

# DISSSENT

## What Socialist Politicians Can Do: An Interview with Nikil Saval

Socialism is rooted in a philosophical optimism that our movement is based in a majority.

Nick Serpe ▪ Fall 2022



Senator Nikil Saval at a rally for the Whole-Home Repairs Program on May 24, 2022 (Courtesy of the office of Nikil Saval)

Nikil Saval was elected to the Pennsylvania State Senate in 2020. Insofar as there is a typical path to American public

office, Saval didn't follow it. The New York Times called him the "n+1 candidate" (after the magazine he used to co-edit); he was a reporter and essayist, and the author of *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace*. He was also an organizer with UNITE HERE from 2009 to 2013, and, fatefully, his Philadelphia home became a canvassing hub for the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016.

In the wake of that dizzying moment—when self-identification with “socialism” ceased to be an immediate disqualifier for elected office—Saval became more involved in politics in his home city and state, culminating in his successful 2020 campaign amid a wave of local and state victories for candidates endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America. (Full disclosure: I donated to Saval's campaign.) Perhaps more surprising is the success of the Whole-Home Repairs Act, a bill he sponsored and shepherded through a Republican-controlled state legislature this year. The program supports housing repairs and weatherization for low- and middle-income owners and renters, tying together the issues of blight and gentrification, public health, and energy efficiency. In tackling these intersecting problems, the policy is emblematic of the thinking behind the Green New Deal. In August, I spoke with Saval about this program, his experiences in office, and the connection between socialist ideas and everyday politics.

**Nick Serpe:** I thought I would start with your 2016 essay in *n+1* about canvassing on the Sanders campaign, and the tensions you felt between the life of an editor and writer, and the life of an organizer, politician, or activist. You wrote that you had “the feeling that intellectual work, even in the service of politics, is useless—that the only thing to do is to give yourself over entirely to the cause.” I'm curious about what that quote sounds like to you six years later, and if you have a sense of how your political and intellectual development as a socialist relates to what you're doing right now.

**Nikil Saval:** The quote strikes a nerve, in part because I do feel

like I have, in some ways, given myself over. Which I had not wanted to do for a long time. For many years, I felt like I was able, uneasily, to keep two sets of books. I had my intellectual work at n+1; I was a professional journalist. And then at the same time, I had an organizing life. One actually enabled the other, in the sense that I felt freer not to solve certain political questions intellectually. My professional work was largely about architecture and design. Politically, I was focused on Philadelphia. Now, that is my entire professional life. It is fairly all-consuming. It's not that it affords no time for reflection or intellectual inquiry. But time certainly is tough to come by, and the job allows for less disinterested reflection and intellectual inquiry.

In terms of my development, I did feel increasingly, over time, that politics, and in particular state politics, would be intellectually satisfying. It satisfies some of the same impulses that brought me to writing, to thinking, in the way that I had done it. There are a lot of intellectual rewards in the work that I'm doing right now.

**Serpe:** When you were making the decision to run for elected office, what was your understanding of what a socialist could accomplish—or what, maybe, a group of socialists could accomplish—working at the state level? Where have those opinions been reinforced in your time in office, and where have they shifted?

**Saval:** Pennsylvania is one of the largest fossil fuel-producing states in the country. It's a large state, but there's also more focus on it than might otherwise be the case because of the role it plays in national politics. And running for office as a Democrat, I knew I was likely to be in the legislative minority. All of those things being the case in 2020, I thought that a socialist in state government could advance a transformative agenda that would change the nature of what not just socialist politicians, but politicians in general, considered possible, or considered they should be fighting for, in Pennsylvania. We ran

on a very extensive Green New Deal for the state, focused on housing. We also outlined a Green New Deal for schools proposal that was subsequently taken up at the national level. These were ways that we could cut across urban and rural lines around a common agenda, but one that I frankly was not sure would pass. I thought these legislative proposals could be agenda-defining, and we would be building a movement, working together with a number of organizations across the state. We would be building capacity for the moment when we had enough numbers—not necessarily numbers of socialists, but just numbers of Democrats—to have a legislative majority. In 2022, we actually passed part of the agenda without that majority. Coming into office, it became clear to me that there was a legislative path. Housing was something where we could find partners across the state, across geographies, across party lines. The Whole-Home Repairs Program relied on the same theory of change—a co-governance model with social movements to generate pressure and support for the proposal across the state. The fact that we were able to accomplish it makes me feel like there is more we can do.

I still think we need to increase our numbers. We need to increase the number of socialists in elected office, not just for more votes, but because the more of us there are in office, the more those relationships between officeholders and social movements get built across the state, and the more statewide campaigns we can run. There might be more possibility than I imagined in 2020.

**Serpe:** I want to dig into the home-repairs program. It seems to come out of a Green New Deal framework, which is, in part, about how to make climate politics a mass politics. Yet Democrats are a minority in state government in Pennsylvania. How were you able to get the bill to the finish line?

**Saval:** One of the points of our housing platform was a home retrofit program. I spoke a lot on the campaign about housing preservation as a key affordable housing and climate strategy.

And we have a lot of expertise on housing policy in our office staff. We hired for that. So, we were in a position to develop a proposal that would make sense for the state. And we wanted to find something that made sense for most people in the state. Whatever geography you were in, whatever kind of political district you were in, whoever your representation was—the problems that were being treated in the bill were understandable to you, maybe even familiar.

One of the key parts of the bill is that it builds on and coordinates existing housing programs. It fills in gaps in funding for critical repairs, including energy efficiency and modifications for people with disabilities, as well as fixing your roof and things like that. When you talk to people about what the bill would do, they say, “Oh yeah, I understand that program. We had a home-repair program. We had Habitat for Humanity in our district.” And they understand all the limitations that are placed on these programs. There was a discursive framework that we drew upon to create a shared language and shared understanding around a shared crisis.

And then we organized. We worked with a statewide coalition. There were many different partners, including a federation of groups that had mostly formed after 2016 called Pennsylvania Stands Up, along with Make the Road Pennsylvania, which is largely an immigrant rights group that was working on housing. We had a community organizer on staff who helped build a campaign with these groups, and who also worked on the legislation with us. We had rallies across the state, in red and blue districts, that generated pressure, attention, and interest. I also worked the halls of the capitol. I had meetings, or my staff had meetings with other legislative staff. I nabbed people in the hallways. We answered questions, we corrected misunderstandings, and we got buy-in—one by one.

Passing the bill took all three of those components: a policy that was designed for the state on an existing framework (the new principles come out of old), the organizing, and then, finally, the more traditional legislative work.

**Serpe:** This brings up the general question of inside-outside strategies. There's a lot of discussion and argument about the details of how that looks or should look among people on the left. I imagine once you're in government, you face a whole different set of arguments about strategic priorities. What has it been like to straddle the organizing side, the base side, and the inside? Have there been tensions? Have you felt the kind of cross-pressures we always hear that even idealistic politicians will face once they're in the halls of power?

**Saval:** I have felt them less than I might have expected. Coming into office, we set up a series of roundtables—on housing, environmental justice, and criminal-justice reform. The idea was to have regular, bimonthly meetings with, effectively, the left. So there's a direct line in our office. For a long time, Whole-Home Repairs consumed two of those groups. But that meant that there are no surprises coming out of our office. Legislators will sometimes take votes that are shocking, or advance ideas that come out of nowhere. We wanted to avoid that from the beginning.

The problem I really felt initially was that a lot of the work that you do in socialist politics is in an urban context. If you run for office, you represent that geography, the groups of people based in that sort of place. But if you're in state politics, you have to work in a state context. You suddenly have to consider what it means to organize outside of those boundaries, across the state. Philadelphia is a large part of the state, but you can't win policy in Pennsylvania just by winning in Philadelphia. On the contrary: if something is seen too much as a Philadelphia issue, that makes it much less likely to be adopted at the state level.

But in part because of the organizing that has been done at least since 2016—in many respects it goes beyond that, but certainly it was accelerated with the Sanders campaign and the election of Donald Trump—we had a framework. We had a dedicated community organizer, and we had a dedicated liaison with organized labor. Both of them do legislative work. That

meant that we were in constant communication, and this was an essential part of our strategy.

**Serpe:** Pennsylvania mirrors a lot of trends that you can find across the United States—and across a lot of the Global North—with the hardening of urban-rural divides over the course of decades, and educational realignment of party politics. In 2016, there was a lot of optimism that a Sanders-style program could work to overcome some of these issues. With all that in mind, I wanted to get your perspective on what is distinctive about Senate District 1, how it fits in the state, and how that relates to these trends that national media have been obsessing over since 2016.

**Saval:** The district is in the heart of Philadelphia. It is all of the downtown, Center City, and a generous portion of South Philadelphia, and then it creeps into what are known as the river wards, which are just northeast of Center City along the Delaware River. It also has a huge number of areas of major economic activity: the airport; what's called the Navy Yard, which still has some ship-building capacity but is largely now an office district; the Port of Philadelphia, which is growing; and then the commercial heart of the city, downtown. It may be unusual among districts represented by progressive or socialist politicians to have all of those things.

Partly for that reason, it is growing, even more than Philadelphia itself. It was one of the few districts in the statewide redistricting that took place after the census that had to shrink its boundaries because the population had grown so considerably. And it is growing through immigration, so it is incredibly diverse. The core around the downtown is gentrifying or already gentrified, and the related political phenomena might be familiar from other kinds of districts where the left has won. It is also, for all those reasons, one of the most economically unequal sections of the city. I represent part of Kensington, a neighborhood that is, on the one hand, the site of a lot of property speculation and real-estate development, and on the

other hand, one of the hardest hit by opioid and drug dependency in the country. I represent some of the poorest areas of the city as well as some of the richest.

It is also the site of a lot of political organizing. The organization that I helped found after 2016, Reclaim Philadelphia, has a strong core of support in South Philadelphia. We have helped a lot of the progressive candidates who have won elections in Philadelphia. District Attorney Larry Krasner has a huge base of support in the area. So does Kendra Brooks, the Working Families Party city councilmember, as well as someone who inspired me to run, State Representative Elizabeth Fiedler, who won her seat in 2018. For that reason, and I mean this in the best way, it is a demanding district. There's a lot of energy and desire for transformational politics, in part because of this organizing and ferment. And so it has immense significance.

**Serpe:** As you mentioned, there are other urban districts where socialists have done well. In New York, there's a socialist caucus in state government, working against the backdrop of a Democratic majority. Much of New York State is rural or deindustrialized, but in a state like Pennsylvania those areas represent a much bigger part of the population, and that's reflected in a split state government that leans Republican, an evenly split congressional delegation, split Senate seats. Do you feel it is possible for the kind of politics you represent to make inroads across this divide?

**Saval:** Obviously, the left is not immune to divides among Democrats and Republicans, and the metropolitanization of the Democratic Party. In some ways, the left benefits from that by winning these urban districts, and it might possibly contribute to it. But it was clear to me in the Whole-Home Repairs campaign —purely on the legislative side, but I think it has implications for campaigns and coalitions—that there is organizing being done across the state, not just in these major metropolitan areas. We worked with really vibrant groups in Lancaster, in Reading, and in Allentown. Reading and Allentown have been

deindustrialized almost in a mythic way. But the work is being done, and new coalitions are being built. Allentown is now a majority Latino city. Reading is close to that. There's a lot of work being done in Western Pennsylvania as well, in and around Pittsburgh, that I saw in this campaign, and I think we'll see more of it. Coalitions among healthcare workers—Gabriel Winant's book, *The Next Shift*, really points to this—represent a growing constituency in Western Pennsylvania, with implications for politics in that part of the state. It's happening unevenly, but over the course of this campaign I saw how advanced it had become. On particular issues or maybe with particular candidates or campaigns, it may grow. Winning helps things to grow. It helps people to want to join in.

**Serpe:** If you're just reading national media, the shine would seem to have come off of American socialism in the last year or two. There's also talk about internal conflict, and about DSA's membership plateauing. Have you encountered these dynamics in what you're doing? To what extent are the politics you represent rooted in that ferment happening, in forward momentum for labor, for tenants, for organized socialists?

**Saval:** I think much of the perception of a diminution in the interest in socialism and the capacity of socialists to win and govern is the result of a concerted campaign by the political right to defeat socialists. It is clearest in things like the multi-million-dollar campaign to stop Summer Lee from becoming a congresswoman in Western Pennsylvania. Thankfully, that was a failed effort, because she's a terrific, protean organizer. This is not to say that there aren't limitations, or potential limitations, within the left, within the socialist movement; I'm not dismissing those things. It's more to say that there is an increasingly vituperative opposition, and largely it is in the Democratic Party. The right wing of the Democratic Party is attempting to suppress its left. That's what we're feeling. And that will also cause divisions and fractures. It's difficult to sustain a movement under that kind of pressure.

We have many more members of the left and socialists in elected office than we have had in decades. And certainly many more than we all expected in 2016. They have established the framework for policymaking in a lot of places. We have many more people adopting social housing proposals in states across the country; the Green New Deal is an accepted framework, even if it may not be the language that everyone uses. The same goes for policymaking around infrastructure, schools, jobs. So I feel optimistic. And the history of the movement is rooted in a philosophical optimism that our movement is based in a majority—that we speak to a majority, and a majority that is growing. That’s not meant to be whiggish or pseudoscientific, but I think that’s the history of the movement. And the nature of that movement is also to see past seemingly insurmountable political obstacles, including geographic boundaries, city and country. We want to develop a politics that transcends that.

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