

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

Pennsylvania has been a battleground state for at least 20 years. Its historically blue cities continue to grow economically but have lost political power to shrinking red, rural areas, while blue-to-purple suburbs swing between moderates of both parties – though the term “moderate” can hardly be applied to any member of the Pennsylvania GOP these days.

The legislature has been dominated for years by Republicans, who refuse to pass legislation to improve lives. Pennsylvania, for example, is the only mid-Atlantic state that hasn’t raised its minimum wage above the federal level of \$7.25, meaning that workers in even redder states like West Virginia and Ohio make higher wages. Rather than fixing critical problems, the Republican Party has used control of both the state House and the Senate to undermine voting rights, attack trans people and others in the LGBTQ+ community, try to eliminate access to reproductive and sexual health care, and promote election lies.

Pennsylvania’s 2022 elections are crucial to the future of democracy in the United States. First, a high-stakes race for a U.S. Senate seat will help determine whether Democrats can hold or expand their majority nationally. Another equally high-stakes race for governor may well determine the fate of future elections and basic human rights in the state and the country writ large. There are fewer U.S. congressional seats in play this year: As a result of the 2020 Census, Pennsylvania is now down a seat, to 17 members of the United States House in 2022. Currently, the state’s congressional delegation is evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans. The new maps lean slightly Republican, and Democrats will need to fight to defend a nine-seat majority in the delegation.

Redistricting also resulted in new, more equitable maps – creating new potential to shift power. Pennsylvania has the second-largest legislature in the country. Democrats made headway toward flipping the state house in 2020 and are trying to build on those wins in 2022. With new maps and a smart ground game, they can potentially flip one or both of the Pennsylvania Assembly and Senate in 2024.

Reaching these goals will depend on whether progressive groups that engage in long-term organizing and electoral activism in vulnerable communities have the resources they need to build

power in the state. This brief suggests how donors can contribute to winning elections in Pennsylvania in both 2022 and 2024.

### **What's at Stake**

Progressives in Pennsylvania are focused on four major goals this year: winning an open U.S. Senate seat to solidify Democratic control of the Senate in the next session of Congress, keeping the governor's office under Democratic control, winning key congressional races, and picking up seats in the state legislature.

Television celebrity and purveyor of misinformation, Dr. Mehmet Oz, won the GOP nomination. Oz, who has lived in New Jersey for more than 30 years and still owns a home there, [only "moved" to Pennsylvania in late 2020](#). In fact, he regularly returns to his mansion in northern New Jersey, a fact that provides humorous campaign fodder for his opponent, Democrat and Pennsylvania Lt. Gov. John Fetterman, who is running a strong campaign against Oz.

Given the importance of veto power over a Republican-controlled legislature, Democrats view holding the governor's mansion as an urgent priority. They've nominated incumbent Attorney General Josh Shapiro to oppose Republican nominee and supporter of the "Big Lie," state Sen. Doug Mastriano, a white Christian nationalist and conspiracy theorist who supported the January 6 insurrection, and has pledged that, if elected, he will decertify all voting machines and make every voter in Pennsylvania re-register to vote.

Pennsylvania's current congressional map is evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, who hold nine seats each. The new map for 2022 is [slightly more favorable](#) to Republicans (due to the distribution of voters throughout the state), with nine districts that voted for former President Donald Trump, and eight that voted for President Joe Biden. However, four of the districts are so evenly balanced that either party might win them in any election. At this point, the districts that Democrats will need to work hardest to defend are the Lehigh Valley-based district of Rep. Susan Wild (7), which became slightly more Republican, the district of Rep. Matt Cartwright, and the moderate western-Pennsylvania district of Rep. Conor Lamb (17), who gave up his seat to run for the U.S. Senate.

Newly drawn maps have given Democrats opportunities to pick up seats in the state legislature, especially in smaller cities and ex-urban areas, and have set off a series of Republican retirements

around the state (close to 20% of the members of the Assembly are retiring rather than running for reelection this year). This gives the Democrats an opportunity to flip that chamber in 2022 and to make progress toward flipping the Senate in 2024 (only half of the Pennsylvania Senate runs in any one election). The best opportunities for Democrats to pick up seats will be in the Philadelphia suburbs, the Lehigh Valley, and the Capitol Region, which includes Harrisburg, Cumberland, York and Lancaster counties, among others.

### **Recommendations for Donors**

Donors should invest in groups working in the highest priority areas of the state in 2022, including Lehigh Valley, Philadelphia and its collar counties, the Capitol Region, and Pittsburgh and its suburbs. Donors should prioritize groups working in Black and brown communities in these places, in part because gubernatorial candidate Josh Shapiro may struggle to connect with them, and they are also in areas that will have competitive U.S. House or state legislative races.

Investing in grassroots groups that engage in year-round organizing is important, particularly because the Democratic Party routinely ignores Black and brown voters until very close to Election Day. Democrats also need trusted messengers to cut through the barrage of mis- and disinformation with which the right pelts these communities every day. Those trusted messengers are the people and groups who have provided services and political support during the pandemic and the fight against the extrajudicial police killing of civilians, in addition to addressing other critical issues. Specifically, we recommend the following:

#### **1. Invest in groups that are growing the electorate and fighting to protect the vote.**

In late 2019, in a compromise with Gov. Tom Wolf, Republicans in the state legislature passed [Act 77](#) to expand access to the vote. This bill expanded options for early voting sites; allowed voters to vote by mail without an excuse (previously, voters had to prove that they were hospitalized or out of state, to receive a mail ballot); and shortened the deadline for voter registration. All of these new processes were launched and battle tested during the 2020 election and they are now being attacked by the same Republicans who voted for them in 2019.

Groups around Pennsylvania are working to inform voters about their new rights under this law to secure plaintiffs for lawsuits defending Act 77, and working with local elected officials to ensure that communities understand their new voting opportunities under the law. Investing in the following groups will help ensure that Pennsylvania voters enjoy access to these reforms for years to come.

**Pennsylvania Voice:** Pennsylvania Voice is the state's c3 table, and is part of the national State Voices system. It is a partnership of more than 45 501(c)(3) organizations in the state committed to growing political power for the state's Black, brown and AAPI communities. Pennsylvania Voice has played a key role in enacting voting reforms in the state for the past decade, including working with the Wolf administration to reform voter registration, which has led Pennsylvania to have best-in-the-country access to digital voter registration, and led a coalition of their own members and other good government groups in the state to pass Act 77 with bipartisan support. PA Voice's goals for 2022 include registering 120,000 voters to achieve a 19% reduction in the vote gap in communities of color and contacting nearly 3.4 million voters about their right to vote by mail as well as with other important information for voters. Blue Tent recommends contributing to 501(c)(3) funds as early as possible to ensure that these programs have ample launching time and to allow PA Voice's partner organizations to plan their hiring for the year.

**Make the Road Pennsylvania/Make the Road Action in PA:** Make the Road Pennsylvania (c3) and its sister organization, Make the Road Action in PA (c4), will be organizing in the critical areas of the Lehigh Valley and the Philadelphia suburbs, where some of the state's most important down-ballot races will be held. Make the Road PA has offices in Allentown (Lehigh), Philadelphia and Reading (Berks), and does additional work in Bucks and Luzerne counties, specifically with immigrant communities. Blue Tent recommends investing in the c4 arm, Make the Road Action in PA, in order to ensure that Latino voters in this critical area of the state are engaged early.

On the c3 side, Make the Road PA plays a critical role in Berks and Lehigh Counties to ensure election officials are competently communicating with Spanish-speaking voters and calling them out when they fail to do so. In 2021, for example, Berks County election administrators (a Republican-controlled county that is home to Reading, the state's largest majority-Latino city) sent mail ballots to Spanish-speaking voters with erroneous dates for voting. Make the Road worked to correct this misinformation through the press and through direct voter contact.

**Pennsylvania Working Families Party:** The Pennsylvania Working Families Party (c4 & PAC) has been working with grassroots groups in Black and brown communities in Philadelphia and its suburbs, the Lehigh Valley, and Allegheny County, supporting a range of candidates that will help make the legislature both more progressive and more representative of the state's population.

## 2. Invest in opposition research and communications.

Republicans in Pennsylvania have long held a winning position when it comes to influencing the legislature and the capitol press in Harrisburg due to their commitment to funding right-wing think tanks and communications shops. In recent years, progressives and the labor movement have worked together to overcome this disparity, and this year sees some grassroots groups launching an effort to publicize the negative impacts of money in Pennsylvania's political system.

**Pennsylvania Spotlight:** Pennsylvanians were among the third largest group of participants from any state in the January 6 insurrection. Extreme right-wing actors – including some elected to state offices – supported buses to Washington, D.C. on that day, and have been implicated in the actual invasion of the Capitol itself. This network of right-wing actors must be exposed to the public and the press, and participants in the insurrection should lose elected office. Donors should invest in Pennsylvania Spotlight (c4) to fund investigative work documenting the highly coordinated political giving to supporters of the January 6 insurrection. One of these donors was Jeffrey Yass, Pennsylvania's richest man, and the founder of the Susquehanna Investment Group. Yass is a long-time supporter of right-wing astroturfers and elected officials. PA Spotlight is helping coordinate a table of base-building groups in the state to bring voters' attention to these and other malevolent actors. Note: This group should not be confused with Spotlight PA, a media organization that was founded years after PA Spotlight.)

**ACRE:** The Action Center on Race & the Economy (ACRE) and its recently launched **c4 sister organization** is a research and campaigning hub for economic research focused largely on Black, brown, immigrant and Muslim communities in the United States. ACRE is working with PA Spotlight to shine a light on the political donations to nefarious actors, including various individuals and corporations, and to help voters understand the unseen forces that are dominating our political spaces and creating legislation that harms their communities. Blue Tent is recommending that donors support the c4 arm in order to allow a focused partisan edge to this work.

## Conclusion

Ensuring that Black and brown communities are getting voting information well before the general election is critical to Democratic electoral prospects in November. In addition, concerns about Josh Shapiro's ability to connect with voters in these communities mean that donors will get more bang for their buck if they are investing in grassroots groups rather than the campaigns

directly. Donors can help ensure that Pennsylvania continues to make strides toward winning the state House and that Democrats keep the nine congressional seats they currently hold. Finally, winning the top prize of the open U.S. Senate seat will allow Democrats to strengthen their hold on the Senate, reducing the power now wielded by Joe Manchin and Kristen Sinema.

