



NATIONAL JOURNAL

In Nevada, a proxy fight for the soul of the Democratic Party

The left-wing chair of the state party suggested that a move to sideline her was months in the making, while old-guard Democrats said she had proved herself ineffective.



(AP Photo/Scott Sonner, File)

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🕒 June 20, 2021, 8 p.m.

Fights between centrist Democrats and the party's left flank aren't just playing out in primaries. They're also dividing state parties, and in turn risking Democrats' chances in next November's elections.

Perhaps nowhere is this more true than in Nevada, a blue-leaning swing state where Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto's reelection campaign will help decide whether Democrats keep the Senate.

According to conversations with more than a dozen Nevada Democratic operatives, tensions between the old guard and the newly elected state party leadership, which was backed by the Democratic Socialists of America, have been simmering all spring. The Silver State drama includes the same conflicts over socialism and support for Palestine that have played out on the national stage, but it also involves an aggressive attempt to assert control of party funds and machinery. The tense situation illustrates the sort of power struggle that may be ahead as progressives continue to assert themselves, even as Democrats across the spectrum claim unity.

The disarray among Nevada Democrats came into sharp focus this month when the Washoe County Democratic Party announced it would house the state's 2022 coordinated campaign, Nevada Democratic Victory, a move opposed by the state party and its new chair, Judith Whitmer. Generally, state parties helm coordinated campaigns, which organize on behalf of candidates up and down the ballot. According to Whitmer and her allies, the decision was the culmination of months of efforts to undermine progressives.

“We had uncovered indications of this being the plan before the election [of new party leaders],” Whitmer said in an interview with *National Journal*. “We had uncovered information showing that there was correspondence back and forth, that their internal polling was telling them that I would more than likely win the election. And therefore, some of these plans were laid then, including the transfer of funds to not just the DSCC, but the transfer funds to Washoe County.”

Ahead of Whitmer's victory, party staffers moved \$450,000 from the state party to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. But according to Whitmer, they also moved \$18,000 to Washoe County, a transfer which has not been

previously reported. In her view, there was no rationale for the move; the rent for the office shared by the state party had been paid and she was ready to sign a document to continue the lease. A Nevada Democratic insider aligned with Whitmer confirmed the transfer, adding that it was not earmarked for any purpose.



📷 Nevada Democratic Party Chair Judith Whitmer NONE

According to a former party staffer, however, the transfer was a safeguard. Democrats were worried that Whitmer would not continue to pay the rent for the Washoe office; the money would cover that through the end of the year. Eventually, the state party got the \$18,000 back. However, Whitmer said attorneys for the Nevada Democrats are still reviewing evidence that the move to Washoe had been in the works for months. Allies of both camps suggested that, since March, they had heard talk of establishing a different kind of coordinated campaign, one that would bring in the state party chair later in the process. Former Clark County Democratic Party Chair Donna West supports the move to house the coordinated campaign in Washoe, which encompasses Reno and Northwest Nevada, far from Las Vegas and Clark County—historically the hub of Democratic organizing in the state. She said she had heard discussion about the move ahead of the party’s leadership elections, although she wasn’t aware of specifics.

“I heard rumors that there were concerns about where to place the coordinated campaign, and that an option was being looked at to put it outside of the state party, possibly,” West said. “And I heard one or two references over the following months that that was being looked at.”

Many supporters of the Washoe-based coordinated campaign, on the other hand, say the decision to create it came about because the state party was not moving fast enough to launch a coordinated campaign. According to them, serious conversations about moving the coordinated campaign began weeks into Whitmer’s tenure. Several longtime Nevada operatives said they were frustrated the new party leadership had not reached out to them and they were unaware of who the state party was talking to, even as leaders said they were speaking with stakeholders.

Supporters of the Washoe move cite the precedent of North Carolina Democrats who, led by the late Sen. Kay Hagan, set up a partnership with Wake County Democrats instead of with the state party in 2014. In her response to the Washoe announcement, Whitmer cited that example, too; she noted that Hagan lost.

Before last week, Whitmer said she had been trying to get information on potential plans for establishing the coordinated campaign in Washoe. Ahead of a trip to Reno scheduled for this week, she had expressed interest in meeting with Washoe County Chair Sarah Mahler, but the only response she got was that Mahler might not have time for a meeting.

“We only found out by press release,” Whitmer said of the decision to house the coordinated campaign in Washoe.

Other progressives who have recently come into power were similarly blindsided.

“I knew that there were people within our party that were disappointed with the outcome of the internal elections of the state party where Judith Whitmer was elected,” said Clark County Democratic Party Chair Michael Weiss. “But I didn't think Washoe or any other county party would do something like this.”

Two sources said the move to Washoe was spearheaded by Cortez Masto and her operatives, although other Democrats familiar with the decision suggested responsibility lay with a broader group, including Gov. Steve Sisolak, state Senate Majority Leader Nicole Cannizzaro, and state House speaker Jason Frierson.

Allies of the state party largely suggest that the strategists who previously led Nevada campaigns did not give the new leadership a chance. In March, some former party staffers quit in what some outlets described as a [“mass resignation”](#)

(<https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/nevada/democratic-party-staff-resigns->

[after-progressives-take-over-2298631/](#)) following Whitmer's election. Whitmer said that characterization was incorrect, and that very few staffers—she named Molly Forgey, the new spokesperson for the coordinated campaign, and then-executive director Alana Mounce—had still been working for the party at that time. There's plenty of precedent, she said, for party staffers to choose to move on when leadership changes.

For the staffers who left, their decisions to move on were partially due to differences in approach. They felt Whitmer's understanding of her role centered on activism more than was appropriate. But rumors that Whitmer was planning to fire the old staff may also have contributed to their decision.

"I was under the understanding, as were many, that she was going to fire the staff," said Nevada's Democratic Committeeman Alex Goff. Several other operatives echoed that suspicion to *National Journal*, although none specified hearing it from Whitmer directly.

Whitmer said she had no intention of firing anyone, adding that she did speak at a virtual meeting of rural Democrats about finding a new executive director only after she'd heard that Mounce was planning to take a job at the Democratic National Committee.

Across both camps, such miscommunications have fueled division. Chris Klarich, the party's new executive director, acknowledged rumors that Whitmer might endorse candidates who primary incumbents this cycle. Indeed, Goff relayed some Democrats' concerns that Whitmer would use the party to back Amy Vilela, whose 2018 congressional campaign was featured alongside Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's in the documentary *Knock Down the House*. This cycle, Vilela is mounting a primary challenge to longtime Rep. Dina Titus in Nevada's 1st District.

The state party shot down that theory and promised to support incumbents, including Titus.

“I don't think that's a state party's role,” Whitmer said of endorsing against Democratic incumbents. “I think the state party's role is to provide a level playing field for all of the candidates.”



📷 Rep. Dina Titus and then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, in 2010 (AP Photo/Julie Jacobson) ASSOCIATED PRESS

Such conflicts might be resolved through more open communication, and both sides show signs that they genuinely want to partner with each other. The state party has expressed eagerness to open communication with the leaders of the

Washoe effort and to focus on electing Democrats downballot. Whitmer also mentioned she has a good relationship with Sisolak and recently met with his campaign manager.

“We are happy with our relationship with Governor Sisolak,” Klarich said. “He also intends to work with the state party.”

In a [Nevada Newsmakers interview](#)

(<http://www.nevadanewsmakers.com/RayHagar/article.asp?ID=356>) this month, former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said that the division in the state party was overblown. Indeed, both sides say they share the same goal: to elect Democrats up and down the ticket as they expect a tough fight against the GOP this cycle.

“Washoe County is a critical swing county in our battleground state and will play an outsized role in electing Nevada’s leaders in the 2022 elections,” wrote Mahler in a statement to *National Journal*. “I intend to continue working with the state party, other county parties, and other democratically aligned groups because it will take all of us working together in order to win next November.”

“We absolutely want to work with the state party,” affirmed Forgey.

Yet trust has frayed following years of conflict between the progressives who have gained power in Nevada in recent years and the longtime operatives aligned with Reid.

A major criticism from the old guard is that the new team at the Nevada Democratic Party is inexperienced and lacks respect for the operatives who have carried the party to many successes for the past two decades. Before hiring Klarich, the state party relied on volunteers throughout the spring, although it plans to bring on a new data and digital director and a new operations director in the coming weeks.

Supporters of the Washoe coordinated campaign also say the progressives have unnecessarily divided Democrats and given Republicans hot-button issues to latch onto.

“My job as chair was to represent everybody from the Far Left to the middle of the political spectrum,” said former Clark County Democratic Party Chair Chris Miller. “And I don't feel that when you hear the word ‘progressive, progressive, progressive,’ that they are interested in representing anything but the Far Left.”

A statement Whitmer issued about Israel and Palestine was particularly controversial. Whitmer urged the U.S. to defend Palestinians and noted that the U.S. helps fund the Israeli military. Some operatives in the state considered the statement anti-Semitic, and one of the members of party leadership elected alongside Whitmer [resigned in response](https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/nevada/nevada-democratic-party-treasurer-resigns-over-israel-statement-2356324/) (https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/nevada/nevada-democratic-party-treasurer-resigns-over-israel-statement-2356324/).

Several elected officials were taken aback. Sen. Jacky Rosen [responded](https://twitter.com/RalstonReports/status/1393364417002151937) (https://twitter.com/RalstonReports/status/1393364417002151937) by saying she was

“disappointed” by Whitmer’s statement, which she felt gave cover to Hamas.

Rep. Susie Lee [issued a statement](https://twitter.com/RalstonReports/status/1393403901517303816/photo/1)

(https://twitter.com/RalstonReports/status/1393403901517303816/photo/1) that didn’t name the party chair but appeared to condemn her statements nonetheless.

Whitmer said she had no regrets about issuing the statement but was sorry to see the fallout.

“What I felt was disappointment that they didn't understand the need to stand up for human rights, and that it could have been an opening for them to have a dialogue with our very strong and active Muslim community in Nevada,” she said.

Whitmer's statement on the Washoe coordinated campaign also ruffled some feathers. Washoe Democrats were particularly incensed at her referring to them as "a less-successful county organization."

"That was so offensive because we work so hard up here," Goff said.