

## National Journal

# Khanna's Rise Brings Risks and Rewards

The Silicon Valley freshman wants to be the Paul Ryan-style policy wonk of the Left. Will he alienate his colleagues before he gets the chance?



Rep. Ro Khanna

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**R**ep. Ro Khanna represents Silicon Valley, so it stands to figure that in his first term he is becoming known as a Democratic disrupter.

Khanna, 41, an uber-ambitious freshman, former tech lawyer, and Obama administration veteran, has received plaudits from his colleagues for his audacious jobs legislation and enterprising foreign policy ideas and has coauthored op-eds with everyone from Arnold Schwarzenegger to Rep. John Lewis.

He has also been raising eyebrows all over Capitol Hill by committing the cardinal sin of American politics: Endorsing primary challengers over his own Democratic colleagues.

Khanna himself earned his seat on his third primary attempt against entrenched incumbents. But his [endorsement of Ferguson, Missouri activist Cori Bush](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQW149b9zBc) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQW149b9zBc>) in the race against Rep. William Lacy Clay only months into his first term was different. Now, he was part of the club, and as progressive colleagues such as Reps. Bennie Thompson, Barbara Lee, and Raul Grijalva strongly impressed on him the day after the endorsement, you don't go against a fellow member of the club.

Khanna told his colleagues it was a "stupid mistake," that he did not realize Bush was running against Clay. He reviewed Clay's record and, finding it sufficiently progressive, retracted his endorsement of Bush and promised to contribute to Clay's campaign, which he did this summer.

"I wouldn't have had I known the person was running against Lacy," Khanna said in an interview. "I realized, 'Wow, ... I need a lot of good relationships here.' There's a delicate balancing act. So what I did is I said, 'I'm going to make a rule that I'm going to stay out of most of this stuff,' and I did."

That is, until Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez came onto the scene. The firebrand Democratic Socialist recently upset 10-term incumbent and House Democratic Caucus Chairman Joseph Crowley in a campaign that was bolstered by Khanna's unusual backing of both candidates. First he endorsed

Crowley, and then, [after taking heat from progressive activists](https://theintercept.com/2018/06/13/ro-khanna-joe-crowley-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/)

(<https://theintercept.com/2018/06/13/ro-khanna-joe-crowley-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/>), Ocasio-Cortez, too.

Khanna has also been outspoken in his support for California State Sen. Kevin de León in his bid to unseat Sen. Dianne Feinstein. And Khanna is a member of the Justice Democrats, who are engaged in internecine warfare against incumbent Democrats across the country—including a Nebraska race that saw Justice Democrat Kara Eastman stymie the political resurrection of ex-Rep. Brad Ashford.

Among the newer members of the Democratic tribe, Khanna is seen by his colleagues as somewhat of an enigma, floating between a new, unforgiving progressive politics and the staid orthodoxy of incumbency; between the corporate world of Silicon Valley and the burgeoning Democratic Socialist movement; between wanting to be known as a policy wonk and yet distinguishing himself most through his controversial political endorsements.

Some of Khanna's colleagues see his primary moves as the flailings of a neophyte congressman fumbling his way through the new political landscape.

“Going hot and cold in primaries and deciding to interject yourself in colleagues' contests—that's serious business and you need to show fortitude when you do it, if you do it. The better part of wisdom may be not to do it,” Rep. Gerald Connolly said. “You can create oceans of ill will that can last a long time.”

Others think that Khanna is trying to start the Democratic answer to the House Freedom Caucus; it would be a splinter group of the Congressional Progressive Caucus that could vote as a bloc.

“There's a belief that he and some of the new members would be an offshoot of the CPC and take a more strident, harder line on things,” said Grijalva, a CPC cochairman.

Khanna insists, however, that is not the case. Though Ocasio-Cortez has said she is [mulling a “sub-caucus,”](https://theintercept.com/2018/07/16/ocasio-cortez-floats-a-sub-caucus-of-progressives-willing-to-vote-together-as-a-bloc/) Khanna is trying to talk her out of it, according to a source familiar with their conversations. Unlike Ocasio-Cortez, he has stayed out of most races where a Justice Democrat is running against an incumbent, such as Reps. Adam Smith, Michael Capuano, and Stephanie Murphy. And despite the Clay mistake, Khanna said his opposition to Feinstein and Crowley and support for Eastman were calculated exceptions to his rule, based on the incumbents being too close to Wall Street, out of touch with the tech community, or too supportive of the war in Iraq.

“If I didn’t do that, I would be seen as a total hypocrite. Like, ‘OK, this guy gets to Congress, he’s been saying he wants to reform the system and then he closes the drawbridges behind him,’” Khanna said. “The three times I ran against an incumbent, not one federal official supported me. Not one federal official said nice things about me. Not one federal official lifted a finger for me. And I felt that I had to claw to get a seat at the table.”

If Khanna seems uncomfortable with the idea of being a progressive kingmaker, it’s because he insists he’d rather be known as a policy thinker—and not one in the Democratic Socialist mold. Though he wants to see more far-left voices in Congress, he himself is a capitalist. His [“Jobs for All”](https://theintercept.com/2018/05/30/job-guarantee-bill-ro-khanna/) bill, for instance, eschews the pie-in-the sky ideas of progressive stalwarts like Sen. Bernie Sanders, instead proposing public subsidies to spur private employment.

“I would love to be seen as an economic thought leader in the Congress for the digital age ... in the way that Paul Ryan, before he became Ways and Means chair or speaker, he was really seen as someone who had ideas on the conservative side,” Khanna said. “I’m trying to take progressive values and articulate it in a pro-growth message and say we need these progressive values to prepare for the jobs of the future.”

Rep. Mark Pocan said Khanna is standing out as a cutting-edge progressive thinker, not just with his jobs bill, but in pushing antitrust legislation that could cut against even his own Silicon Valley interests, and in raising awareness of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the U.S. military's involvement abroad.

"He's approaching things from a non-insider way, and that may ruffle feathers because people are used to things being a certain way," Pocan said. "My sense is he's going to grow in the way of innovative ideas rather than grow in the way of going against colleagues in his own political party."

The risk for Khanna is that some colleagues may write off his policy ideas if they feel they have to watch their back politically around him.

"He's got a lot to offer; it's just that I think you undercut the effectiveness of the whole if we're sniping at our own people," Rep. Scott Peters said. "If you're setting up a circular firing squad, I think you will find that people are less willing to work with you."

Still, Khanna believes he has good relationships with his colleagues. And he said we need only look at how the last Democratic president rose up to see the inherent flaws in the incumbency-protection system.

"Don't you think Democrats should learn from the fact that the greatest talent of the modern era in Democratic politics did not have the support of incumbents?" Khanna said. "If we had this view that we should always rally around incumbency, how many Barack Obamas are we missing out on? How many Alexandria Ocasio-Cortezes are we missing out on?"