

Movement Voter Project: What Donors Need to Know

The Movement Voter Project is an unusual organization because it doesn't really do anything itself. Instead, it acts as a funding conduit for hundreds of progressive organizations all over the country, moving over \$100 million in the 2020 cycle to groups doing on-the-ground organizing. These groups are often small and often focused on specific goals, like [fighting mass incarceration](#) in North Carolina or [boosting civic engagement](#) among Asian Americans in Michigan.

Why couldn't donors just give to these groups directly? Well, they can, but MVP's value proposition is that it has identified and vetted these organizations so donors don't have to do that legwork themselves. Donors can either use MVP as a resource to find specific groups or, more commonly, they can give to "funds" set up by MVP that distribute money to groups either based on geography or area of focus. For example, you can give to the [Texas Fund](#), which provides money to nine groups in that state, or the [Immigrant Power Fund](#), which supports 22 organizations working on immigration issues. MVP's PAC administers all of these funds, giving to organizations based on MVP's assessment of who needs the money most urgently at that moment. MVP also has arms that [distribute money exclusively](#) to c3s and c4s. MVP passes on 100 percent of this money to the groups and doesn't take a cut.

Giving through MVP offers donors an opportunity to invest in ways that can have lasting effects. If you give to a political candidate who loses, that money was in some sense wasted. If you give to a group that organizes, say, Latinos in Arizona, that group will work to get votes for Democrats at all levels of the ballot, including many state and local contests that a donor may not even have thought of. And even if all those candidates lose, your money has gone down building up a group that will stay active not just in future cycles but in the policy debates that happen between elections.

MVP is great for donors who want to build progressive power over the long run. Blue Tent **strongly** recommends giving through MVP's PAC and rates it a **high priority**. You can also donate to MVP itself to support its (relatively modest) operations, but MVP doesn't do a lot of fundraising for itself; Blue Tent **recommends** giving to MVP, but donors should make it a **low priority**.

What are its core strategies?

The group, founded in 2016, is the brainchild of Billy Wimsatt, a journalist and long-time organizer who has been working on versions of the idea that became MVP for decades. He was hired by Rock the Vote as the national talent scout in the 1990s to find people who were changing the world all over the country. When he realized there was no list of these people, he became obsessed with making one—starting with youth organizations in all 50 states.

MVP began as a Google doc listing of organizations, and though it has grown into an operation with dozens of staffers, the basic idea remains the same, which is to close what Wimsatt calls an “information gap” when it comes to these grassroots groups. For example, a donor in California or New York who wants to support people of color or young people getting out to vote in key Senate battlegrounds is likely to have a hard time deciding what groups to fund. Rich donors may have advisors who can make calls to groups, a time-consuming endeavor; ordinary small donors have no chance of knowing which groups are worthwhile.

Today, MVP employs “state advisors,” people who have extensive knowledge of their state’s progressive ecosystem, to find groups that are worth funding. On the other end of the transaction are MVP’s “donor advisors,” who help donors figure out ways for them to give that line up with their personal priorities. MVP works with hundreds of groups, which Wimsatt says is a result of wanting to fund a broad network of progressives. “We believe in supporting ecosystems of organizations who can be trusted messengers to every community in a state—every geography, and issue,” he told Blue Tent. “When people ask me, ‘what’s the best group to fund in X state?’ that’s like asking, ‘who’s the best baseball player to fund?’ You need a shortstop, a pitcher, three outfielders. We believe in funding a whole winning team.”

As MVP guides donors to groups they would have otherwise overlooked, it also pushes these groups to become more involved in electoral work and expand their voter registration and voter engagement programs. In addition, MVP provides capacity-building, offering groups training on things like how to use certain tech tools or how to conduct a search for a new executive director; when MVP-sponsored groups have questions, they can ask MVP and be connected with experts who can help them.

Much of what these groups do—voter registration drives, making sure people know about upcoming elections, getting people to the polls—is from an electoral perspective about boosting

turnout among the Democratic Party's base, particularly people of color. There's been an ongoing debate about how many resources Democrats should devote to increasing turnout among low-propensity voters and how many resources should go toward persuading swing voters; MVP is on the "turnout" side of that divide.

How does it spend money?

In some ways, MVP operates like a foundation. It asks its partner groups to submit budgets and goals for the year and will make grants based on MVP's understanding of who needs what amount of resources. But what sets MVP apart from the traditional foundation model is that it prides itself on moving money out the door as quickly as possible.

"Donors don't want their money to sit in a bank account for six months," said Causten Rodriguez-Wollerman, MVP's vice president of programs. "They want it to go to the field where it can have an impact immediately."

According to Rodriguez-Wollerman, MVP sees itself as doing fundraising for groups so they don't have to do it. Getting money into groups' pockets faster allows the groups to be more nimble; having money sooner is always better than having it later.

Many of MVP's funds target swing states like Wisconsin, Florida and Arizona, where many groups are active and where important elections are frequently up for grabs. But MVP works with groups in 49 states (the exception being Wyoming), including many red states. This speaks to MVP's mission of gradually building power for the progressive movement, not just parachuting in with money whenever a Senate seat is at stake.

What is its track record of achieving its goals?

The nature of long-term organizing work makes it hard to judge any individual group's impact since it may not show up in electoral victories for years. Additionally, MVP has only been around for a half-decade, which is not a long time horizon when you're talking about funding groups in currently red or purple-ish states like Texas, North Carolina and Georgia.

But in terms of moving money, a fairly obvious metric, MVP has been doing great. That \$100 million it raised in 2020 was three times its goal, and an impressive amount for a new organization.

For individual groups, this money and assistance can be valuable. Arizona Coalition for Change is a Black-led 501(c)(3) founded in 2016 by organizers Reginald and Cymone Bolding, focuses on strengthening the political power of people of color by registering voters, training young organizers, and working in coalition with other groups to strengthen bonds between different communities. It also has a connected 501(c)(4), Our Voice Our Vote Arizona, that advocates directly for progressive policies. In 2020, MVP's financial support allowed Coalition for Change to staff up temporarily from 13 employees to 50 as they registered nearly 10,000 voters.

MVP also provides training to Alexa-Rio Osaki, who serves as communications director for both groups. With help from an MVP-provided mentor, Osaki created an "encyclopedia" of best comms practices to help the rest of the staff handle public- and media-facing requests, an example of how deep in the weeds MVP's help can get. It also connected Coalition for Change with other organizations in states like Georgia that were doing similar work with similar populations.

Critically, Osaki said, MVP has provided resources to Coalition for Change without attaching any strings. "To have people that are just like, 'we respect you and know you know, what's best?'" Osaki told Blue Tent. "That is very rare in politics."

Does it have strong leadership and governance?

Some of MVP's fundraising success can be chalked up to Wimsatt's personal rapport with donors; in its earliest incarnation, MVP was an outgrowth of the work he was already doing. But it has staffed up over the past year as it makes the transition a lot of groups make from a small, seat-of-its-pants operation to a larger organization that is more permanent and professionally managed. Recent hires include Rodriguez-Wollerman as well as Chief of Staff Aditi Juneja, COO Lizz Gramling, and VP of Development Darrell Tucci, all of whom have experience in the nonprofit world.

Its roster of advisors is impressive, and it needs to be: A core element of MVP is that it has experts who can identify groups donors haven't heard of. That means that there is a lot of knowledge about many states floating around MVP.

What metrics and milestones does it use to measure its success?

You can't measure MVP's impact by looking at election outcomes; there's too much noise to determine whether its groups swung any individual contest. But MVP does have a lot of numbers

it can use to measure what it's doing. Money raised is one, but it also tracks how many groups it funded (636 in 2020), how many capacity-building requests it got (467), and also how many voter contacts its partner groups make (MVP says these have added up to more than 200 million since 2016).

How transparent is it about its spending, results and learning from its mistakes?

MVP doesn't lay out exactly how much it plans to give to individual groups, and its outlays might change based on shifting conditions. It also doesn't highlight that in some circumstances, it stops supporting groups, if, for instance, they stop responding to MVP or collapse due to leadership crises. The sprawling nature of MVP's funding makes it a bit of a black box.

But MVP's donor advisers are on hand to answer questions, and in some cases, will tell donors with specific goals to donate directly to a specific organization. MVP's communications with its donors is one of its strengths.

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

MVP's list of groups skews heavily toward those run by people of color and those that work to organize communities of color. This choice is driven both by a desire to give these communities a voice and by the reality that these communities tend to turn out at relatively low rates; making the electorate more diverse by driving up turnout among people of color is a core progressive priority. Given this, MVP is a great option for donors who are primarily concerned with racial and gender inequity. MVP also offers funds that allow donors to give to groups that focus on amplifying Black, Native, AAPI or LGBTQ+ voices.

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

MVP's focus on collaboration and its ability to move a lot of money without a lot of overhead makes it a valuable and respected partner.

As the experience of Arizona Coalition for Change demonstrates, MVP's relatively hands-off approach to partnerships makes it especially helpful for resource-strapped groups that know what they want to do, but don't have the means to do it quite yet. Rather than finding successful groups and trying to mold them into something else, MVP seeks groups doing good work and amplifies and supports them.

Does it have clear and realistic plans for the future?

MVP hasn't been around for long, but it has a clearly defined "lane," unlike some of the post-2016 progressive groups that focus more generally on elections. No one else is doing quite what MVP does.

So its future looks a lot like the present: more money to more groups, more capacity-building, and more donor organizing. A major test for MVP (and the movement as a whole) is whether donors will stay active with Donald Trump out of office, but so far, it appears that liberal donors are remaining active.

Conclusion

Many people will say that they want to "build long-term power" or "fund grassroots groups," but many of the groups building long-term power get next to no media attention and are invisible to donors, especially small donors who give to politicians.

MVP's signature contribution is that it has finally unlocked the riddle of how to give to those obscure grassroots groups. This is how your money can go toward building power beyond the next election cycle. MVP fills a valuable niche in the ecosystem and we **highly recommend it**.

Disclosure: Jodi Jacobson, Senior Director of Foundation Relations & Philanthropic Advisor at MVP, is a part-time consultant to Blue Tent. She had no role in the selection or evaluation process that resulted in this organizational brief and related blog post.

You may also want to check out:

- [National Domestic Workers Alliance and Care In Action: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Community Change: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Here's How to Build Power—and Win Elections—in the Midwest](#)
- [Organizing vs. Advocacy: A Primer for Donors](#)