

## What Small Donors Need to Know

Anyone even tangentially involved in politics or activism is regularly swarmed by fundraising requests—the emails, the texts, the repeated asks for your money, even if you don't have much money to give. Sometimes, you might feel inspired, either by a particular candidate or a cause, to create an ActBlue account and donate. Maybe you set a recurring donation of \$5 or \$10 as a way to help out; maybe you give more, though probably not much more—a [Pew survey](#) from 2017 found that only 13% of Americans who donate to political causes give more than \$250. (A “small” donation is anything under \$200, which is the point at which gifts have to be itemized on FEC reports.) The same holds for gifts to 501(c)(3) nonprofits; donors gave [\\$128 on average](#) when they made online gifts in a recent year.

As a small donor, you may not feel like your contributions amount to much, whether you're giving for campaigns or to (c)3 groups. The cost of each electoral cycle runs into the billions; high-profile Senate campaigns can spend [over \\$100 million](#). Just as a voter's individual ballot is highly unlikely to determine an election, your \$25 donation is unlikely to put a campaign over the top. Small gifts can also feel like a drop in the bucket when giving to nonprofits—especially big ones like the ACLU, which raises over \$200 million a year.

But small donations are vital to contributing to both social change and the political process, and you should think about your donations carefully.

While well-known mega-donors tend to get the lion's share of attention in reporting on politics and philanthropy, small donors can play an essential role in propelling candidates and nonprofits alike. Sen. Bernie Sanders' two campaigns for president were largely made possible by a flood of small donations, while a surge of giving by ordinary Democrats helped fund the retaking of the House of Representatives in 2018 and the presidency in 2020. Small donors also play a crucial role in financing many progressive nonprofits groups, especially activist organizations working at the local level.

If you doubt your importance as a small donor, remember all those groups emailing you to get your money—you matter!

Some large donors have advisers who can help them allocate their funds effectively; some give as part of a broader strategy for both electoral and philanthropic giving. You probably don't have a strategy, but there are guidelines you can follow that will help you have more of an impact.

### **Think Small**

As a general rule, small donors are likely to have more impact by directing their gifts to underfunded causes, groups and candidates. The old adage that "every bit counts" is especially true when an organization or campaign has few resources.

An extra \$20 isn't going to make a molecule's worth of difference in a presidential or Senate race; it's probably not going to matter in a House race, either. But races for state legislative seats or local offices are usually cash-starved; campaigns may run on budgets in only the tens of thousands of dollars. If your \$20 is going to matter, it will matter in these races. And a lot of policy is decided at the state and local level. If you contribute money to a race in your area, you'll be engaging with the elections that affect your community in a way few people do; if you instead contribute to a state legislative campaign in a swing state far away from you, you can use the opportunity to learn about the nitty-gritty policy issues of another region.

A similar logic holds for giving to nonprofit groups. A small activist group in your town or a think tank focused on your state is likely to need your \$100 donation a lot more than a well-known national group with backing from top foundations and major donors.

### **Give Early**

Political campaigns need money the most early on, when they are staffing up and building the operations that will handle voter outreach, fundraising and communications. The same goes for nonprofit organizations. Often, campaigns or new groups are only able to get off the ground because they manage to attract enough initial support from small individual donors that they can get the word out to a broader audience about what they're trying to accomplish. If you're among those early believers, your money can go a long way.

Unfortunately, most donors only start paying attention to campaigns late in the electoral cycle or only notice nonprofits when they already have a spiffy communications operation. But late money is less useful in elections because there are fewer things to spend on; it would be mostly pointless for a campaign to bring on new staff in the final week of a campaign. If instead it had

more money earlier, it could hire additional people. And when you're talking about local and state races, an extra staffer or two could spell the difference between victory and defeat.

Likewise, while established nonprofits are always trying to grow and can always benefit from donations, the relative importance of gifts from small donors declines as the budget of a nonprofit increases. Your biggest impact with a modest gift will come when a group is trying to get things going.

One risk of giving early to either a nonprofit or a political candidate is that the effort won't really get off the ground at all, and your money will be totally wasted. Plenty of candidates call it quits before even getting to the primaries. And plenty of nonprofit startups never manage to attract enough funding to operate with enough capacity to have an impact. So before you give to a fledgling candidate or group, make sure to do your homework (see below).

### **Ignore Shiny Objects**

Even though small donors can get more bang for their buck by giving to lesser-known organizations and candidates, many do the exact opposite: They give to name-brand groups like Planned Parenthood and to well-known national political figures.

In politics, the most successful small-dollar fundraisers are, generally speaking, famous politicians who go on TV, have an active social media presence, and have acquired a loyal fan base. But these politicians also tend not to need money that much—members of the left-wing “Squad,” for instance, were [among](#) the members of Congress most successful at bringing in small donations in 2020, but they all cruised to reelection easily.

The candidates who need the money are the ones who aren't famous, and it takes a little bit of searching to find them. If you were a left-wing small donor in 2020, for instance, you may have given to Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who accumulated more than \$20 million that cycle. But the candidates aligned with Ocasio-Cortez who needed the money were people like Cori Bush, an activist who raised [\\$1.4 million](#) on her way to defeating 10-term incumbent Lacy Clay. Whatever your political affiliation, you should look for candidates who are underfunded or competing in lower-cost races, not giving to the most famous politicians in the country—they don't need your help.

Again, a similar rule of thumb holds for giving to progressive organizations. While there's nothing wrong with giving to the ACLU or the Sierra Club—they're both great organizations—each is already well-financed. Think twice before you get sucked in by the sleek fundraising appeals from these famed groups. Your money will make more of a difference if you take the time to get to know progressive organizations off the beaten path—like the growing network of groups working to build progressive power in the South but which often struggle to raise money.

### **Donate Your Time, Too**

Campaigns and nonprofits need money, but they also need volunteers: canvassers, phone-bankers, postcard-writers. (Once again, the need is especially acute in smaller races.) If you are politically active enough to donate a few bucks, it's probably worth it for you to consider donating your time as well as your money, if you are able. Not only is volunteering a way to help out a campaign or nonprofit, it can put you in contact with like-minded people; you will also learn how campaigns work and government works.

### **Don't Panic**

Giving money to any candidate or organization is like giving the mouse a cookie in *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*—they're going to ask you for more money. And once you start thinking of yourself as a donor, you'll notice how many organizations and campaigns start soliciting you, sometimes in the [hyperbolic style](#) popular among fundraising emails.

Campaigns will say they have only ONE MORE WEEK before some deadline; they'll inform you that TIME IS RUNNING OUT or that they're FALLING BEHIND. You can ignore these pleas, which at worst can be actively deceptive and often seem intended to make you feel guilty.

Campaigns will ratchet up the pressure on potential donors as Election Day approaches, and these solicitations plus breathless election-focused media coverage can make you feel like you have to hit donate or something very bad will happen.

Nonprofits will do the same thing, pestering you about matching funds that will vanish on a set date, even a set time—usually midnight—if you don't donate. (Such drop-dead matches are usually a fiction, but we'll save that for another brief.) Or they'll play up some titanic battle they're fighting that may be lost if they can't raise just a little more money.



Don't worry! Do what you can to help progressive organizations and Democrats to win, but don't lose sleep over this stuff. Unsubscribe from the email lists that are stressing you out. Stay focused on using the resources you have to be the most strategic small donor you can be.

### **Do Your Homework**

While wealthy big donors can hire expert consultants or staff to help them make their giving decisions, most of us are on our own. And too often, we rely on bad information in deciding where to give: a Facebook ad that keeps showing up in our feed, a marketing email or letter we received, or advice from a friend who really doesn't know that much more than we do. Don't be that kind of donor. Do your homework! Take the time to research organizations and candidates before you click the "donate" button. Study their online materials and read press coverage about them. And, of course, search this website to see if Blue Tent has written anything. We exist to provide critical, independent analysis to help inform the giving decisions of donors like you.

### **You may also want to check out:**

- [BlackPAC: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Swing Left: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Sister District Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)

