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HOW THE DNC STARTED SABOTAGING OWN PEOPLE

SECRETLY TAPED AUDIO REVEALS DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP PRESSING PROGRESSIVE TO LEAVE RACE

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Lee Fang

In partnership with



STENY HOYER, the No. 2 Democrat in the House of Representatives, has for years been a prolific campaigner on behalf of current and potential members of Congress. It was no surprise, then, that December found him in Colorado, where the party has hopes of knocking off Republican incumbent Mike Coffman.

Before Donald Trump had even been inaugurated, local resistance groups [began deluging Coffman's public appearances](#), pressing him not to repeal the Affordable Care Act, and putting him back on his political heels. Levi Tillemann, an author, inventor, and former official with the Obama administration's Energy Department, moved back home to make a run against Coffman.

He focused his campaign on clean elections, combatting climate change, "Medicare for All," free community college, and confronting economic inequality and monopoly power. Another candidate for the nomination, Jason Crow, a corporate lawyer at the powerhouse Colorado firm Hollan & Hart and an Army veteran, meanwhile, appeared to have the backing of the Democratic establishment, though it wasn't explicit. In November, it became clearer, as Crow was named by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee to the party's "Red to Blue" list, which the committee specifies is not an endorsement but does carry symbolic weight.

With Hoyer in Denver, Tillemann met the minority whip at the Hilton Denver Downtown to make the case that the party should stay neutral in the primary and that he had a more plausible path to victory than the saccharine centrism that Coffman had already beaten repeatedly.

Hoyer, however, had his own message he wanted to convey: Tillemann should drop out.

In a frank and wide-ranging conversation, Hoyer laid down the law for Tillemann. The decision, Tillemann was told, had been made long ago. It wasn't personal, Hoyer insisted, and there was nothing uniquely unfair being done to Tillemann, he explained: This is how the party does it everywhere.

Tillemann had heard the argument before from D.C. insiders and local Democratic bigwigs, all of whom had discouraged him from challenging establishment favorite. The only difference was that for this conversation the candidate had his phone set to record.

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The secretly taped audio recording, released here for the first time, reveals how senior Democratic officials have worked to crush competitive primaries and steer political resources, money, and other support to hand-picked candidates in key races across the country, long before the party publicly announces a preference. The invisible assistance boosts the preferred candidate in fundraising and endorsements, and then that fundraising success and those endorsements are used to justify national party support. Meanwhile, opponents of the party's unspoken pick are driven into paranoia, wondering if they are merely imagining that unseen hands are working against them.

Hoyer bluntly told Tillemann that it wasn't his imagination, and that mobilizing support for one Democratic candidate over another in a primary isn't unusual. Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, D-N.M., chair of the DCCC, laid out a "policy that early on, we'd try to agree on a candidate who we thought could win the general and give the candidate all the help we could give them," Hoyer told Tillemann matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, I'm for Crow," Hoyer explained. "I am for Crow because a judgment was made very early on. I didn't know Crow. I didn't participate in the decision. But a decision was made early on by the Colorado delegation," he said, referencing the three House Democrats elected from Colorado.

"So your position is, a decision was made very early on before voters had a say, and that's fine because the DCCC knows better than the voters of

the 6th Congressional District, and we should line up behind that candidate,” asked Tillemann during the conversation.

“That’s certainly a consequence of our decision,” responded Hoyer.

“Staying out of primaries sounds small-D democratic, very intellectual, a very interesting,” said Hoyer. “But if you stay out of primaries, and somebody wins in the primary who can’t possibly win in the general,” the Maryland representative said, citing the surprise victory of Democrat Doug Jones over Republican Roy Moore in the Alabama Senate election, “I’m not saying you’re that person.” But staying out of primaries, he argued, is “not a very smart strategy.”

Before agreeing to provide the audio, Tillemann requested that personal details be withheld. The Intercept selected the newsworthy aspects of the recording for publication.

 [WASHINGTON, DC - January 30: House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer \(D-Md.\) leaves the House of Representatives chamber after President Donald Trump's first State of the Union address on January 30, 2018 in Washington, DC. \(Photo by Pete Marovich/Getty Images\)](#)

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, D-Md., leaves the House of Representatives chamber after President Donald Trump's first State of the Union address on Jan. 30, 2018 in Washington, D.C. Photo: Pete Marovich/Getty Images

DURING THE CONVERSATION, Hoyer asked Tillemann to leave the race multiple times and make way for Crow. “You keep saying I would like you to get out of the race, and of course that’s correct,” Hoyer said, adding that he hoped Tillemann would refrain from criticizing the party’s chosen candidate if he decided to stay in.

The party, notably, has a poor track record in selecting candidates that can win the general election.

In 2006, the last cycle viewed as a wave midterm election for Democrats, the DCCC famously became heavily involved in Democratic primaries. In that election, just as in 2018, the party attempted to pick moderate, business-friendly veterans, while nudging left-leaning candidates out of the election. But some of the party’s chosen primary candidates ended up losing, and several candidates viewed as too progressive to win the general election in Republican-held districts — such as John Hall, Carol Shea-Porter, and Jerry McNerney — went on to win that election with little to no DCCC support.

The suggestion that Tillemann might end up being a spoiler like Roy Moore, an extremist with a [history of soliciting minors](#), may seem far-

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fetched.

Tillemann, while studying for his Ph.D., founded an energy efficient engineering design company, and in 2012, was appointed by President Barack Obama to advise the Energy Department. Though he has positioned himself as a grassroots populist aligned with local resistance activist groups, if anything, he is simultaneously a legacy of the Democratic establishment, as the grandson of the late Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., on his mother's side and the grandson of former Colorado Lt. Gov. Nancy Dick on his father's side. He grew up in a working-class neighborhood of Denver. He also speaks Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, and Japanese — an asset, he says, in the rapidly diversifying 6th District.

Crow spoke at the 2012 Democratic National Convention to [support](#) the repeal of the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. He previously served on the Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs and advised both the Obama administration and former Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper on veteran issues. Crow's first television advertisement [focuses](#) on Coffman's support from the gun lobby, but conservatives have fired back to note that Crow's law firm [lobbies](#) against gun control on behalf of gun manufacturers in Colorado.

Crow's work representing corporations accused of misconduct may become a liability in the campaign. Legal filings list Crow's name on lawsuits defending payday lender Western Sky Financial and fracking firm Slawson Exploration.

IN RACES IN Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Texas, Nebraska, California, and beyond, progressive candidates are finding that the DCCC has mobilized support for moderate candidates with access to early campaign cash at the expense of progressives. As we've reported, many [first-time candidates](#) told by the DCCC that before they can even be considered, they have to perform the "[rolodex](#)" test to show they can raise \$250,000 or more from the contact list on their phone.

In February, the DCCC made the unusual move to [release](#) opposition research, the term of art for political dirt, against activist Laura Moser, whom the party viewed as too liberal to win in the 7th Congressional District of Texas, a Houston-area seat. The strategy, however, appeared to backfire. Moser [placed second](#) in the Texas Democratic primary, meaning she'll have a shot at the nomination in the May 22 runoff.

Tillemann says the decision to record the conversation came after months of hints that party officials did not want him as the candidate. Though he notified the party of his intention to run, he had trouble gaining an

audience with senior DCCC officials, obtaining polling data promised by the DCCC, or even gaining access to resumes of Democratic campaign staff. The party continued to promise neutrality while inviting only Crow a candidate [training seminar](#), Tillemann alleges.

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In February of last year, Tillemann reached out over email to DCCC officials as he explored a bid and maintained contact with party staff through the launch of his campaign; he says he was continually stonewalled as he sought candidate resources. Nearly six months after the initial contact, with Tillemann's internal complaints growing more forceful, the party committee offered some perfunctory assistance in exchange for access to details about campaign financials and organizing. The offer came after a heated exchange between Tillemann and a DCCC official at a campaign event, in which Tillemann argued that the party was more interested in boosting Crow than beating Coffman.

While the DCCC still promised neutrality, publicly disclosed campaign donations confirmed Tillemann's suspicions. In June 2017, a political action committee controlled by Luján, the DCCC chair, donated [\\$1,000](#) to Crow. That month, PACs controlled by Hoyer also donated two checks for a combined total of \$2,000 to Crow.

"We were put in a situation time and time again where what was communicated to us behind closed doors and what was communicated to the public was at odds," says Tillemann of his decision to tape the conversation with Hoyer. "The breach of personal decorum," Tillemann adds, "was much less important than the fundamental principle at stake in our democracy in 2018."

Mariel Saez, a spokesperson for Hoyer, said that "we do not comment on private meetings. Mr. Hoyer supports Crow and donated to him last year but he hasn't engaged in the race since then." Crow did not respond to a request for comment, and the DCCC declined to comment.

 [Levi Tillemann, managing partner at Valence Strategic, speaks at the Bloomberg Future of Energy Summit in New York, U.S., on Tuesday, April 5, 2016. Tillemann is determining energy market evolution globally and then dives deep on three topics: global supply and a regional focus on the Americas. Photographer: Michael Nagle](#)

Entrepreneur Levi Tillemann speaking at the Bloomberg New Energy Finance Future of Energy Summit
Nagle/Bloomberg via Getty Images

BUT THE DYNAMICS described in the audio tape and by Tillemann resonated with other former candidates in the district.

“The party did not give me the resources that they gave Jason Crow,” says David Aarestad, an attorney who had been running for the nomination for the 6th District. Aarestad dropped out of the race in March and [endorsed](#) Crow.

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“It was the D-trip. I was given extensive promises in March of last year that they would not do anything to favor one candidate over another, that they had learned from the mistakes made during the Bernie-Hillary fallout, and that they would do everything the same for all of the candidates,” says Aarestad. “But, they made polling data available to Crow that they did not make available to me. They made other resources available to Crow that they did not make available to me, such as email lists for fundraising purposes.”

Gabriel McArthur, another former [candidate](#) for the 6th District, says the DCCC never contacted him, even though he was the first candidate to enter the race. He says the party exercises influence not just over candidate selection, but how political money and media coverage operates in the state. McArthur says he had the most detailed policies on his campaign website, but could never gain serious media coverage for his race. While Crow for much of last year had [no issues](#) page on his campaign website, McArthur noted that the establishment favorite appeared to easily win endorsement after endorsement from local liberal groups and politicians along with fawning coverage from local media.

“Jason Crow has been hoisted up as the chosen candidate the entire time. The party officers say we need centrists to win against Mike Coffman, that’s just the way it is,” says McArthur, a former Bernie Sanders delegate to the 2016 Democratic National Convention.

Democratic consultants, McArthur says, have told him to focus more on fundraising than publicizing his policy agenda. “The money isn’t the real problem — the problem is that the Democrats lack any real agenda,” says McArthur.

When the DCCC publicly added Crow to its “Red to Blue” list of front-line candidates in November, the move further embittered local Colorado Democrats who had been assured the party was remaining neutral in the primary. State Party Chair Morgan Carroll, the Democratic nominee in the 6th District in 2016, wrote on Facebook, “The DCCC verbally said they would be neutral and in practice just endorsed one of the candidates in CD6.”

The suburban district is being widely watched as one of the most important seats Democrats need to flip to regain the majority. Obama won the district

in 2012 by 5 percentage points, and Hillary Clinton won it by 9 percent in 2016. But the incumbent, Coffman, has proved resilient, winning crossover votes by projecting a moderate image. He defeated Democratic challenge in the last two election cycles by a wide margin.

Hoyer has for years been a mainstay of House Democratic leadership, tantalizingly close to the speakership. Soon after being elected to Congress in 1981, he became a protégé of then-Rep. Tony Coelho, D-Calif., a business-friendly lawmaker who had just become chair of the DCCC. Coelho famously transformed the DCCC into the big-money operation it is today, rebuking the Democratic Party's longstanding alliance with labor unions and activists in favor of raising millions of dollars from corporate lobbyists.

Under Coelho, one DCCC brochure assured donors "courteous and direct access to" Democratic lawmakers. The DCCC encouraged candidates to focus on raising cash from corporate PACs and building relationships with business executives as the easiest path to office. Coelho resigned in 1989 following an ethics scandal, but not before giving a boost to Hoyer, his lieutenant who was quickly rising through the ranks of leadership.

Hoyer, exploiting his own role as the caucus point person for K Street, won the election as House Democratic whip in 2002. According to reports in Roll Call and the Washington Post, Hoyer regularly invites corporate lobbyists for weekly lunches with the caucus and helps to headline private donor retreats for the party. During the 2006 midterms, he worked closely with the DCCC to raise prodigious sums of corporate PAC cash for party election efforts, further cementing his role as a power player in the party.

FOR THE 2018 midterm cycle, the party has not only courted moderate Democrats and formed a renewed partnership with the conservative Blue Dog caucus for candidate recruitment, but has discouraged candidates from embracing populist ideas, such as single-payer health care.

For Tillemann, however, the party's closeness with the corporate elite is very reason why the DCCC continues to lose general elections.

"They squash progressive candidates. They destroy the diversity of ideas in their caucus. They keep ideas like 'Medicare for All,' free community college, or impeaching Donald Trump from having a significant role in the national conversation," says Tillemann. "The issues that resonate most with voters are not the issues that the DCCC is telling candidates to focus on."

Is he worried that even if he is successful in his campaign, that he's already betrayed one of the most powerful Democrats, making him an outsider as soon as he arrives in Washington?

"To a certain extent, people like Elizabeth Warren and people like Bernie Sanders have been ostracized by the party, and they have been marginalized by the establishment to the extent that is possible," says Tillemann. "But the fact of the matter is that the people are crying out for genuine leaders, and the people are crying out for a solution to inequality and systemic injustice, and to the extent that I am fighting for those solutions, then I think there will be a powerful constituency for that."

"I'm proud to be on the side of truth," he added. "I'm proud to be on the right side of democracy, and I'm proud to be on the right side of free and fair elections."

The video was produced by The Intercept's Travis Mannon and Lauren Feeney, and narrated by The Intercept's Elise Swain. Illustrations by M Lubchansky, associate editor of The Nib.

