

The States Project: What Donors Need to Know

Since 2016, a collection of strategists and organizations have been trying to push the Democratic Party and its funders to focus less on high-profile federal races and more on state legislative battles. These races get less media hype and generally feature unknown candidates, but state legislators wield an incredible – and growing – amount of power in the U.S. political system. There has been some (belated) attention paid to state legislatures after Republicans threatened to use their control of these chambers to [overturn the results](#) of the 2024 election; separately, the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* has made people more aware of state-level abortion laws, which have now become hugely important.

But investing in state legislative races isn't simple. While there are relatively few competitive U.S. House and Senate seats each cycle, there are hundreds of competitive state legislative seats up for grabs, each with its own set of characteristics and challenges. Trying to find a campaign to donate to at this level can seem like looking through a haystack for a needle. Donors therefore need a guide to determine which campaigns to support or else trust an organization to distribute money on their behalf.

The States Project provides an easy way for donors to do that, providing a trustworthy and convenient way for regular people to support the vital mission of building power in the states. Because of this, we **recommend** using States Project as a platform for giving and rate it a **high priority** for donors.

What are its core strategies?

The States Project has both donor-facing and candidate-facing strategies, both of which are based on the deep amount of research it does into state legislative races. For donors, it offers two ways to give. The first and simpler option is [Give Smart](#), a fund that distributes money among candidates around the country that TSP has judged to be most in need. (It funds eight candidates in Arizona and Michigan at the time of this writing.) This is an easy way to contribute to high-impact races without having to think too much about it. Donors who want a more hands-on approach can start a “Giving Circle,” which means gathering a group of people you know and using TSP’s resources to identify a state to focus on. In the process, the Giving Circle will learn about the state’s politics and candidates and get a deeper understanding of how state legislative races work – more effort than

clicking “donate” on ActBlue, but also potentially more rewarding. (In both cases, all of the money raised goes directly to campaigns. Donors can also give to the [PAC](#) that supports TSP.)

On the campaign side, TSP focuses on states that have Democratic legislatures that need to be defended (like Maine), are Republican-controlled but could flip (like Arizona), or those races that could break or prevent Republican supermajorities (like in North Carolina). Its research team then identifies key races, which is itself a complicated process given how many districts there are and how many candidates are involved. Finally, it conditions its support on campaigns embracing research-based tactics (TSP partners with the Analyst Institute for this purpose.) One example of this: In 2021, TSP encouraged candidates in Virginia to do door-knocking themselves because in-person canvassing by the candidate is an effective form of voter outreach at this level of politics. TSP did this by having the candidates compete to see who could knock on the most doors, with the winner getting the most money, and everyone who hit a certain benchmark getting a set amount of funds.

How does it spend money?

The States Project doesn’t run programs. Instead, it moves money to campaigns directly. There are several organizations that do this for state legislative campaigns, including the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee and Sister District, which we’ve written about before. National organizations not specifically focused on state legislatures like EMILY’s List and Swing Left endorse and funnel money to candidates as well.

What sets TSP apart is firstly the depth of its research. Though it focuses on a handful of states each cycle, it looks into all 50 states, so you can find information about, say, [Alaska](#) on its website. TSP has supported candidates in both purple and deeply red states, like [Mississippi](#).

Secondly, TSP doesn’t just give money to candidates in important districts, it pushes campaigns to adopt effective tactics. This is slightly different than giving candidates access to expert advice (which the DLCC and Run For Something do) but it has a similar effect of helping campaigns that may not be that experienced spend money efficiently.

What is its track record of achieving its goals?

The States Project has been involved in the 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 election cycles. While these were generally good years nationally for Democrats, at the state legislative level, the results were

mixed. TSP can point to many candidates it has backed who went on to win, but state legislatures where TSP (and many others) were focused like Arizona and Michigan remain in GOP control, even though the margin of defeat in many races was encouragingly close.

But it would be unfair to blame TSP for not single-handedly turning around Democratic performance in these races. Prior to 2016, a lack of focus on state legislatures was a chronic problem and part of TSP's goal is to energize donors and the party as a whole around state legislatures. That's a long-term project and it's too soon to judge TSP on that.

Does it have strong leadership and governance?

TSP is the flagship project of Future Now, a group founded in 2017 by former New York State Sen. Daniel Squadron, who still leads it. The group changed the name so its mission was more identifiable ("Future Now" is vague) but its focus and data-driven approach has remained constant.

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

The States Project highlights its wins on its website and the narrow margins by which these wins are often achieved. In [Arizona](#), for instance, TSP notes that "In 2020, two-time TSP endorsee Senator Christine Marsh flipped her seat by fewer than 500 votes – a margin of just 0.4% – almost the mirror image of 2018, when she ran for the seat and lost by fewer than 300 votes."

When elections are decided by so few ballots, of course, there's an element of near randomness that goes into the results. A better way to judge organizations that play on this field is to see how many of its endorsees come close to winning, and TSP's candidates very often get within 5%, speaking to its track record of identifying close races.

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

TSP is not the most transparent organization in the world. Part of this may be its association with the relatively secretive Analyst Institute, which does not make its research or even what it is working on publicly available. What exactly are these "efficient" campaign tactics that TSP encourages candidates to adopt? Well, if that were widely known, presumably Republicans could use them, as well. So there is some reason to keep the secret sauce part of TSP's formula a secret.

Still, TSP obviously makes its endorsements public, and its website has a wealth of information for anyone interested in state legislative races.

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

Many of the candidates TSP supports are politicians of color, LGBTQ people, women or immigrants, reflecting the diversity of the Democratic coalition. In its outward-facing communications, however, TSP doesn't emphasize the diversity of its endorsees or winners, which is in contrast to some organizations that foreground that information, or a group like EMILY's List that is explicitly devoted to electing female candidates.

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

TSP's work by nature is collaborative and it provides assistance both monetarily and in the form of pushing campaigns to adopt data-driven tactics. But it's also a little bit more top-down than bottom-up, again by the nature of its strategy. Instead of asking campaigns what they need, TSP tells them what the best path forward is. There's some merit in this approach – not all campaigns may know what they need – but it does distinguish TSP from some other organizations in this space.

Does it have clear and realistic plans for the future?

One of TSP's strengths is that it has always had a clear idea of what it wants to be and what it wants to do, and as it has hired staff and grown it has stayed true to that mission. There is a clear need for more organizations that focus on state legislatures, and TSP helps fill that need. To its credit, it hasn't allowed its mission to creep into other, more high-profile areas of politics, and it has stayed laser-focused on its core competency.

Conclusion

TSP is a great vehicle for donors because it offers a simple answer to the question, "where should I give money?" Its Give Smart fund is great for people who know that state legislatures are important but aren't sure how to help. And its Giving Circles are a useful option for donors who want to be more involved. If you give through TSP you can trust that your money will go to races where it is most needed. Blue Tent rates it a **high priority** that we **recommend** to donors.

DONATE

You may also want to check out:

- [The Fairness Project: What Donors Need To Know](#)
- [Giving to Elect Democrats and Build Progressive Power in 2022](#)
- [Swing Left: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Sister District Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)

