

## Building Progressive Power and Winning Elections in Michigan: Options for Donors

Michigan is a must-win state for Democrats in 2022 and 2024 and for the survival of democracy in the United States writ large. The good news: Democrats can win in Michigan this year and in 2024. The Michigan electorate is closely divided politically – and, thanks to newly drawn districts, there’s a solid chance to flip at least one chamber of the state’s legislature and possibly pick up a U.S. House seat, in addition to reelecting key statewide Democratic office holders, including Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. The bad news: Michigan is also on the precipice of a takeover by an extremist right-wing actively using minority rule to suppress the will of the people and undermine democracy.

The *New Republic* recently ranked Michigan as one of six states where, if left unchecked, the increasingly extremist Republican party can potentially steal the 2024 presidential race – and that was before the state’s GOP nominated hardcore, Big-Lie-promoting MAGA supporters for attorney general and secretary of state, and before recent reports about the “army” of volunteers the GOP is recruiting to disrupt the state’s elections.

In the face of these very real threats, it’s absolutely vital to elect or reelect key statewide Democrats, including the governor, secretary of state, attorney general, and state supreme court candidates. Also likely on the ballot this year is an important ballot initiative, Promote the Vote, which would enshrine voting rights in the state’s constitution.

Donors should invest in Michigan with the goal of both winning this year’s high-stakes election contests and building progressive power over the long term. New resources are urgently needed to build a foundation of deep grassroots organizing in both rural and urban areas, working across geographic and racial barriers that have for decades been used to keep residents of Michigan from coalescing across areas of common concern.

This brief contains suggestions for how donors can give money to achieve all of these goals. It is based on independent research and interviews with more than 20 experts including state lawmakers; county and state party officials; political professionals; and members of the activist and funding communities.

### What's at Stake

For more than two decades, Michigan was part of the “Blue Wall” that helped Democrats win presidential elections. In recent years, though, it's become a swing state that Donald Trump narrowly won in 2016 and that Joe Biden won back in 2020 by less than three points. While Democrats currently control the three top statewide offices – governor, attorney general, and secretary of state – Republicans have controlled the Michigan State Senate for more than 30 years and also the House of Representatives for most of this same period.

The struggle by Democrats to do better in Michigan reflects several factors. A majority of the eligible electorate are non-college white voters, including many who live in small towns and rural areas, a demographic that Democrats have had challenges connecting with for decades. (Seventy percent of Michigan's population identifies as white.) Republican gerrymandering and voter suppression efforts, meanwhile, have served to amplify GOP power in the state – on top of the right's effective use of wedge issues and disinformation to divide working-class voters.

But the weak position of Democrats in Michigan also reflects a lack of sustained attention by the national Democratic Party and progressive donors. Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign largely neglected Michigan in 2016, making possible Trump's victory by just 10,000 votes. While the state is home to a number of progressive organizing groups, these organizations tend to be small and poorly funded, receiving little support from national funders. Michigan lacks the kind of strong state-wide organizing groups that exist in other swing states, such as Georgia and Arizona.

The Michigan Democratic Party is also weak and underfunded. In 2020, [Trump increased his share of the vote](#) in many of Michigan's rural areas, but Democrats still don't seem to be meeting the challenge. As of the end of June, the state Democratic Party said it expected to have offices in only roughly 20 of the state's 83 counties. Rural activists say that just like on the national level, Michigan's Democratic Party neglects rural areas. A party official whose county includes a college town and rural areas said the state party isn't proactive about providing county parties with urgently needed tools. Those rural activists need all the help they can get in an election year requiring all hands on deck.

## Electoral Goals in 2022 and Beyond

With the right investments, Democrats can make significant gains in Michigan. According to an [analysis](#) by Way to Win, Democrats have the potential to expand their base in Michigan by nearly 1 million voters and build a much stronger multiracial coalition in the state. The keys to achieving this success include mobilizing Black, Latino, and young voters to register and turn out at higher rates, as well as doing better with white voters. Below, we discuss ways that donors can support this critical work now and over the long term.

The most immediate priority for donors is to ensure that Democratic candidates running for statewide, legislative, and judicial offices have all the money they need to compete in this year's must-win election. With Republicans in control of the state legislature, Gov. Whitmer's veto power is a critical line of defense against GOP extremism in Michigan. In addition to protecting voting rights, Whitmer has vetoed attacks on abortion access; cuts in [income](#) and gas taxes that would cost the state critically needed revenue; a bill to spend \$16 million on medically inaccurate and often coercive "[abortion alternatives](#)," and a bill to require county clerks to process permits for concealed carry of firearms even [during declared states of emergency](#).

Attorney General Dana Nessel and Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson also occupy crucially important offices. As the state's top law enforcement officer, Nessel is playing a key role in defending abortion rights and could be a pivotal player in working to stop Republican efforts to subvert the 2024 presidential election. Reelecting Benson is essential to defending the integrity of the state's election administration in the face of the Michigan GOP's efforts to purge [county elections officials](#) and replace them with conspiracy theorists who promise to refuse to certify election results in which a Democrat wins. (See Blue Tent's recommendations for [Nessel](#) and [Benson](#).)

Beyond securing abortion rights and safeguarding the electoral system, the reelection of Whitmer and other statewide Democrats, combined with electing more Democrats to serve in the state House and the state Senate, would make it easier for progressives to push for more action on a host of issues.

Organizers across the state underscore that working-class and low-income voters in both rural and urban areas support expanding access to healthcare, child care, transportation, and quality education, to name a few. There is also majority support for efforts to protect voting rights and

end gerrymandering, as well as abortion access. Good organizing can build on this base of support to win elections, enact change, and improve people's lives.

### **Recommendations for Donors**

Blue Tent recommends that donors provide both urgent, immediate support to win critical electoral contests in Michigan this year and, at the same time, give to help build long-term progressive power in the state and sustain that funding over multiple election cycles. We expand on these recommendations below.

#### **1. Support Democratic Candidates in Key Races**

It's essential to reelect Democrats to key state-wide offices this fall, as discussed above. Blue Tent especially recommends that donors support the campaigns of Attorney General Dana Nessel and Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson since these lesser-known officials don't have the fundraising advantages of an incumbent governor like Gretchen Whitmer. Blue Tent also suggests [giving to the state Democratic Party's recommended candidates](#) for state Supreme Court: incumbent Justice Richard Bernstein and current Democratic state Rep. Kyra Harris Bolden. As we explain in a [recent brief](#), state supreme courts now wield growing power across the nation, including in Michigan, where Democrats now hold a 4-3 edge in a court that could decide important cases on voting rights, abortion, and other issues.

Investments to flip the state senate also are urgently needed. Democrats need to pick up three seats to tie the chamber, and four to gain a majority. Candidates who need money now to help get them over the finish line in November include [State Rep. Darrin Camilleri](#), who is running for an open seat in the 4th district which leans Democratic; [incumbent Rep. Padma Kuppa](#), running for an open seat in the 9th district; and [Rep. David LaGrand](#), who is running for an open seat in the 30th. Each of these districts has shifted Democratic in the last several cycles.

Michigan's state House may also be in play in November, although most analyses are less optimistic about Democrats taking control. However, Democrats do have a chance to win a congressional seat in Michigan – the 3rd District, featuring a rematch between former Obama administration DOJ official [Hillary Scholten](#) and incumbent Peter Meijer. Scholten lost to Meijer by just six points in 2020. The new district, which includes Muskegon and other “bluer” areas, will be more competitive.

## 2. Support Voting Rights and Abortion Access

Donors should also support a crucial ballot initiative campaign, Promote the Vote, to enshrine voting rights in the state Constitution reforms including the right to vote free of harassment, nine days of early voting, and making it easier for voters to prove or attest to their identity at the polls.

The Promote the Vote coalition has a proven track record after winning a 2018 ballot drive to pass [sweeping reforms for voter access](#). For this year's effort, they are working with Voters Not Politicians, the organization behind 2018's successful state constitutional amendment establishing a nonpartisan commission to end the state's gerrymandered voting districts. An initiative to amend the state constitution to protect abortion and reproductive rights is also likely to be on the ballot in November after organizers turned in a [record-breaking number of signatures](#). In addition to protecting Michiganders' abortion access and potentially driving voter turnout, the [Reproductive Freedom for All](#) initiative has the potential to establish a powerful precedent for [other states with citizen initiatives](#) and referenda.

## 3. Support Grassroots Organizing and Voter Mobilization Efforts

Democrats have the potential to mobilize large numbers of new base voters in Michigan, making gains that could build a strong multiracial majority coalition and help secure electoral victories for years to come. While the organizing required to achieve such progress is labor-intensive and time-consuming, investing in such work is a bargain for donors compared to the expensive advertising buys and other costs of competitive political campaigns. Moreover, as Blue Tent explains in our [2022 donor guidance brief](#), supporting grassroots organizing work can both help a range of Democratic candidates up and down the ballot and advance progressive policy priorities year-round. Donors have a number of options for supporting grassroots organizing work in Michigan:

[Michigan Voices](#), a coalition of more than 80 organizations across the state, builds power among Black and other residents of color, and works on environmental, housing, education justice, and immigrant justice.

[We The People Michigan](#), founded in 2017, works from Detroit to the Upper Peninsula to organize across the divides of segregation, geography, and race.

[Movement Voter Project](#), a national funding intermediary, supports organizing and voter mobilization work in Michigan through its [Michigan Fund](#).

**Rural Democracy Initiative** is a national funding intermediary that supports organizing work in rural areas and small towns. Michigan, where Democrats have been losing rural voters by growing margins, is among the top targets of its grantmaking in 2022 and beyond.

**Other State Groups.** For donors who wish to explore additional options for supporting progressive work in Michigan, we recommend taking a closer look at the following groups: **Michigan United** works in several areas of the state on issues including immigration, workers' rights, and environmental justice. **Center for Change** works across the northern lower and upper peninsulas to advocate for living wages, full funding for schools, and LGBTQIA civil rights. **APIA Vote Michigan** focuses on catalyzing the political voice of Asian & Pacific Islander Americans. **GLPA-LEAD** is building a bench of trained candidates and campaign staff alike. **Detroit Action** organizes by and with BIPOC workers throughout the metro Detroit region through year-round civic engagement.

### **Conclusion**

Democrats are highly electable in Michigan and, with robust donor support, Democratic candidates have a good chance of winning this fall up and down the ballot. Longer term, donors must help build a broader, more enduring multiracial coalition of voters that can secure Democratic electoral victories and progressive policy gains well into the future. Michigan may not be a hotbed of progressivism, but the state does have real progressive energy. With dedicated effort and dedicated donor support, there's a good chance that the state will be able to overcome the current crop of GOP extremists, protect democracy, and lay the groundwork for real progressive change.

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

- [Building Latino Power: Strategies and Options for Donors](#)
- [Winning the Battle for State Legislatures: Options for Donors](#)
- [Winning Secretary of State Races: Options for Democratic Donors](#)
- [Winning State Attorney General Races: Options for Democratic Donors](#)