

## Working Families Party: What Donors Need to Know

The Working Families Party (WFP) was founded in New York in 1998 as a coalition of community groups and labor unions. It has since evolved into a multi-state organization fusing the work of traditional political parties with progressive organizing. WFP's mission is to build a multi-racial, working-class movement pushing for transformative change so that "our nation works for the many, not the few." It now has chapters in 11 states.

WFP advances its mission through grassroots organizing, political education and leadership training, and through primary and general elections, mainly at the state and local levels. By dramatically scaling this work in recent years, including a major voter mobilization effort in key states in 2020, WFP has emerged as one of the left's most powerful and dynamic organizations, compiling an impressive track record.

WFP is challenging old paradigms and powerful vested interests, so it faces both external challenges and questions about how the organization itself is structured. These include a complicated operating model and a set of expansive ambitions that may exceed its current capacity. Moreover, WFP's extensive work to finance and support progressive primary candidates, including those running against Democratic incumbents, may not appeal to donors who wish to focus their giving exclusively on defeating Republicans.

Blue Tent **recommends** WFP to donors and suggests that supporting its work should be a **high priority** as the 2022 and 2024 elections approach.

This brief is the result of independent research, conversations with a former employee, funders, and activists in two of the states in which the Working Families Party operates, and data provided by the party.

### What are its core strategies?

WFP works to build progressive electoral power and shape public policy by using the strategies of a movement-based political party. As campaign director Joe Dinkin explained, WFP defines a political party as "a group of people who work together under a shared ideology and common platform to make change, using the electoral system." WFP works to identify and support candidates to run for office, recruit and train activists, mobilize voters at election time, and then

turn campaign pledges into legislation. It has worked to develop a political brand that stands for a clear set of positions that carry weight with voters and politicians alike, whether it appears on the ballot or in a candidate endorsement. In addition, WFP has built its own voter file and related tech resources, a critical ingredient for electoral success. WFP also works in close collaboration with a range of affiliated grassroots groups.

In the face of the well-known obstacles facing third parties in the U.S., WFP adapts its strategies depending on where it is working and other circumstances – even as it maintains the basic mindset and approach of party building.

In states with fusion balloting – including New York, where WFP got its start – candidates can run under the banner of more than one political party, and voters can choose under which party line to select that candidate. WFP has used the lure of its ballot line, and with it, the voters who might not otherwise vote for a Democrat, to push Democratic candidates to adopt more progressive positions.

Beyond the use of fusion ballots, which is limited to a handful of states, WFP works within the traditional two-party system. Its strategies include mounting primary challenges to moderate/conservative Democrats; running “WFP Democrats” (who are members of both parties) against Republicans in general elections; running candidates in local, officially nonpartisan races; and making independent expenditures on behalf of its endorsed candidates. WFP also works to turn out progressive base voters at election time. WFP is clear that it isn’t a left-leaning arm of the Democratic Party, and in fact, has taken steps – like creating its own voter database – that allow it to operate as an independent organization.

WFP also engages in issue organizing and advocacy as part of its electoral model. In New Mexico, for example, WFP focused on electing candidates who support caps on payday lending and worked with activists outside of government to enact related legislation. In Connecticut, which has fusion balloting and where WFP has long wielded influence, it has helped enact paid sick leave, a higher minimum wage, and other progressive reforms. WFP doesn’t see its role as running issue campaigns; rather, it works to create the alignment of power both inside and outside government needed to enact change.

**What are the strengths and weaknesses of those strategies?**

WFP offers a powerful set of strategies for change. Through its electoral focus, it can help elect people who will work to advance progressive policy priorities. And thanks to its deep partnerships with grassroots organizations, as well as its own bench of activists, WFP can help mount the coordinated action and pressure campaigns needed to get legislation over the finish line. At the same time, WFP's ability to run candidates in Democratic primaries, endorse candidates, and turn out voters makes it a political force to be reckoned with in some places – which translates into influence that can be used to press progressive priorities.

In Pennsylvania, WFP “enhances our power,” said Ashleigh Strange, director of narrative and communications with [Pennsylvania Stands UP](#), a leading progressive organization in the state. “It enhances our ability to keep pressure on politicians, both good and bad.”

Kati Sipp, a progressive consultant and Pennsylvania state advisor for [Movement Voter Project](#) (MVP), said of WFP: “They definitely have an appreciation for and an ability to spin up direct action work as part of their organizing – which is frankly not a thing that the Democrats or individual Democratic candidates do very often.” Sipp added that WFP plays an important role “giving a voice to the folks who are going to vote with Democrats, but feel like the Democratic Party has left them behind,” while also doing “very smart work” in picking candidates to run in Pennsylvania’s state legislative races.

But WFP’s electoral model is not easy to operationalize across varied political environments and can involve hard choices about how to work with existing power players.

That’s true even in states with fusion balloting, as was demonstrated in 2018 when a number of unions left [New York WFP](#) because it endorsed Cynthia Nixon over the incumbent, Andrew Cuomo. (Other New York State and national level unions stuck with WFP, which today counts multiple unions among its coalition partners.)

“One of the things that makes them effective is also one of the things that make their work challenging, which is that they represent an extremely diverse range of people not just racially but in terms of class and ideology,” said Tom Perriello, who leads the Open Society Foundation’s U.S. work and is a former U.S. representative.

WFP seeks to build influence and wield political power in part through candidate endorsements, but this strategy also carries risks. The sheer number of WFP endorsements – 754 in the 2020 election cycle, including in areas where the party doesn't have state chapters – increases the possibility of questionable choices that rankle or baffle allies.

For example, two organizers in New York and Pennsylvania who spoke only on background questioned some of WFP's recent endorsement decisions. In New York, one said, the party seems to have lost the kind of "clear and focused goal" it had in 2018, saying that lately "they seem to be getting behind candidates that aren't that strong, and it's not super-clear what they think that gets them." A Pennsylvania leader with close ties to WFP questioned the party's early endorsement of Malcolm Kenyatta, a 31-year-old state representative, who came in a distant third during the recent U.S. Senate primary in that state.

WFP's investment in congressional primary campaigns, including against Democratic incumbents, also carries potential downsides. While WFP believes it is essential to elect more progressives in order to enact fundamental change, primary campaigns can be expensive and the results can be mixed (see below). In Blue Tent's [2022 donor guidance brief](#), we recommend that small donors avoid federal races altogether and prioritize defeating Republicans in critical state elections.

Another concern is whether WFP is attempting to build power in too many places at once and thus spreading itself thin. The party now has chapters in 11 states, including Texas and California, and yet its financial resources remain relatively modest (see below.) Attempting to establish a presence and exert influence across so broad a playing field runs the risk of diluting WFP's effectiveness compared to focusing resources more narrowly.

### **What is its track record of achieving its goals?**

In recent years, WFP has pursued multiple goals: electing its own candidates to office, influencing electoral outcomes through its endorsements and campaign work, and turning out progressive base voters during state, local and national elections. In addition, WFP has worked to recruit and train party activists and candidates, as well as build the information and tech infrastructure that it views as essential to scaling an independent party.

WFP's record in regard to the first two goals is difficult to assess, given how many elections it's been involved in over recent years and the varying degrees of support it provides for candidates. But WFP has had a number of notable successes in helping elect party-backed progressive candidates, particularly at the municipal level. For example, in the 2021 election cycle, WFP helped secure mayoral victories for Michelle Wu in Boston, Tishaura Jones in St. Louis, and Malik Evans in Rochester. In 2022, the party helped longtime WFP member Greg Casar win the primary for a congressional seat in Texas and backed Jamie McLeod Skinner's successful primary campaign in Oregon. It also helped Summer Lee, a progressive state representative, win a congressional primary in Pennsylvania. WFP's Joe Dinkin cited both Casar and Lee as examples of WFP's strategy of "building up local progressive leaders who then are prepared to run for higher office."

WFP has also suffered some significant losses in its work on congressional primaries. In the 2022 election cycle, as of July, its PAC had spent nearly \$1.7 million on losing primary candidates, including Jessica Cisneros in Texas.

WFP's role in primaries has also been notable in state legislative races. In New York, for example, WFP provided support and infrastructure in 2018 to help defeat six out of the eight members of that state's [Independent Democratic Conference](#), which since 2011 had been closely aligned with the state Republican Party. "If what you care about is electing progressive insurgent candidates and redefining what's possible at the state legislative level, I think the party has done far more than Justice Democrats (and) far more than the vast majority of progressive organizations," said Hayden Mora, a D.C.-based contract senior strategy consultant who served as WFP's deputy chief of staff from 2019 to 2021.

Regarding endorsements, Dinkin said that in 2020 WFP-endorsed candidates won 62% of their races, or 470 out of 754. (Figures for 2021 weren't available at this writing.) At the same time, Dinkin said, the win/loss rate isn't the metric the party uses to measure its own progress. Instead, he said, the party sees a strong challenge as a way to further build its base or meaningfully shift the dialogue during and between elections.

Candidates who received WFP backing attest that it can make a difference. In Washtenaw County, Michigan, for example, progressive Prosecuting Attorney Eli Savit told Blue Tent that WFP was "tremendously helpful" in his race, with support that included an early endorsement, connection to needed resources, and PAC spending on media buys near the end of the race.

Readers interested in looking more closely at WFP's claims of impact in recent elections through endorsements and primary campaigns should review the analyses the party published on Medium after the [2020](#) and [2021](#) elections.

WFP's record of mobilizing voters is easier to assess – and has been impressive. Most notably, according to an analysis by the Movement Cooperative, WFP mounted a powerful online volunteer operation in 2020 that reached millions of voters. It then went on to mount a strong voter turnout effort in the Georgia Senate runoffs.

According to the analysis, WFP made over 19 million attempts to contact 9 million unique voters in 2020, resulting in 630,000 conversations with 518,000 voters. These efforts were focused in key swing states, including Arizona, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Georgia. Of the 450,000 voters that WFP contacted that could be matched to the voter file, 84% voted, including 18,000 first-time voters. This turnout percentage was higher than that achieved by other national organizations engaged in similar work, according to the Movement Cooperative. WFP's voter mobilization work was particularly robust in Pennsylvania – a state Biden won by just 81,000 votes – where it made over 3 million attempted voter contacts.

WFP's expanding work in endorsing candidates, supporting primary challenges, and mobilizing progressive base voters has made it a more formidable political player in recent years. According to OSF's Tom Perriello, Working Families Party is “hitting above their weight while standing at the intersection of progressive movements and real-world politics.” OSF [included Working Families Party in its 2021](#) pledge of \$20 million to organizations working to strengthen U.S. democracy, and earlier this year, [presented one of its Justice Rising](#) Awards to WFP National Director Maurice Mitchell. “I can tell you that the extent to which Democratic leadership takes them seriously now is probably astronomically higher than a few years ago.”

### **Does it have strong leadership and governance?**

Yes. Working Families Party is led by its National Committee, which includes delegates from each of its state chapters, delegates from national member organizations including activist and union organizations, and at-large delegates.

On the staff level, WFP is headed by National Director Maurice Mitchell, a seasoned organizer who has worked on state senate campaigns and within activist organizations including the Movement

for Black Lives and the New York Civic Engagement Table. Mitchell leads a staff of organizers and activists with years, and in some cases, decades of experience organizing at the local/community, state and national levels across class and racial divisions. The staff also benefits from continuity. While a number of its members started working with WFP in 2019, two of them – Dinkin and Chief of Staff Mike Boland – have tenures of nearly two decades and more than two decades respectively.

**Is it committed to racial and gender equity both internally and in its strategies?**

Yes. WFP’s senior leadership team is majority women and majority people of color. The demographics of the group’s board – majority women and people of color—and senior staff reflect that commitment, as well.

Mora said that the change in leadership was spurred by the hiring of Maurice Mitchell as national director. Prior to Mitchell, and despite “deep aspirations” to be a multiracial, feminist organization, “in many ways, (WFP) mirrored a largely white, progressive” organization of people like himself. “I think there had been good faith efforts to take diversity and inclusion seriously in the organization before (Mitchell’s hiring). I think those were profoundly inadequate,” he said. Mitchell, on the other hand, is “remaking WFP” into an organization that reflects the people it organizes with and serves.

As a party aimed at representing a multiracial working class, WFP emphasizes its commitment to unions, providing Spanish-language materials and events, and ensuring accessibility for all. Those concrete, material efforts reflect a commitment to diversity and cultural competency that goes deeper than just rhetoric.

In 2019, WFP became the first U.S. political party with a unionized staff after voluntarily recognizing its staff’s drive to join Workers United NY. That year, the organization also created and hired a new senior staff position dedicated to “building and fostering an inclusive culture” through both diverse hiring practices and ongoing staff training in DEI.

**Does it collaborate well and is it respected by its peers?**

Yes. Our sources consistently praised WFP’s collaboration with their organizations, including citing the party’s generosity with its resources and a practice of hiring staff from among people



already working on the ground in respective states — rather than hiring and sending in people from outside of those communities.

### **Is its financial house in order?**

WFP has a national 501(c)(4) arm, the Working Families Organization, as well as a national PAC. In addition, several state branches have their own PACs. The c4 arm reported contributions of \$10.2 million in 2019, the last year for which tax records are available. The national PAC reported making \$1.9 million in independent expenditures in 2020, but had spent significantly more than that in the 2022 cycle as of July 2022: \$3.8 million.

Setting aside its independent expenditures for candidates, most of WFP's budget is spent on staff because they are doing the organizing and political education, running the campaign manager and candidate schools, overseeing direct candidate support and tech infrastructure, as well as making decisions on election spending.

WFP reports that it currently has roughly 30,000 individual donor/members. About 50% of its revenue comes from larger donors and 50% comes from “everything else,” including an estimated 20% from small donors, 15% from affiliated unions and community organizations, and a negligible percentage from fee for service.

### **Does it have clear and realistic plans for the future?**

WFP has a clear, long-term vision for building progressive electoral power using the vehicle of a political party, and has embraced a flexible set of strategies for advancing that vision within the strictures of America's two-party system. What's clear is that to achieve its goals and scale this approach across a large number of states and municipalities, WFP needs more resources.

In the short term, WFP's plans for 2022 are basically threefold: (1) strengthen Democratic control of the U.S. Senate, particularly through focused work in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin to replace Republican Senators while defending Democrats in vulnerable seats. (2) Build progressive power in the U.S. House including by challenging conservative or moderate Democrats. And (3) build progressive power in states and municipalities, including by flipping state legislative seats in places like Arizona, Pennsylvania and Michigan; and electing a Democratic governor in Georgia.



## Conclusion

Working Families Party is an ambitious, effective organization that uses a combination of electoral and nonelectoral action to achieve its goal of building a nation that “works for the many, not the few.” There are legitimate questions about whether the organization’s ambitions exceed its resources, and its eagerness to take on moderate or “corporate” Democrats may not appeal to donors whose primary goal is to defeat Republican candidates.

At the same time, though, WFP is a solid investment for donors whose primary wish is to back an organization with a track record of winning for progressive values. Blue Tent **recommends** WFP to donors and suggests that supporting the work of this important group should be a **high priority** as the 2022 and 2024 elections approach.

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*Disclosure: Blue Tent editor Jodi Jacobson also works as a Donor Advisor for Movement Voter Project.*

