

Senate Majority PAC

What Donors Need to Know

The Senate Majority PAC is one of the cornerstones of the Democratic Party's network of outside money organizations. Launched in 2011, SMP was formed following the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision and was a response to the quick loosening of the rules on outside money that the landmark case represented. Since then, SMP has been one of the leading super PACs supporting Democrats each election cycle. Despite its fundraising success, it has largely failed to deliver on its namesake over the last decade, as Democrats have struggled to win seats in the upper chamber of Congress.

The Senate Majority PAC is a favorite place to donate for some of the richest Democratic donors. Though the super PAC has gained popularity and increased its total discrete donations significantly since 2016, most of its money still comes from mega-donors and dark money sources. SMP is an undeniable force as a fundraiser, but its spending has been less efficient. There are numerous examples of the super PAC spending millions on candidates who lose badly, while SMP's opposition-media-focused strategies have often led to underwhelming results. In 2020, SMP deployed a huge share of its fundraising haul for late-stage ad buys and invested heavily in campaigns that were decided by more than five percentage points. Moreover, as the super PAC has grown into one of the largest outside spenders in American politics, it has also increased its contributions to affiliate groups and taken more money from dark money organizations.

Because of SMP's questionable strategies and poor track record, detailed below, Blue Tent advises donors to only **consider** giving to the organization. Further, given SMP's top-heavy donor rolls and position within the Democratic Party's larger outside-money network, Blue Tent designates SMP as a **low priority** group for donors. ([Explore our methodology.](#)) Smaller and mid-sized donors interested in contributing to midterm Senate races would likely have more impact giving directly to preferred candidates, or to grassroots organizations working in key states.

These conclusions, explained in the following brief, are based on extensive reporting and independent research, including examination of FEC data and interviews with experts in campaigns and political advertising. SMP did not respond to requests for comment from Blue Tent.

What are its core strategies?

Ads and contributions make up the bulk of SMP's spending each cycle, according to totals compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics. The super PAC serves as a centerpiece of the Democratic Party's outside spending.

SMP's key strategies include:

Media buys, including web and broadcast ads. SMP is routinely among the top spenders for media in key Senate races. The Center for Public Integrity found that in 2014, SMP funded one out of every 20 ads for a Senate race. The vast majority of the group's spending focuses on opposing Republicans, and in most cycles, SMP dedicates less than 10% of its candidate-focused spending on supporting Democrats—the peak was in 2018 when 16.2% of its money supported Democrats. This is likely due to the unique role of an outside spending group, which can spend most of its attention bashing an opponent, allowing the campaign itself to focus its money solely on promoting the candidate.

Contributions to affiliated PACs and ally organizations. In the most recent election cycle, SMP's contributions reached the highest point in the organization's history. The group routed significant money to VoteVets (\$16 million), which supported Democrats in Congressional races primarily in the South; Priorities USA Action (\$20.6 million), which supported President Joe Biden's candidacy; and Georgia Way and Georgia Honor (\$24.2 million between the two) ahead of the Senate runoffs.

"Pop-up PACs." Early in 2020, The Intercept [reported](#) on SMP's network of recently formed super PACs and dark money affiliates in key states where Democrats hoped to win Senate seats. With the 501(c)(4) groups, which aren't required to report their donors, and with "pop-up" PACs that arrange their filing dates so they don't have to reveal donors before Election Day, the Democrats have built a wide network to pump money into Senate races and challenge Republicans' fundraising operations. One of the first pop-ups used by SMP [appeared in Alabama](#) in 2017, just ahead of the special election for Senate. A month before election day, SMP and Priorities USA Action founded Highway 31, a seemingly local group that was almost entirely funded by its national "parent" PACs. SMP and Priorities poured around \$4 million into Highway 31 to fund ads slamming Republican Roy Moore for allegations of sexual assault, helping to propel Democrat

Doug Jones to victory in the race. Since then, the practice has become more common for SMP, and its network of affiliates and allies has grown.

What is its track record of achieving its goals?

SMP's first election cycle was 2012 when President Barack Obama easily won reelection and Democrats expanded their majority in the Senate. In the next three cycles, Democrats lost their majority and failed to regain it, even as they overtook conservatives on outside spending. It would also be hard to say the super PAC has been efficient given the party's series of disappointing election nights over the last decade, including in 2020.

Democrat Jaime Harrison, for instance, raised and spent [more than \\$100 million](#)—more than any senate candidate in history—in his campaign to unseat South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham. Despite Harrison's massive independent fundraising haul and his [shakey poll numbers](#) in a deep red state, SMP found it prudent to pour in an additional \$4.9 million attacking his opponent. Harrison went on to lose by double digits. Overall, less than 25% of SMP's targeted expenditures in 2020 went to campaigns won by Democrats.

Democrats did defeat a couple of incumbent Senators—most notably, the two Georgia incumbents and Arizona Senator Martha McSally—but given the party's fundraising advantage and President Donald Trump's unpopularity, the cycle was a disappointment. SMP also has a record of pumping millions into negative media late in an election, to little effect. While this practice is based on assumptions that most voters don't seriously begin considering their choices until shortly before an election, SMP's reliance on negative media in the final months of a campaign has often yielded poor results. (See Blue Tent's background brief: [Political Advertising: What Donors Need to Know](#).)

In Wisconsin in 2016, where Democrats counted on challenger former Sen. Russ Feingold to defeat incumbent Sen. Ron Johnson, the SMP spent roughly \$4.6 million on media-bashing Johnson—all of it in October or later—and just around \$14,000 on media supporting Feingold in November. Johnson ended up winning by three points. In North Carolina, SMP spent nearly \$4.5 million opposing incumbent Republican Sen. Richard Burr, all of it spent in October or November, while spending just around \$305,000 on media supporting Democrat Deborah Ross in the final week of the campaign.

By contrast, in the Nevada contest, SMP started its ad buys opposing Republican Joe Heck in May of 2016, continuing a steady stream of media against him until Election Day for a total of \$9.2 million for the cycle. SMP spent just around \$150,000 in support of Democrat Catherine Cortez Masto, and she was able to win her race by just over two points. As the numbers below show, SMP's expenditure success rate (the percentage of money spent either opposing a candidate who goes on to lose or supporting a candidate who goes on to win, as calculated by Open Secrets) has been less than stellar in recent cycles:

- 2010: 82.8%
- 2012: 90.6%
- 2014: 9.1%
- 2016: 26.3%
- 2018: 40.2%
- 2020: 24.9%

In fairness, SMP's total spending has also increased recently, meaning the super PAC has more wiggle room to invest heavily in tougher races. Moreover, in some close elections, as many as a few thousand votes could mean the difference between huge amounts of SMP spending looking either foolish or canny. In North Carolina and Michigan in 2020 for instance, SMP spent a combined \$70 million. Both races were decided by less than two percent of the vote, with Democrats winning in Michigan and losing in North Carolina. But SMP also spent nearly as much, more than \$69 million, in races in Iowa and Maine, where Democrats lost by seven and nine points, respectively, and the super PAC threw an additional \$30 million at races in Montana, Texas and South Carolina, all of which Democrats lost by double digits.

Electoral losses, even those decided by a wide margin, are not an inherently bad investment for donors. Losing campaigns can nonetheless lead to the formation of stronger political infrastructure or result in down-ballot victories, such as the 2018 campaigns of Beto O'Rourke in Texas and Stacey Abrams in Georgia. But SMP's strategy of spending almost exclusively on media, primarily negative media late in the campaign, is not the type of investment likely to have positive knock-on effects down the road. At best, SMP's ad buys could free up a campaign to use less of its own money on ads and more on the nuts and bolts of organizing. However, as many of the advertising experts Blue Tent spoke with have noted, a campaign is likely much better served spending earlier and more frequently on media to establish a relationship with voters.

Does it have strong leadership and governance?

SMP has a strong connection with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and is staffed by many of his allies and former team members of various Democrats' offices. The super PAC's current president is J.B. Poersch, who took the helm of the organization in 2017. Poersch was the executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee from 2004 to 2011, overseeing the elections of 2006 and 2008 that resulted in a Democratic supermajority in the Senate, as well as the 2010 midterms where Democrats lost seats but maintained control of the upper chamber. Before that, Poersch worked as a political staffer for Sen. Jack Reed, as well as the Ohio campaign director for John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign. Immediately before working at SMP, Poersch was a managing director at SKDK (formerly SKDKnickerbocker), a prominent Democratic-aligned consulting firm.

Is its staff diverse and culturally competent?

The organization Democracy in Color conducted a survey of the top liberal super PACs in 2020, reviewing each group's strategy and the diversity of its targeted audience. After receiving a response from SMP and conducting its own analysis, Democracy in Color graded SMP C+ on its demographic targeting and C for its geographic targeting.

The super PAC has often focused on more centrist candidates in conservative states rather than boosting more progressive candidates and candidates of color. In that same report, Democracy in Color criticized SMP for focusing a great deal of early money on states like Michigan and Iowa instead of providing more support to the two Georgia candidates.

What kinds of donors support it?

SMP attracts donations from some of the Democrats' richest allies. In its early days, SMP raised most of its money through large donations from names that would become regular six- and seven-figure contributors to liberal super PACs and party funds. People like Newsweb Corporation's Fred Eychaner, Renaissance Technologies' James Simons, and Paloma Partners' Donald Sussman regularly make multimillion-dollar gifts to the super PAC. Other big names on the donor rolls include former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former presidential candidate Tom Steyer.

A Brennan Center for Justice [report](#) from 2014 found that less than 0.1 percent of total contributions to SMP that cycle came from small donors—those making gifts of \$200 or less—and

of the larger gifts, the average donation was \$170,525. A [similar report](#) from the Brennan Center in 2016 found contributions of \$1,000 or less made up less than 1% of SMP's fundraising total for that cycle. FEC donor records for subsequent cycles show the pattern repeating, with a dramatic change in 2020, when small donors flooded SMP with thousands of contributions ahead of the Georgia Senate runoffs—the added media attention and concentrated resources on those two races after the general election no doubt contributed to the uptick.

But 2020 was also a unique year for the SMP in terms of high-end fundraising. The top contributor to SMP last year was Majority Forward, the super PAC's nonprofit affiliate, which routed more than \$51 million in dark money to the group. That wasn't the only source of dark money for SMP: The recently formed affiliated nonprofit Duty and Honor gave \$15.9 million, and the increasingly prominent Sixteen Thirty Fund brought in another \$1.5 million. With liberal dark money overtaking that of conservatives in 2018, the SMP emerged in 2020 as the centerpiece of a large network of liberal campaign money that became more ambitious than ever last year.

Another key source of funding for SMP that often goes overlooked is union money. The Carpenters and Joiners Union, Laborers Union, the American Federation of Teachers and others are consistently among the top organizations giving to the SMP each cycle. In 2020, labor unions brought in \$55.7 million for SMP, about 19% of the super PAC's total fundraising. But the Carpenters and Joiners Union stands out: In the last two cycles, the union has been in the top three organizations donating to SMP, according to OpenSecrets.org, contributing \$6.5 million in 2018 and \$15 million in 2020.

Overall, SMP's donor records are consistently top-heavy, the bulk of its funding coming from extremely wealthy individuals and major organizations. Outside of the unique circumstances in the 2020 cycle, the super PAC does not generate key funding from small donors, and those with a couple hundred or couple thousand dollars to give are unlikely to have much impact by giving to SMP.

How transparent is it about its spending, results, and learning from its mistakes?

SMP, like many leading super PACs, does not have a practice of giving regular reports or progress updates to its donors—although there are rare cases where donors will get reports by request. As one of the major arms of the Democratic Party's campaign arsenal, SMP doesn't reveal much to the public that isn't already accessible through the FEC and other public records.

SMP's sources of funds have grown more opaque as it has increased the portion of dark money it uses. In 2020, the super PAC's 501(c)(4) arm, Majority Forward, which is not required to disclose its donors, was the top individual contributor to SMP, with \$51.3 million. The second-largest contribution came from a PAC called Duty & Honor, which puzzlingly has no FEC records for 2020 despite appearing on SMP's donor list. SMP also received a contribution of \$1.5 million from noted liberal dark money group Sixteen Thirty Fund. If these trends continue, SMP's will only expand its outside spending and dark money network into the next election cycle.

Does it have clear and realistic plans for the future?

SMP has not issued a press release or statement since the Georgia run-off elections in January, and President J.B. Poersch has not spoken to the press in 2021. Other liberal super PACs, such as Unite the Country, have been buying ads promoting President Joe Biden's stimulus package in an effort to get an early start on positive messaging for 2022. SMP has no spending records so far this year. There are 34 Senate races in 2022. As of October, Cook Political Report rates 25 of those races as solidly Democratic or Republican, with four seats leaning Democratic, two seats leaning Republican and three seats considered "toss-ups."

Conclusion

SMP, like other similar super PACs, regularly posts jaw-dropping's fundraising numbers and massive ad spending, but remains opaque in both its financial sourcing and guiding strategy. The available information about SMP paints a picture of an establishment Democratic money machine, capable of matching Republicans dollar for dollar, but often stuck spending those resources on ineffective ads supporting losing candidates. It's difficult to assess SMP alone in the crowded landscape of Senate elections, which have money coming in from a variety of different avenues and a multitude of variables that are challenging to isolate. However, taken on its own terms SMP seems to repeatedly pump outsized resources into bad losses. Many of SMP's strategic decisions display the need for a new approach to help the party expand its majority in the senate.

For these reasons, Blue Tent advises donors to only **consider** donating to Senate Majority PAC. Likewise, because of the organization's consistent glut of funding from wealthy donors, Blue Tent rates SMP as a **low priority**. Donors looking to make an impact on maintaining and expanding the Democratic majority in the senate should instead donate directly to senate campaigns, or to state and local level organizations engaged in forward-looking grassroots organizing that could also have knock-on effects down the road.

You may also want to check out:

- [American Bridge 21st Century PAC: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Future Forward PAC: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Priorities USA: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [BlackPAC: What Donors Need to Know](#)

