

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

Florida is—electorally—one of the most pivotal and most troubling states in the country. With 22 million people, the longtime “swing state” is critical for winning the Electoral College and home to some of the most ambitious, radical, and openly authoritarian members of the GOP. Over the last couple of years, the Florida GOP has targeted vulnerable communities with a flood of anti-LGBTQ, anti-choice, anti-education and voting restrictions bills. Gov. Ron DeSantis rejected public health data and allowed COVID to spread unabated. And both he and his counterparts in the legislature regularly spread dangerous misinformation. With their actions, Florida’s Republicans are signaling what they want the rest of the country to look like.

The state’s electorate is made up of similar numbers of registered Republicans and Democrats. After years of gerrymandering and voter suppression, Republicans end up winning most elections only by razor-thin margins. Yet, despite the existential role Florida plays in the future of this country, the Democratic party and leading donors routinely neglect the state until just before each presidential election. As a result, progressive organizations are under-resourced and unable to realize the potential suggested by Florida’s demographics, particularly among its many Black and Latino communities, which make up 17 percent and 26 percent of Floridians respectively. These realities present a stark choice: Democratic donors must invest deeply—and beyond any single election cycle—in progressive organizing across Florida or watch the rise of an increasingly repressive GOP.

This brief offers recommendations on where donors should invest now—both to maximize Democratic performance in Florida in the 2022 election cycle and to build the power needed to change the state’s current trajectory. It is based on interviews with numerous Florida Democratic Party leaders, former Democratic candidates, progressive organizers and advocates, and progressive donor advisors.

### What's at Stake

The stakes of Florida’s 2022 elections can’t be overstated. Recent polling [suggests](#) Democrats face headwinds going into the elections, in part because they’ve failed to invest in organizing and mobilizing people over the longer term.

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis is running for reelection and, as of this writing, has amassed [a war chest of at least \\$69 million and counting](#). DeSantis would be a formidable 2024 presidential candidate and a dangerous president. It's clear he'd like not only to emulate but exceed former President Trump's disregard for fundamental rights and democratic norms. Former governor Charlie Crist is currently leading the Democratic gubernatorial primary, followed by Agricultural Commissioner Nikki Fried and state Senator Annette Taddeo. It is essential to elect a Democrat as governor of Florida.

To keep control of the House, Democrats also need to minimize losses across 28 Congressional races in the state. Given the GOP's voter suppression efforts, winning these Congressional races will take strategic and sustained investments in grassroots organizing, particularly in communities of color.

Like most races in Florida, Senate elections are decided by slim margins and are critical to the country writ large. In 2016, Republican Sen. Marco Rubio won reelection with 52 percent of the vote. Republican Rick Scott won in 2018 by just over 50 percent of the vote—a margin of roughly 10,000 out of 8 million votes cast. Now, former Orlando police chief and sitting Rep. Val Demings (D-FL) is challenging Rubio in what is clearly a competitive race. To make progress on critical national policy, Democrats must expand the Senate majority.

Meanwhile, the Florida GOP passed several anti-democratic laws that threaten access to the ballot and rob Democratic voters of their rights. In 2021, amidst Trump's false claims about voter fraud, the legislature [passed multiple voting restrictions](#). This year, the Republican legislature has gone farther, approving DeSantis' plans for a special police force and office to investigate purported election fraud. It's a blatant attempt to intimidate potential voters and even cast doubt on or overturn the 2024 Florida presidential election results, increasing the threat to American democracy.

### **Electoral Goals in 2022 and Beyond**

The most critical goals in 2022 are to defeat DeSantis in the gubernatorial race, win a Senate seat, and minimize losses in congressional races. Democrats must also contest Republican control of the offices of secretary of state and attorney general, since whoever wins these positions may play a critical role in the 2024 election. Another major goal is increasing Democratic representation in the state senate. While winning that chamber is unlikely this year, turning out voters for state

senate races in 2022 will build momentum toward this goal over the next few cycles. Investing in building this kind of momentum is critical to winning races everywhere. The most viable targets for flipping state senate seats in 2022 are in the Miami and Orlando areas.

Donors should invest in Florida now both to maximize Democratic performance in this year's election and to build progressive power to achieve future wins. In the short run, progressive groups in the state urgently need more resources for voter registration and mobilization drives to maximize turnout among base voters this fall. Progressive groups also urgently need the resources for sophisticated efforts to combat disinformation, and equally sophisticated efforts to create clear, targeted messaging for a diverse array of communities in the state. In addition, it's essential that Democratic candidates for office have the resources they need to compete this year.

These investments should be made as part of a larger, long-term push to strengthen progressive organizing capacity across the state to achieve gains in 2022, 2024 and beyond. Ultimately, the priorities for progressive groups are simple—build grassroots power and use it to elect the right candidates, then hold them accountable.

### **Recommendations for Donors**

When and where is money most needed? Florida's primaries are in August, but campaign victories are not realized overnight. Donors should prioritize supporting progressive organizations that will mobilize voters no matter who wins a primary. Early money invested in this work will go much farther than last-minute donations.

Blue Tent recommends that donors give to progressive nonprofits in Florida crafting long-term electoral strategies, registering voters, developing messaging, and mobilizing Black and Latino communities ahead of the election. Early investment is especially critical, given the size of the state and diversity of Florida's electorate. In 2021, the Florida legislature passed laws that make it more complicated to register voters, so it's important to support groups with deep experience and community ties.

Donations to 501(c)(4) funds and PACs go farthest during an election year, and c4 funds, which allow for partisan communication, are especially critical for communicating with Florida's Latino voters, who are extremely diverse and require specific, targeted partisan messaging. If a donor is only interested in giving c3 funds, Blue Tent recommends giving right away, as those funds are

most useful for early voter registration drives, though they are also important to long-term organizational capacity-building. More specifically, we recommend the following:

### **Invest in Registration and Mobilization**

If progressive groups can register and mobilize voters in key Florida counties, especially those with large Black and Latino communities, Democrats will not only have a fighting chance in 2022, they will be positioned to win Florida in 2024 and in future election cycles. According to [data](#) from Way to Win, Democrats have the potential to expand their base by 1.7 million voters—in a state that Trump won by 371,000 votes. But achieving that potential requires large and ongoing investments.

Blue Tent recommends that donors support key organizations engaged in voter registration and mobilization programs in Florida, and provide support as early as possible. These groups are working in the targeted counties where Democrats must turn out voters to win statewide and have the most potential to win swing state Senate and congressional races. Their efforts are especially critical since, according to numerous sources interviewed for this brief, the Florida Democratic Party is weak and disorganized. In the absence of a strong statewide party, progressive donors who want to win in Florida should support the following groups:

- **Florida Rising**, a progressive group organizing in Black and Latino communities, aims to register 100,000 voters in 2022. [Florida Rising](#) has offices in Orlando and Miami, long-established practices, deep community ties in neighborhoods where it works, and knowledgeable leadership. Florida Rising runs a c3, c4, and three political action committees that focus on state and federal elections and ballot initiative campaigns. Blue Tent strongly recommends donors give to Florida Rising's c4 or state political action committee, New Florida Vision PAC, so that Florida Rising can strategically communicate with Latino voters in particular. Donors can also give c3 donations to support the voter registration drive; c3 funds are exponentially more useful the sooner they come in.
- **Poder Latinx** is a civic and social justice organization with a national office and footprint in multiple states. Its aim is to build power within Latino communities. [Poder Latinx Florida](#) registers Latino voters in Central Florida, where Democrats saw a surge of turnout by Latinos in 2020. Blue Tent recommends donors give to Poder Latinx's (c)4 fund.

- **Dream Defenders** organizes among young voters and has seven chapters at colleges and universities across Florida. Multiple sources lamented insufficient investment in local youth voter registration efforts—roughly 20% of the electorate of voting age in Florida is between the ages of 18 and 29—and said that [Dream Defenders](#) is the best option for registering and mobilizing young Floridians. Dream Defenders has a c4 and we recommend giving there, but it’s also a good choice for donors only interested in giving c3 donations.
- **Faith in Florida** is a coalition of nonpartisan faith congregations opposed to systemic oppression, gun violence, and poverty. The group organizes Souls to the Polls-style voter mobilization efforts across the state, and multiple sources for this brief recommended that donors giving c3 donations support [Faith in Florida](#) because of its solid track record.
- **Equality Florida**, a civil rights organization dedicated to securing full rights for Florida’s LGBTQ community, runs a political action committee supporting candidates ahead of elections. [Equality Florida](#) does not spend its c3 funds on voter registration and many of its c4 funds are used during the legislative session, so donors interested in elections should give to the Equality Florida Action PAC, which will be supporting progressive candidates for state legislature among other campaigns.
- Donors who prefer to make a single donation to fund key groups in Florida should give through the **Movement Voter Project**, which supports organizing work in vulnerable communities throughout Florida, including many of the groups listed above. If you prefer “one-stop” shopping, you can donate through MVP or its c4 arm, the Movement Voter Fund, and designate your funds for Florida. Blue Tent wrote about [MVP here](#).

## 2. Invest in Research and Communications

Democrats and progressives must place a high priority on funding evidence-based communications tailored to specific communities. Many sources told Blue Tent that the Florida Democratic Party has not developed effective strategies nor crafted effective messages and that progressive coalitions are working to fill the gaps but lack sufficient resources.

This work is urgent: In one critical example, Republicans are spreading misinformation on Spanish-language radio. Democrats need to counter that misinformation in this election cycle and create stronger bonds with critical constituencies ahead of 2024. The 2020 election showed that

increasing Latino support for Democratic candidates is not inevitable but possible. That year, in Miami-Dade, Latino support for Trump increased significantly but in Orlando and Tampa Latinos turned out for Democrats in higher numbers than in previous years.

Blue Tent recommends supporting **Florida Watch**, a communications and research organization founded in 2020, which works closely with many other progressive organizations across the state. **Florida Watch** conducts polling and research that it shares with other progressive organizations so they can tailor their messaging to specific audiences. This outfit fills a major gap and plays an important role that will grow in importance as the election season progresses. Blue Tent recommends donors support its work.

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

While Blue Tent recommends that donors prioritize investments in progressive organizing capacity and communications in Florida, it is also essential that key Democratic candidates have the resources to compete. Blue Tent recommends giving to candidates who meet three criteria: They are running in important races; have a strong chance to win; and need money. We will have a set of specific recommendations of Florida candidates to support after primaries are held in August.

### **4. Support Pro-Democracy Ballot Initiatives**

Democrats will hit a ceiling in Florida until gerrymandering and state voting policies are addressed, so another key strategy for impact is passing three ballot initiatives intended to reset a playing field created by Florida Republicans to their own advantage. The three initiatives set for 2024 include automatic voter registration, same-day voter registration, and creation of an independent redistricting committee. If enacted, these proposals could address some of the largest structural barriers to building progressive power in the state; they would change the game by expanding the electorate and making districts fairer and more representative. Florida voters have recently supported other progressive ballot initiatives, including restoring voting rights to some previously incarcerated Floridians and increasing the minimum wage.

Gathering signatures to get amendments on the ballot is a multimillion-dollar proposition, so progressives need money now. Florida organizers suggest that donors supporting voter registration in 2022 consider a matching donation toward the 2024 ballot initiative effort and support the following:

**The Florida Alliance**, a consortium of progressive donors, is organizing preliminary research and signature gathering for the effort to put all three measures on the 2024 ballot. Donations can be directed to the Florida Alliance's c4 Florida Advancement Project, which will be making the ballot initiatives one of its top priorities.

**Florida Rising** runs Family Always Comes First INC., a PAC which will fund work toward the ballot initiatives to expand voting registration.

### **Conclusion**

Achieving electoral gains in Florida is a key to Democrats' ability to maintain federal power and combat rising authoritarianism in 2022 and beyond. Under DeSantis, the state has become a testing ground for increasingly anti-democratic rhetoric and legislation, including a new elections police force. Thwarting that agenda is critical to preserving our democracy, while winning Florida in 2024 would likely cement a Democratic victory in the presidential election. Donors can fortify Florida Democrats and progressives by supporting organizations that are registering and mobilizing voters, communicating with Floridians, and putting together ballot initiatives that will make the state's elections fairer and more representative.

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

- [It Only Looks Red: How Florida Rising is Fighting Back](#)
- [Winning the Battle for State Legislatures: Options for Donors](#)
- [Four Reasons That Val Demings is Raising So Much Money So Early](#)
- [Building Progressive Power and Winning Elections in the South: Options for Donors](#)