

## Winning the Battle for State Legislatures: Options for Donors

Bad news first: For years, the Democratic Party paid far too little attention to down-ballot races in state legislatures, allowing Republicans to amass an incredible amount of power. During the [Obama administration](#), Democrats lost 12 governorships and nearly 1,000 seats in state legislatures. After Election Night 2016, the GOP had 24 “trifectas,” i.e. control of both houses of a state’s legislature plus their governorships, while Democrats had just six. Today, Republicans have 23 trifectas in states that are home to 41% of Americans.

In an era when it’s very difficult for major federal legislation to pass a closely divided and often gridlocked U.S. Senate, many policy battles—including reproductive rights, guns, and minimum wage—are fought on the state level. As Republicans have steadily gained power in this arena, they’ve achieved a long string of legislative victories that affect the lives of tens of millions of Americans, often working in close concert with national organizations like ALEC, the NRA, and the State Policy Network.

The good news is that since 2016, Democrats have become more invested in state legislative races. The [Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee](#), the party arm in charge of these contests, has improved its leadership and funding, while many independent organizations have cropped up to support Democratic candidates on these levels as anti-Trump anger spurred new enthusiasm for local politics. There is still a lot of ground for Democrats to makeup—one operative described the party as being in “year five of a 40-year plan,” while the GOP was at “year 39.” But this gap also provides an opportunity for donors, as supporting underfunded state legislative races and other work focused on state legislatures is a good way to make their dollars count.

### The Opportunity

State legislatures are the foot soldiers of the United States’ complex, multi-tiered form of government. Many Americans can’t name their state representative or state senator, and the national news media rarely discusses the actions of state legislatures. Compared to congressional and statewide campaigns, state legislative campaigns are conducted on a shoestring budget, with a small staff, and are often decided by fewer than a thousand votes. Daniel Squadron, a New York state senator who co-founded The States Project, has [called legislatures](#) “the least glamorous, often most frustrating part of politics.”

The case for focusing on these races is that they're a relative bargain. Republicans and Democrats together spent **nearly \$2.1 billion** combined on nine of the ten most expensive Senate races ever in 2020. Sara Gideon, the Democratic Senate candidate in Maine, raised \$75 million, so much that she **couldn't spend it all**, and still lost badly to incumbent Susan Collins.

Compare that price tag to the cost of the 2017 special election in Washington State's 45th Legislative District. At stake was control of the closely divided state senate, and money poured in, with **\$9 million** being spent on the race. But when Democrat Manka Dhingra won, it gave Democrats a trifecta in state government, and they have since used that to pass voting rights legislation, force insurers to cover abortions, enact net neutrality, and ban employers from making workers sign agreements preventing them from discussing their salaries. In their second year in charge, Democrats passed more **progressive legislation**, including a public option for the state health insurance marketplace. The few million spent on Dhingra's race led to greater real-world impact than an equivalent amount spent on one of those money-flooded Senate races.

And many legislative campaigns operate on much smaller budgets. For these candidates, an extra \$100,000 is a big deal, money that could be used to hire an additional paid staffer, expand a field operation, or send a new wave of mailers. Since state legislative elections often are decided by hundreds of votes, a properly funded campaign may be the difference between a victory and defeat.

Democrats need to win at all levels in order to govern, but the strategy of pumping hundreds of millions into federal races, including races that were never going to be close, is problematic. The ultimate aim of political donations is to elect politicians who will make a positive difference in people's lives. There's so much that state legislatures (and governors and attorneys general) can do in terms of policy that we should arguably be thinking about these races as the most important battlegrounds in politics right now.

### **Strategies for Impact**

The path to winning legislative majorities in states is difficult thanks to Republican gerrymandering and, in some cases, the institutional weaknesses of state Democratic parties. The 2020 cycle produced **disappointing results** down ballot, proof that the new focus on state-level races doesn't guarantee results.

But donors who want to get involved with these races have a straightforward path to making a difference:

- **Donate directly to legislative candidates.** Most state legislative campaigns need money badly, and early donations are especially important as they allow campaigns to plan and budget for the future. The tricky thing here is that most donors don't know where to send their money as state legislative races are not covered much by the media and candidate names are unfamiliar. Fortunately, groups like the [DLCC](#), [Sister District Project](#), and [The States Project](#) identify key state races and priorities. With only a minimal amount of research, donors can figure out how to make high-impact gifts to candidates who need the money.
- **Donate to grassroots organizing groups.** In terms of bang for your buck, it's hard to beat contributing directly to key state legislative races as a strategy for change. But giving to organizing groups that can mobilize voters is another strategy. As we explain in our recent brief, [Giving to Elect Democrats and Build Progressive Power in 2022](#), such investments have a multiplier effect by supporting candidates up and down the ballot. For instance, successful organizing in Arizona this year could help flip the state's legislature, but also flip the governorship—and help maintain Democratic control of the U.S. Senate. Moreover, even in the face of electoral defeat, organizing groups can lay the foundations for future political success. The [Movement Voter Project's funds](#) offer an easy way for donors to support grassroots organizing groups in specific states.
- **Give to state parties.** State parties can provide valuable support up and down the ballot, but there's a catch: some of these parties are very effectively run, and some are notoriously incompetent. Unfortunately for donors, state parties are often a black box, and though people who work in Democratic politics generally know which are which, this information isn't public. Blue Tent will be offering recommendations of strong state parties to support in coming months.
- **Give for policy and strategy work.** While winning more state legislative seats and flipping chambers is imperative, there's also other important work that needs to be done to support Democratic officials in these bodies and to influence legislation. Donors can help fund such work by giving to several groups, including the State Innovation Exchange (see below).

## Options for Donors

Blue Tent has identified six organizations that are established in the state legislative space and have proven to be effective:

- **The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee.** The DLCC is the state-level version of the DCCC and DSCC, party committees that work to elect representatives and senators, respectively. But unlike those committees, the DLCC doesn't get involved in primaries and it has a permanent staff that doesn't turn over every cycle. DLCC President Jessica Post is widely respected and given credit for resurrecting an organization that in 2016, when she took over, was a shell of itself. In 2020, it had a budget of just over \$50 million, and while that cycle wasn't particularly kind to Democrats, it's simplistic to blame that downturn on the DLCC. ([Read our brief on the DLCC.](#))
- **Sister District Project.** SDP sifts through thousands of state legislative races to identify a limited number of Democratic candidates that donors and volunteers should prioritize. You can give directly to these candidates through SDP's site or you can support SDP itself and let it decide how to best deploy your donation. This organization is notable for its analytical approach: it conducts extensive analysis and study of its outreach techniques and publishes its results, and its metric-laden [post-election reports](#) are models of transparency. It also tries to be responsive to the needs of its candidates. Its latest project, the [Purple District Network](#), aims to connect lawmakers in swing areas in hopes that they can share campaign tactics and governing ideas. ([Read our brief on SDP.](#))
- **Forward Majority.** One of the several state-focused organizations founded in the wake of the 2016 disaster, Forward Majority's mission was to provide lower-level candidates with [sophisticated tactics](#) routinely used by congressional and Senate campaigns. This means, for example, deploying social media ads in the Virginia House of Delegates that helped Democrats win [several close races in 2017](#). Forward Majority has also shown a willingness to embrace cutting-edge campaign techniques, sending veterans out on "[deep canvassing](#)" missions in Arizona in an effort to change voters' minds in 2020. It has proven itself to be one of the largest of the groups in this space, deploying \$32 million in 2020.

- **The States Project.** Founded by former New York State lawmaker Daniel Squadron, The States Project aims to identify the most important state-level races and direct donors to get involved with them—including by forming “giving circles” with their friends. These circles learn and discuss the policies being debated in state capitols, the idea being that people shouldn’t just donate blindly, but rather understand something about the politics underlying these races.
- **Run For Something.** RFS isn’t just concerned with state-level politics but local offices as well—the smallest of the small-time races. It aims to recruit BIPOC candidates, LGBTQ candidates, young candidates, and women candidates, while also making more races contested around the country. It recruits thousands of candidates each cycle and connects them with resources to help them run—not just financial resources but advice and mentorship. RFS does a lot of the party-building functions that actual state parties are not always great at doing, in other words, and it is far more transparent than actual party organs, publishing long, very readable, summaries of election results and its future plans. (Here is its plan for 2021-22.)
- **State Innovation Exchange.** SIX performs an important function in the push to reshape state legislatures. It doesn’t help candidates get elected—as is evident, lots of groups are involved in that work—but provides guidance in the form of policy briefs, additional staff, and connections with other state legislators. This is important because many lawmakers don’t have the policy or political experience that can help them navigate their new jobs; they also don’t make much money, so can’t devote themselves to the legislature as a full-time job. SIX is dedicated to making sure that when Democrats do win power in the states, they can use it to make change.

## Conclusion

Thanks to a record surge in giving, Democratic candidates in federal races are better funded than ever before. High-profile governor’s races also attract large sums of money. By contrast, many state legislative campaigns continue to be low-budget affairs—offering a chance for small to medium donors to give in ways that can make a difference. This potential for impact, along with the large role that state government plays in the lives of Americans, are strong reasons to prioritize giving in this area.

**You may also want to check out:**

- [The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Giving to Elect Democrats and Build Progressive Power in 2022](#)
- [Sister District Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Movement Voter Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)

