

Building Progressive Power and Winning Elections in the South: Options for Donors

After decades firmly in the grip of the GOP, the South is showing signs of change—President Joe Biden’s win in 2020 in Georgia, and the state’s subsequent electing of two Democratic Senators could be a bellwether for the political transformation of a once-solidly red region.

The South presents Democrats and progressives with tantalizing possibilities. Demographic change is a big reason why, as Republicans struggle to connect with those groups growing fastest across the region—Latinos, Asian-Americans, and college-educated professionals—and as Blacks, still a very large share of voters in many states, participate at higher rates. But a second reason Democrats have new opportunities in the South is because of the many organizations around the region that are engaged in grassroots organizing work to engage and mobilize new voters.

This brief will show how donors at all levels can help accelerate the positive political change underway in the South. Our main recommendation is that donors provide far greater support to key grassroots organizations spearheading change, while giving more carefully to candidates and electoral groups to ensure that their donations have the greatest impact.

Despite the opportunities in the South for progressives, it will be a long road. Blue Tent found that though attitudes are shifting to the left across the region, expecting an immediate shift to the blue side of the ledger is not very realistic. Change will come slowly, at least at first, and setbacks are likely—as we saw recently in Virginia. Along with the organizers and political leaders they support, donors must embrace a patient approach to investing in this region, guided by the conviction that it will lead to progressive victories.

The Opportunity

The upswell in progressive energy across the South has been decades in the making. Organizers around the traditionally deep-red region have been fighting to make this change a reality. Georgia is a prime example. During the 2020 general election and the 2021 special Senate elections in the state, the nation saw the gains from backing the work of Stacey Abrams and other organizers in Georgia when Democrats prevailed in both contests. But flipping Georgia blue didn’t happen in one election cycle. It took a decade.



That's the kind of commitment that's needed across the South to change the political equation in the region. Continuing to make steady gains across these states may hold the key to transforming U.S. politics writ large.

"I think most of us who do work in the South have an analysis that while the South is seen as a bastion of conservatism, it could actually be a bastion of a progressive movement," New Virginia Majority co-founder Jon Liss told Blue Tent. "The South could be a solid South for racial equity, a solid South for income distribution that's fair and equitable, for healthcare, etc."

Steve Phillips, a progressive writer and donor who focuses on the South, agrees with that vision. Biden's election, Phillips [wrote](#) in November 2020, could "herald the transition to a new era where the cornerstone of Democratic politics rests in the rapidly racially diversifying states of the South and Southwest instead of in the much more monochromatic Midwest."

The two most important factors driving political change in the South are demographic change and a dramatic expansion of progressive work across the region.

With a population of roughly 119 million people, the South is a major prize for Democrats and a necessary bulwark for Republicans. But the demography of the region is starting to shift in terms more favorable to moving states purple—or even blue. Southerners are trending younger, and more diverse: 23.5% of the region is 17 or younger; and 41.8% of the population is non-white.

Progressive organizers across the South have been working to capitalize on these changes, building up an increasingly powerful infrastructure of groups working to advance change and win elections. Examples include the Texas Organizing Project, the New Georgia Project, Florida Rising, New Virginia Majority, the Carolina Federation, and Poder Latinx. Many other progressive groups in the region are doing work that is centered on such issues as climate change, criminal justice reform, immigrant rights, wages, and reproductive rights.

According to an [analysis](#) by Way to Win, grassroots organizing in the South had a significant impact on voter turnout in 2020. For example, Texas Organizing Project reached 126,000 voters (whose participation was confirmed by the voter files), 13,700 of whom were first-time voters; the New Georgia Project reached 150,000 voters, 28,000 of whom were first-time voters; and the group Florida for All reached a 550,000 eventual voters, 40,400 of whom were first-time voters.

Other groups in these same states and elsewhere, such as North Carolina and Virginia, also contacted and helped turn out tens of thousands of voters—including many who were not targeted by the Biden campaign.

Way to Win’s analysis also found that there is the potential to mobilize many more base Democratic voters in key swing states, including nearly 9 million voters in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.

Strategies for Impact

Donors at all levels can help build stronger progressive infrastructure across the South by investing in key organizations working in the region. Nearly all are under-resourced and need to expand their base of supporters in order to expand their operations and impact. North Carolina labor activist Bryan Conlon told Blue Tent that smaller groups in his state and elsewhere desperately need the kind of cash flow that is hard to come by at the local level. “There are a lot of extremely talented, extremely skilled organizers who are just barely scraping by,” Conlon said.

Here are six giving strategies donors should consider to advance progressive change in the South and help Democrats win elections.

- **Focus on Five States.** While hopeful political trends can be seen in many places in the South, we recommend that through 2024 donors focus attention on five states where progressives and Democrats have the most momentum: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia.
- **Prioritize Year-Round Organizing.** Many of the gains that Democrats have made in recent elections in the South are the result of long-term work to engage and organize voters, especially new voters from communities of color. Data from Way to Win and other sources show that there remains enormous potential to mobilize additional new voters or infrequent voters. This requires labor-intensive and expensive work.
- **Given to State and Local Progressive Groups.** Strong progressive organizations are active in all five key states. Donors should prioritize groups with a proven track record of engaging in year-round organizing and voter mobilization work.

- **Give to Intermediaries that Fund in the South.** Donors looking to streamline their giving to support organizing and voter mobilization in the South can give to several national funding intermediaries that regrant to groups in the region.
- **Give to National Groups Working in the South.** A growing number of national progressive organizations are working in the South or have state affiliates in the region.
- **Carefully Target Campaign Giving.** Small to medium donors can play an important role in helping win key elections in the South. But they should only give to candidates who meet three criteria: they are running in important races, have a strong chance to win, and need money. (See how [Blue Tent recommends candidates](#).)

Options for Donors

Blue Tent has identified a number of organizations that donors should consider supporting to help fuel progressive political change in the South. Many of these groups have both 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) arms, giving donors more ways to give. We spotlight a handful of leading groups working in the South, but there are many others that donors can explore on their own.

State Organizing Groups

- **New Virginia Majority:** Much work needs to be done in coming years to reverse the setbacks of the 2021 election, where Democrats lost control of both the governorship and House of Delegates, as well as to ensure that Democrats win Virginia in the 2024 election. Donors should support New Virginia Majority, the leading statewide progressive organization.
- **Carolina Federation:** North Carolina is a swing state, but there's a huge potential to change that by mobilizing new Democratic base voters—including in the upcoming election for an open U.S. senate seat. Carolina Federation is a key grassroots organization involved in this work, along with other groups that donors might consider, such as the New North Carolina Project.
- **New Georgia Project:** Founded in 2011 by Stacey Abrams, NGP has a successful track record of mobilizing voters and shaping electoral outcomes in a key swing state that will feature high-stakes elections this year for governor and U.S. Senate.

- **Florida Rising:** While Florida has been tilting right in recent years, Way to Win estimates that there's the potential to expand the Democratic base in the state by 1.7 million voters. (Trump won Florida in 2020 by 371,000 votes.) Florida Rising is the leading progressive organizing group working to engage and mobilize these potential voters. (See Blue Tent's recent brief)
- **Texas Organizing Project:** Long a dependable GOP lock in federal elections, Texas is coming closer and closer to being a toss-up—in 2020, Trump won it by only 631,000 votes. Way to Win estimates that 4 million additional Democratic base voters could be mobilized in Texas. TOP is among the leading groups engaged in this work.

National Organizations

A long list of progressive funding intermediaries and national organizing groups are active in the South—too many to discuss in this brief. Here, we spotlight just a few organizations for donors to consider, both to support nonprofits and to give to political campaigns.

- **Movement Voter Project** is a great option for donors who want to support grassroots groups in southern states, including those that work locally in places like Atlanta. MVP hosts a number of special funds for donors who want to target their money in a particular state. (See our brief on MVP.)
- **Voto Latino** and **Mi Familia Voto** are two of the leading national organizations focused on mobilizing Latino voters and each does significant work in the South. Voto Latino claims to have registered more than 300,000 voters in the five key states discussed in this brief. Mi Familia engaged in extensive GOTV work in Texas, Florida, and Georgia. Mijente and Poder Latinx are two other important groups that work to mobilize new voters in the South that donors should know about.
- **Center for Popular Democracy** supports many grassroots organizations in southern states with grants and other assistance.
- **Working Families Party**, the national organizing group, has a major presence in two southern states through the Texas Working Families Party and the Georgia Working Families Party.

- **Swing Left** and **Sister District Project** both offer an easy way for donors to give to electoral campaigns in the South by doing the work to identify critical races and promising candidates. Read our brief on Swing Left [here](#) and SDP [here](#).

Conclusion

Major political changes are underway in the South and reflect larger shifts in the U.S. electoral map. Even as Republicans make new gains in once solidly blue Midwestern states, which are mostly white, Democrats are on the march in southern states that are far more diverse. Donors at every level have a range of options to help advance this historic shift and build the foundation for a future progressive governing majority.

You may also want to check out:

- [Building Progressive Power in Rural America: Options for Donors](#)
- [Building Progressive Power and Winning Elections in Florida: Options for Donors](#)
- [Giving to Elect Democrats and Build Progressive Power in 2022](#)
- [Winning House Races: Options for Democratic Donors](#)

