

Virginia's Election

What Donors Can Do

In an electoral off-year, Virginia's elections loom as the most important political battle of 2021. The state will elect a new governor (Democratic incumbent Ralph Northam is term-limited) and all 100 seats in the House of Delegates are up for grabs. Democrats have a narrow five-seat majority that could easily be flipped, and the polling in the gubernatorial race is [close](#).

The political press will likely treat the results as a barometer of where the entire country is politically, and as a kind of dress rehearsal of the 2022 midterms, but the real stakes here are much more local. After taking control of the legislature in 2019, Democrats have [passed a number of progressive bills](#) that (among other things) removed barriers to abortion access and made it possible for authorities to take away firearms from someone judged to be a risk to themselves or others. Maintaining power in Virginia will allow Democrats to enact more policies that improve lives. Losing power, on the other hand, opens the door for regressive GOP plans—gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin has said that he'll go "[on offense](#)" if Republicans win the governor's mansion and the House of Delegates. The election could also impact redistricting in Virginia. While congressional and state-level redistricting is handled by a [committee](#) and approved by the legislature, it's possible that this process will end up being [deadlocked](#). It will be better for Democrats to retain control of the government in the event redistricting becomes subject to a legislative vote.

The races in Virginia should be a priority for activists and donors across the nation. Winning won't be so much about persuading swing voters but about getting Democratic voters to the polls. In Virginia's off-year elections, turnout is typically [below 50 percent](#), and there are [concerns](#) that Republicans will be more energized than Democrats, which is typical for the party that is out of power nationally.

Donations help because they'll allow campaigns to expand their outreach operations, whether that means more direct mail, increased door-knocking and phone banking operations, and in some cases, more TV and radio ads. Those who live in the state have lots of opportunities to volunteer with campaigns or contribute monetarily; this brief is intended for out-of-state donors who want to help out but aren't sure where to send money.

The two questions to ask about any potential donation target are (1) How important is the race? and (2) How badly does the candidate need the money? We'll keep both those questions in mind as we go through these options.

Giving to Terry McAuliffe

McAuliffe is atop the ticket as the gubernatorial candidate, and his contest is clearly the most important one. Though his nomination made some [progressives unhappy](#) (he defeated more left-wing candidates in the primary), Democrats need him to win.

The bad news is that Youngkin, McAuliffe's opponent, is a former private equity executive, has the ability to self-finance his campaign, to which he has loaned \$12 million. The good news is that as of June 30 (the most recent reporting deadline in Virginia), McAuliffe had [raised as much as Youngkin](#), even including that loan. So the Democrat isn't at a money disadvantage, and with his name recognition (he was governor from 2014 to 2018) he has a good shot to win, with most polls showing him holding a substantial lead. Still, given the possibility of [polling errors](#), Democrats shouldn't be complacent.

McAuliffe will need more donations to keep pace with or have an advantage over Youngkin. But the tricky thing for donors is that we've seen several high-profile statewide races in 2020 where a Democrat had a huge war chest and [still lost](#). There appears to be a point in many races beyond which more money doesn't really help, but it's very difficult to say where that point is. Campaigns reflexively raise as much money as they can, because every dollar is theoretically some amount of advantage, but donors should be skeptical of a well-financed candidate demanding money.

So on one hand, McAuliffe's race is the highest priority in the state right now (and maybe the country). But he also probably has the lowest need for money. Which brings us to candidates who need your money more.

Giving to House of Delegate candidates

Giving to down-ballot candidates is more complicated than donating to McAuliffe. There are 100 Democrats running for House of Delegates seats, and none of these races are individually all that important. Additionally, donating to one of these candidates means picking from a bunch of names that you won't be familiar with unless you have an unusual amount of knowledge about Virginia politics.

Still, there's a very strong case to be made that these campaigns are worth focusing on. These races are often *very close*—in 2019, Nancy Guy won a seat in the House of Delegates by *27 votes*.

According to the state legislature-focused group the [Future Now Fund](#), control of the entire chamber came down to fewer than 2,000 votes in 2019. Donations that allow campaigns to expand their get-out-the-vote operations reach more people, and thus win more ballots that might actually flip elections.

The other thing about donating to state legislative candidates is that they tend to need the money. The Virginia Public Access Project, which tracks campaign finance in the state, notes Democratic candidates have a major edge in fundraising as of June 30, with more than \$19 million compared to Republicans' \$9 million. But these donations are concentrated in the hands of a few candidates, and there are Democrats whose fundraising is in the low six digits.

How do you find these candidates? One option is to donate to Swing Left's Keep Virginia Blue fund, which splits gifts between several candidates and McAulliffe. State legislative-focused organizations also publish endorsement lists that can help you find worthy candidates. These groups include the DLCC, Sister District, Swing Left, EMILY's List and the Future Now Fund. Giving targets highlighted by these groups include:

Debra Gardner is running in the 27th District, a suburban area of the state that has been a battleground recently; incumbent Republican Roxann Robinson won her last two elections by fewer than 200 votes. Gardner, a Black woman who has worked in state government, has been endorsed by all the above organizations as well as several state progressive groups and Governor Ralph Northam, but as of June 30, she had raised just \$185,000. [Donate to Debra Gardner](#)

Joshua Cole is something of a rising star, a 31-year-old bisexual pastor who narrowly lost in 2017 before winning the 28th District in 2019. He's been endorsed by all the same organizations as Gardner, and has raised less than \$300,000. He's someone the Democrats badly want to keep in the House of Delegates. [Donate to Joshua Cole](#)

Nancy Guy, as noted above, won election to the House of Delegates in 2019 by just 27 votes, so it's safe to assume she'll be in another close race in the 83rd District. She's done fairly well in terms of fundraising, bringing in \$366,000 as of the latest reporting deadline, but this is a key race for Democrats. [Donate to Nancy Guy](#)

Giving to Organizations

A lot of progressive groups have organized over many years to make Virginia a more just state, and this work has helped put Virginia Democrats in the position of power they enjoy today. These groups include [New Virginia Majority](#), [Virginia Organizing](#), [Virginia Student Power Network](#), [Chesapeake Climate Action Network](#), and others.

Donating to these groups helps them do important work. The downside is that some are 501(c)(3) nonprofits, which means they are limited in the amount of electoral work they can do. But there are a couple organizations doing major outreach operations.

New Virginia Majority

This long-standing (since 2007) progressive organization does [weekly phone banking](#) among other get-out-the-vote operations; it plans to invest [\\$3.2 million](#) in this election. Though NVM endorsed progressive options for [governor](#) and [attorney general](#), the defeat of [those left-wing candidates](#) hasn't dampened the group's efforts to elect Democrats up and down the ballot. [Donate to New Virginia Majority](#)

Virginia Democratic Party

The Democrats' big get-out-the-vote operation is the [Virginia Turnout Project](#), an initiative state Democrats have launched in conjunction with major national party committees. The VTP is doing lots of in-person canvassing and phone banking on behalf of candidates. There's no way to give money directly to the VTP, but you can donate to the state party, the idea being that every little bit helps. [Donate to the Virginia Democratic Party](#)

The downside to donating to organizations is that they aren't as laser-focused on winning in November as campaigns are. Now, building power in a state is a long-term project, so sprinkling some money on these organizations makes a certain amount of sense. But if you are prioritizing the elections, donating to campaigns probably makes the most sense in the short term.

One notable quirk of local laws: Unlike most other states, Virginia has [no individual campaign contribution limit](#), so there's no risk even a deep-pocketed donor will max out their giving the way mega-donors often do in federal elections. (Virginia oddly also doesn't prohibit the [personal use of campaign funds](#), so it's possible that an unscrupulous candidate could pocket money rather than

using it for electioneering, but let's assume that the candidates endorsed by major organizations won't be corrupt.)

Volunteer

If you want to help elect Democrats in Virginia, you can also volunteer to do voter outreach yourself. Contributions of time rather than money can be helpful. Some opportunities:

Vote Forward, an organization focused on personalized mail campaigns, is recruiting volunteers for a [letter-writing campaign](#).

New Virginia Majority, as noted above, holds [weekly virtual phone banks](#).

The Virginia Turnout Project, a joint venture from the Virginia Democratic Party and several national Democratic committees, holds [regular in-person](#) canvassing events as well as occasional virtual phone banks.

Swing Left's Immediate Impact Team is holding regular phone banks starting September 21.

Conclusion

Winning an election in an off-year directly after a brutal presidential election during a pandemic is a challenge. Democrats have to keep voters engaged at a time when they may be exhausted and want to tune out. "We just have to keep people awake" is how Democratic House of Delegates member Wendy Gooditis put it while [talking to *The Atlantic*](#).

The good news is that Democrats are keeping pace with Republicans in terms of fundraising and will have money advantages in many races. The bad news is that a money advantage hardly guarantees victory. Republican voters will be looking to avenge their losses in 2020, and they will be energized by what they see as a left-wing threat.

Donations can fund voter outreach efforts to persuade voters that they need to cast ballots in order to keep Virginia blue. Volunteering can accomplish the same goals more directly. Whoever wins, it's clear that the elections in Virginia will be close, and individual efforts will make a difference.



You may also want to check out:

- [Sister District Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Future Forward PAC: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Priorities USA: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [The Democratic Senatorial Committee: What Donors Need to Know](#)

