

8 Rules for Democratic Political Donors

What Donors Need to Know

One of the most striking trends in recent political history has been the explosion of small donors and small donations. According to [Pew data](#) from 2017, the percentage of Americans who said they gave money to campaigns doubled from 6% in 1992 to 12% in 2016, a trend driven in large part by Democrats, 22% of whom reported making any type of political donation in 2016. In 2020, [25% of all voters](#) and 28% of Democratic voters made a political donation. That year, small donations—defined as any gift of less than \$200—made up 27% of contributions to federal candidates, according to [a report](#) from the Center for Responsive Politics and the National Institute on Money in Politics—a relatively small slice of funding, but up from 21% in 2016.

These donors have been enabled and encouraged to give by [ActBlue](#), the Democratic-aligned platform that makes it possible to give with a single tap on your phone. Some are no doubt motivated by the personal magnetism of left-wing candidates like Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who fueled their campaigns the last few cycles with small-donor money.

But while more liberals than ever are discovering the political power of their wallets, they may not be sophisticated in their giving strategies. There are hundreds of candidates and organizations that solicit donations, and it is not always clear exactly what these groups are doing with the money they collect.

So what principles should guide donors seeking to influence politics and have an impact? While they may have a variety of objectives, there are some basic principles that can guide them.

1. Give with a clear objective in mind

The first step in any donor's process should be to identify a goal that their giving can contribute to. This can be as specific as trying to change a single policy in a certain state (raising the minimum wage in Georgia, say) or as broad as trying to win congressional seats across the country. From that point, it's relatively simple to identify where your money should go: i.e., if you want to help Democrats win congressional elections, you can identify candidates running in swing districts. This sounds obvious, but donors small and large don't always follow this maxim. Two of Congress's top fundraisers in the 2020 cycle were [Ocasio-Cortez](#), who brought in \$20 million,

nearly 80% of which was from small donors; and Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#), who raised \$27 million from a mix of small and large donors. Donors likely gave to these two politicians because they are well-known and seen as standard-bearers for the left wing and establishment branches of the party, respectively, but they both occupy safe seats, and it seems more than a bit wasteful to send them money. Sure, both AOC and especially Pelosi send money to allied candidates and committees, but if you want to support AOC-friendly primary insurgents or Pelosi-backed, at-risk incumbents, it makes much more sense to donate to those candidates directly. *Don't give money to figures just because they are famous and soliciting from you.*

2. Fundraising emails will lie to you

In 2020, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) sent out fundraising emails touting Kentucky Senate candidate Amy McGrath, who was seeking to unseat widely despised Sen. Mitch McConnell. “I’m within ONE POINT of beating Mitch McConnell,” one [February missive](#) read, imploring Democrats to split a small donation between McGrath’s campaign and the DSCC. Except the race was never close: Despite McGrath raising [\\$94 million](#), \$23 million more than McConnell, she lost by nearly 20 points.

This is not to single out the DSCC or McGrath. Organizations and campaigns of all ideological stripes engage in a certain amount of alarmism in the name of buckraking. Often, these pitches focus on the threatening strength of conservative opponents rather than the Democrat’s specific goals for the money raised. Ocasio-Cortez’s recent email solicitations have [emphasized](#) her previous opponent’s \$10 million war chest as if to indicate she is at risk. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee still occasionally indulges in its [longstanding habit](#) of deranged subject lines, with recent examples including “[MASSIVE loss](#)” and “[sadly.](#)” *A few minutes of research can sort out whether a candidate is viable; don't take the overhyped claims in fundraising pitches at face value.*

3. Give to candidates before committees

One fact donors may not know is that by law, candidates and their campaigns are [guaranteed](#) the lowest ad rates during election season. Super PACs can end up paying several times that amount for the same airtime. This makes donating to a super PAC whose primary purchase is to run ads an inefficient business, since a candidate could buy the same ads cheaper—and campaigns may also have a better idea of what their on-the-ground needs are. Donors who spend large sums may run

into limits on gifts to candidates, but they should in general *max out their donations to individual campaigns before giving to national Democratic Party committees or super PACs.*

4. Give early

The name of the venerable PAC EMILY's List stands for "early money is like yeast"—as in, it makes the thing you're cooking rise. When campaigns get money early in the cycle, they can use it to hire staffers who can build fundraising and field operations; early fundraising can also be a signal to party committees and big donors that a candidate is viable. *If you want to influence elections, give now, don't wait to be solicited.* When campaigns get close-to-Election-Day influxes of cash, they can't do very much with it and often end up buying TV, radio or digital ads, and many practitioners believe such late-in-the-cycle buys have little to no impact on races.

5. Play the long game

While giving early in an election cycle is important, even better is to forget about such cycles altogether and focus on long-term efforts to build progressive power in key states. Democratic successes in Virginia, Georgia and Arizona offer a case study of this approach in action. In each state, far-sighted progressive donors invested in grassroots groups (e.g., the New Georgia Project and the New Virginia Majority) that labored over years to organize communities of color and other key Democratic constituencies—and then to mobilize these newly engaged voters at election time. This patient work paid off in 2020 with decisive Democratic wins in Georgia and Arizona. Greater long-term investments in Texas, North Carolina and elsewhere could potentially yield the same results—if enough donors step up.

6. Give to the candidates who need it, not the candidates you like

The Democratic Party is a big tent; both voters and politicians have a range of views on a bunch of issues. But when it comes to general elections, nearly everyone should agree that in nearly all cases, any Democrat is better than any Republican. You should give to incumbents under threat or challengers who have a legitimate chance. If you want a list of such candidates, the DSCC, DCCC and Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (which deals with state legislative races) have lists on their websites. Or you can go to a neutral website like the Cook Political Report, which rates races based on competitiveness. *If you're giving to politicians in safe seats, there's a bigger chance your money will ultimately go to waste.*

7. The smaller the campaign/organization, the bigger the impact your donation will have

Massive organizations like the DSCC and DCCC or the major super PACs are important, as are each cycle's handful of up-for-grabs Senate races. But money is going to pour into those places regardless of what you do. Especially when you aren't giving large sums, you're unlikely to have much impact when you're donating to Senate campaigns, major super PACs, or major party organs. You're going to get more bang for your buck giving to state and local races (see our guide to state legislative races here), or seeking out organizations doing on-the-ground work in key states. (You can browse Blue Tent for examples of these places.) *Smaller organizations are no less effective than large ones in many cases, and they often need the money more.*

8. Think like an investor

Sometimes, political donations seem like a way to register your approval of a candidate or cause, or your disdain for the thing they are fighting against. This may feel good, but it is not a great way to think of donations—giving money to a political cause should be a way to leverage power and influence the direction of the Democratic Party and the country. You should give to organizations that can use that money effectively, or to candidates who badly need resources and are on the cusp of winning or losing. *Ultimately, donating isn't just a show of support for the Democrats; it's a way to build power.* Though more people than ever are becoming political donors, they are still a small minority, and they should take their ability to wield influence seriously.

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](#)
- [Indivisible: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [The Democratic National Committee: What Donors Need to Know](#)