concluded primary, delegates began to discuss online the systemic issues with the Democratic Party and the political system that they felt had handed Clinton the nomination. These included: a party-created debate schedule in which events were held on Saturday nights and holiday weekends to ostensibly constrain viewership and favor a household name like Clinton; a consensus of support by party elites and elected officials for Clinton in the earliest days of the election cycle; the influence of corporate money and SuperPACs; and a media system
that was both unsupportive in its reporting on Sanders and complicit in suppressing voter turnout via acts like the superdelegate announcement.

The overwhelming support Clinton had from the party establishment since the beginning of the campaign cycle contributed to the outsider status that Sanders delegates felt in advance of the convention. One delegate called the superdelegates “bought and paid for,” referring to Clinton’s fundraising support for down-ballot candidates, many of whom were superdelegates. Much of this collective animosity played out in the delegation’s Facebook groups as they collectively experienced and analyzed what for them was the exact “rigged system” that Sanders had rallied against throughout the campaign. While this feeling was shared with many Sanders supporters nationwide, some delegates felt it was their duty as delegates to contest these injustices. Figuring out how to do that was a process they began as they came together for the first time with one another, and with Clinton delegates, at the party’s state delegation meeting.

A month after the primary, on June 19th, the Clinton and Sanders delegations attended the California State Delegation Meeting. One Sanders delegate referred to the event as “our Nevada,” referencing the controversial Nevada Delegation Meeting described above. This was the first time the delegates met in person and the first experience they had with the party bureaucracy that was not mediated by the television or the campaign. Though the agenda of this meeting had little potential for controversy on the level that Sanders supporters experienced in Nevada, the Sanders delegates nevertheless had a knee-jerk reaction as those leading the meeting began to conduct the business of ratifying at-large delegates using the same ‘voice vote’ procedures that they knew had been used for controversial votes in Nevada. One Sanders delegate with experience in parliamentary procedures raised a point of order resulting in the chair asking the assembly to indicate both “ayes” and “nays” for each order of business, rather than
only the “ayes.” The last vote of the day was to elect California Governor Jerry Brown, who had endorsed Clinton a few weeks earlier, as chair of the state’s delegation to the national convention. As the chair asked for the vote, “nays” rang out through the auditorium, forcing a count of individual ayes and nays. Though Brown prevailed in the vote, the Sanders delegation felt a sense of satisfaction that they had forced the party to do things by the book. At this point, the delegates began also to see fighting against the system as part of their role rather than advocating for the nomination of Bernie Sanders. One Sanders delegate and lifelong Democrat described her interaction with a Clinton delegate who watched her vote against Jerry Brown:

“The woman behind me goes, ‘How can you do that? Even Bernie thinks that’s acceptable. What are you guys doing?’ And I told her ‘Well Bernie's from Vermont I'm from California. [Brown’s] my governor. I don't want him at the head of my party because I'm mad at him because of fracking. I have an opinion.’ But you’re not allowed to have that in the Democratic Party anymore.”

This clash over decorum and processes between Clinton and Sanders delegates foreshadowed the experiences that the Sanders delegates would soon have at the convention in Philadelphia. Further, the dissonance Sanders delegates felt between their own ideals and the party’s treatment of Sanders would inform the actions they chose to take at the convention. As the delegates planned for the convention, Sanders became less of a candidate to them, in that they knew his chances of being nominated were very slim. Instead, continued support for Senator Sanders became an act of protest by delegates against the party and, by extension, a vehicle for bringing attention to the issues they had with the party and with Hillary Clinton.
Planning

By the time California’s Sanders delegates were planning for the convention, they knew in the back of their minds that a massive movement of superdelegates away from Clinton was extremely unlikely and as such Sanders had little chance of getting the nomination. One delegate explained, “If we could get Bernie elected by flipping superdelegates sure - that was [the goal] in theory. We all understood that that was not going to happen.” And yet, as this section shows, Sanders delegates were extremely motivated and driven to get to the national convention despite extremely high financial costs and a very low chance of nominating Senator Sanders. When Sanders conceded the race and endorsed Clinton two weeks before the convention, it did little to change their plans. From their perspective, Sanders had no choice politically but to endorse Clinton. If anything, the forced endorsement was just another sign of what was wrong with the party and the system. Continuing to support Senator Sanders served three main purposes for the delegates: to bring public attention to key issues related to trade, the environment, and U.S. military participation in ongoing foreign wars, to highlight what they saw as the unfair practices of the Democratic Party and the political system, and to connect and network in-person with members of the movement nationwide.

Beyond issues of politics and ideology, the California Sanders delegation spent much of the month before the convention trying to figure out how to get to Philadelphia and where to stay. They had long-since realized that their lack of both organization and information about the logistics of their trip to Philadelphia and their role as delegates was not going to be remedied by the Democratic Party or the Sanders campaign. At the state delegation meeting they had received a one-page flyer with basic information about the official state delegation hotel in Philadelphia and about complimentary shuttles between the hotel and the Wells Fargo Center, the arena where
the convention was to be held. A Sanders staff member was assigned to the California
delegation, but few delegates reported any contact with him. Those he did contact reported that,
other than emphasizing the importance of staying at the official delegation hotel at its $700 a
night room rate, he provided little information beyond that which was already available on the
flyer.

The high cost of the trip to Philadelphia—the California Democratic Party told delegates
to budget $3250 for the trip—was a startling surprise for the Sanders delegation who saw this as
another institutional barrier to participation. Many delegates created pages on GoFundMe, an
online “crowdfunding” platform used by individuals, charities, and fledgling businesses to raise
money via small donations. The delegates modeled their pages after one-another, highlighting
their reasons for supporting Senator Sanders, the work they did on his campaign, and their goal
of spreading his message or building “the movement” at the convention. One delegate concluded
his page by stating that he wanted to “carry [Bernie’s] message to the Democratic National
Convention…in order to be able to reach out to more Democrats in the interest of our nation’s
future.” Another wrote that she needed the money to “put in our 18-20 hour days of fighting for
progressive values.” None of these pages referenced Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. They
raised money from their friends and family, their extended social networks, and from Sanders
supporters they had never met. Delegates who could afford to do so donated money to help their
co-delegates get to Philadelphia. Many delegates, after reaching their own goals, shared the
pages of other delegates with their own networks to help them raise funds to attend. Using the
Facebook group, delegates made plans to split single hotel rooms with two or three other
delegates, many of whom were people they had never met in person. This comradery and
collaborative sense of purpose as the delegates continued to organize for the convention.
A few weeks before the convention, the Sanders campaign notified the California delegation that several delegates would need to serve at the convention as “whips”—or leaders—for the state delegation, helping the delegates with logistics on the convention floor. The campaign suggested that the jobs be given to the few long-term party insiders in the Sanders delegation, a suggestion floated in the Facebook group and immediately rejected by the delegation who saw those individuals as too focused on their own political careers to properly represent the delegation. Instead the delegates self-organized themselves into groups based on regions—Northern California, Central California, and Southern California—with each region electing its own leadership and whips. These whips, which the delegation decided to call organizers, tried to help the delegation get answers to logistical questions in advance of the convention. Recognizing that most delegates had no idea what to expect from the convention, one organizer collaborated with a delegate who had been to several past conventions to create a “Convention How-To” video for the delegation. It featured the two sitting next to each other in chairs with the organizer asking the experienced delegate basic questions about the convention. The video was posted to a private YouTube channel and distributed via the delegation Facebook group. All of these organizing practices emerged on their own with no interaction from the Sanders campaign or the party.

During the weeks immediately prior to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, the California Sanders delegation discussed in its statewide delegation Facebook group the many potential actions they could take during the four day-long event. The consensus amongst the delegation was that, beyond general support for Sanders, they would carry out modest protests against the use of military action abroad, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, and controversial practices impacting the environment, such as fracking. These were
all seen as problem areas for Clinton who supported fracking and military actions abroad. During the campaign, Clinton claimed to oppose the TPP, but no one in the Sanders delegation believed her, especially after Clinton loyalists on the DNC platform committee vetoed the addition of anti-TPP language to the party platform.

While the main Facebook group continued to be the primary site for interaction between the state’s delegation, other separate online groups emerged, including smaller subgroups of the state delegation and a massive group for all Sanders delegates nationwide that one California delegate described as “completely unwieldy.” Another group emerged when delegates, interacting in the national Facebook group, recognized a shared interest in protest and civil disobedience, and formed a subgroup whose members referred to themselves as the “Coalition of 57,” after the number of states, territories, and abroad party organizations represented by the Democratic National Committee. These members established a private Facebook Group for communicating with one another in advance of and during the convention. Other small groups spun off to carry out specific actions that were raised in the national group, ranging from creating anti-TPP signs that would match across delegations, to designing and ordering neon green “Bernie” shirts to wear in protest during Clinton’s acceptance speech on Thursday night as a physical representation of the lack of unity between the delegation and others at the convention.

Coming into the convention, the delegates were planning modest protest activities for the convention and dealing with the logistics of the convention independent of help from the campaign or party. They made planning decisions and negotiated their collective identity online without encountering any attempts by the campaign at the “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley, 2014) consistent with modern political campaigns. Nor did the party reach out to negotiate the “precise packaging” (Garrett & Panagopoulos, 2007), or presentation of, the
delegation in advance of the convention. As the delegates carried out their plans in the context of a modern political convention, they selectively used technology, combined with in-person meetings and word-of-mouth messaging, to enable and encourage participation in acts of citizenship in the context of a highly-choreographed media event.

Acts of Citizenship at the Convention

Coming into the convention, the California Sanders delegation had planned several actions protesting core issues related to the environment (fracking), international affairs (military conflicts abroad), and trade (the trans-pacific partnership). They were frustrated by the party’s attempt at what they saw as “manufactured unity.” This section shows how the California Sanders delegation, in concert with delegations from other states, carried out disruptive acts of citizenship that were grounded in concerns about process, democratic ideals, and alienation from the political system. It also shows how, despite planning and consensus around what acts of protest to carry out or not carry out, events on the ground led to the almost unanimous adoption by the delegation of tactics like booing, despite ruling those out in advance.

In the three days leading up to the convention, two events took place that drastically increased both the delegate’s motivation and feelings of justification for protesting the Democratic Party. First, the selection by Clinton of Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia as the Vice-Presidential nominee, who Sanders supporters saw as having almost identical policy positions to Clinton. One delegate described Kaine as “completely off with all of the values that we were focusing on including the [Trans-Pacific Partnership].” The Sanders delegation felt that, given the constant rhetoric from the party about Clinton/Sanders unity and the fact that Sanders delegates made up 46% of the total elected delegates nationwide, their ideology, or at minimum their views around a few core issues, should have been nodded to in Clintons’ pick for vice
president. Second, the release by WikiLeaks of email threads between Democratic National Committee operatives, including Wasserman-Schultz, that supported Sanders long-standing accusations that the party preferred Clinton to Sanders and did not behave neutrally throughout the primary. For Sanders delegates, these emails, along with Wasserman-Schultz resignation on the first day of the convention, gave credence to the fears and theories about the party that they had been discussing in the previous months.

This outrage carried over as California’s Delegates organized in Philadelphia via a variety of media. Most used the Facebook application on their smartphones to communicate with the delegation, but others had joined a national campaign channel using Slack, a real-time group messaging application popular with software companies and non-profits. Each morning, they attended delegation breakfasts at their hotel. At these events, delegates were offended by the presumption of party unity assumed by speakers and Clinton delegates at the breakfast. After the breakfasts, the California Sanders delegation met separately to discuss the previous day and to discuss and debate any actions they planned to take at the convention that night. A controversial topic amongst the delegates was about whether to walk out during Clinton’s acceptance speech or not. In the end, the delegation decided not to protest Clinton’s speech, though they did carry out other actions. The Coalition of 57 also met several times during the convention to plan automatically protest actions.

Members of the California Sanders delegation carried out a variety of actions at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Some of these were actions planned around specific moments in the convention and others were spontaneous reactions to issues of process and to perceived slights to Sanders or his delegation by the party. On the first afternoon of the convention, Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, chair of the convention, opened the convention with the
statement, “I am honored to accept this gavel as permanent chair of the Democratic National Convention. And I am excited to put Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine in the White House” followed minutes later by several sentences of campaign rhetoric about Clinton and Kaine. Sanders delegates from around the arena, including California, booed in protest for several minutes, forcing Fudge to repeatedly pause her speech. While it stands to reason that some of the Sanders delegates that booed the mention of Clinton likely did so because they truly oppose her nomination, all the Sanders delegates I spoke to said the response was not to Clinton herself, but to her being referred to as the nominee in advance of the roll call vote necessary for her to officially be nominated. None of these delegates thought Sanders was going to win the nomination, but it was important for them that the DNC go through the motions out of respect for Sanders, for the delegates who had travelled there, for those who had voted for him, and for the process itself. One delegate described how she and others around her felt:

We [hadn’t] put Bernie's name in nomination yet. Nobody's in nomination yet. This is the Democrats right? And we have two candidates. One of whom raised all that money and got 13 million voters with no SuperPac and with no corporate money. This was people power. And instead of being proud of that, they did everything they could to shut up and get us out.”

She described how two delegates she was with were uncomfortable with this initial booing, but by the second day heartily joined her in boing military-related speeches. Similar acts of spontaneous protests, like the one described in the opening of this paper, broke out at delegation breakfasts and on busses. In the daytime, delegates also took part in issue-focused protests held outside the convention hall and at other landmarks in Philadelphia. When the delegates would encounter members of other Sanders delegations and say they were Sanders delegates from
California, they would immediately get hugs and “thank yous” for their role in starting actions that other delegations could participate in.

Inside the convention, some delegates protested by waving paper “No Fracking” and “No TPP” signs. On the third day of the convention, security guards began attempts at confiscating the “non-approved” signs upon entry to the arena and threatening to eject people who held up unapproved signs. On subsequent days, delegates used construction paper to create folding signs that fit in their pockets but expanded to full size. Some delegates also put electrical tape over their mouths to signify that the party has silenced them in some way, such as by confiscating a sign. One of the simplest and most effective actions coordinated on social media was chanting over speakers they saw as having questionable backgrounds. Leon Panetta, the former U.S. Secretary of Defense, was repeatedly interrupted by chants of “no more war” that initiated in the California delegation. The next day, when the delegates began the same chant for another military speaker, the Clinton delegation erupted with chants of U-S-A leading to a verbal competition heard throughout the arena.

The largest, and most visible act carried out by the delegates was their participation along with many other state delegations in a “walkout” of several hundred delegates immediately following the roll call vote on the second night of the convention. This event, though perceived as spontaneous by most delegates who took part in it, was in fact organized by the “Coalition of 57” described above. In the case of the walkout, they planned it as a small group and, due to concerns about being found out, only shared it with delegates outside the coalition via word of mouth. Eventually, they did send a call to action to all nationwide delegates via the campaign’s Slack channel and their Facebook groups, but only moments before the walkout was to begin. After delegates left the floor, the Coalition had wranglers in the hallways directing people out of
the arena complex and into the adjacent media tent, a temporary complex created for the convention so that media outlets could work and hold events near the arena. Delegates sat on the floor of the media tent in an effort to “occupy the media tent” and garner media coverage. The next day, the Coalition sent out a press release identifying themselves as the organizers of the walkout and protesting the “unity façade” of the DNC’s relationship with Sanders.

On the last day, several hundred Sanders supporters from around the nation wore neon green “Bernie” shirts that they had custom made for the event. Their goal was to visually depict the lack of unity between the Sanders and Clinton delegates. In the last part of the evening convention staff dimmed the main lights in advance of Clinton’s speech and turned on black lights, causing the shirts to glow in a smattering of neon all over the darkened convention floor. While this looked like one of the more coordinated visual events crafted by Sanders delegates, several of those involved in its planning reported that the “glow-in-the-dark” effect was just a pleasant side-effect of choosing such a bright shirt.

The California Sanders delegation also carried out subtle acts of resistance throughout their time at the convention that were not visible to the audience. Each night, they reported facing increased animosity from arena staff who tried to split the Sanders contingent up and Clinton delegates who threw water at them and ripped their signs. As such, the act of continued participation in the convention was itself an act of resistance. The delegation’s elected organizers mobilized to have delegates save the seats of other delegates when they got up to use the restroom or visit the food buffet. The continued need to defend their space on the floor converted members of the delegation who were initially hesitant about protesting into boisterous participants in the actions other delegates were carrying out.
Using traditional organizing, combined with technology, members of the California Sanders delegation led or participated in various type of acts of citizenship during their time at the Democratic National Convention. Their continued vocal support for Bernie Sanders, despite his concession and endorsement of Clinton, was an act of civil disobedience, in that it highlighted in a tangible way for the media and those inside the convention the fact that unity did not exist. It was also the most visible way to protest against the DNC’s support for Clinton throughout the primary, which did not lend itself to signs or chants. Continuing to support Sanders was their way of saying that they believed her candidacy was illegitimate. The walkouts immediately following the roll call vote created a spectacle for the cameras and provided a sense of catharsis for the delegates struggling to accept the permanence of Clinton’s nomination. They also highlighted specific issues—opposing fracking, the TPP, and military use abroad—that they knew would not otherwise have been part of the convention.

Conclusion

Over the course of the primary, the delegate election, and the self-organizing processes that led them to the convention in Philadelphia, the California Sanders delegation had experiences developing and practicing democratic ideals and experienced collectively as those ideals were challenged by their own party. Technology played a major role in their experience in a variety of ways. From enabling many of their first contacts with the campaign to notifying them of imminent protest actions. Social media served as the space to organize throughout the entire process and it was collective in such a way that they went together through different stages of indoctrination and education into the political process and into their experience with democracy. They developed a collective narrative about what was happening around them,
framed around a shared protagonist in Bernie Sanders. The Facebook groups allowed the delegates to develop a new political consciousness in the face of the perceived antagonism they were experiencing in party politics.

Using traditional organizing methods, combined with technology and word-of-mouth tactics, the California Sanders delegation carried out acts of citizenship at the Democratic National Convention, making claims to political justice. Specifically, they wanted their ideals to be represented by their party in the form of Clinton’s Vice Presidential pick, changes to the party platform, or even acclimations of support for their core issues. Isin (2009) explains acts of citizenship as a process where, by making claims to justice, an actor becomes an activist citizen. The process involves disrupting already defined orders, practices, and statuses. Their actions at the convention were at odds with both long-standing decorum and expectations of deference to the practices of the Democratic Party. In the context of conventions, this research shows that while some conventions might be choreographed infomercials with passive delegates, there is the potential for idealist delegates to carry out actions in the context of a contentious convention.

Beyond the convention, interviews with these Sanders delegates show that, for most of these former delegates, the political consciousness that was activated for them throughout the process convention process continues to be active. After the November election, many of the delegates delivered on social media using the hashtags #DemExit or #DemInvade, the former being a denunciation of the Democratic Party and the latter being an active decision to, as one of them said, “take over the Democratic Party.” Last month, many of these delegates won local party elections to become assembly delegates to the California State Democratic Party. A January 2017 article in the political blog, The Hill, entitled “Sanders backers take over California Democratic Party” implies that many Sanders supporters chose #DemInvade. In terms of
normative ideals of democracy, it is telling that the experience these delegates had with the political process led them to further involvement in politics. While it is obviously not practical to give all citizens the opportunity to be a delegate to a national convention, this outcome implies that those concerned with declining citizenship should consider the recommendation of authors (e.g. Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006) who recommend that schools and communities provide more opportunities for people to practice politics.

References


