

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee

What Donors Need to Know

The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee is one of the core institutions of the Democratic Party and also one of the largest distributors of outside spending in the electoral ecosystem. It spends hundreds of millions each cycle in support of Democrats running for U.S. Senate seats, much of it on negative TV and digital ads targeting vulnerable Republicans. In 2020, its budget topped \$300 million, its largest ever, and though Democrats had some unexpected defeats, the party was able to close out the cycle on a high note, winning both Georgia runoff elections and securing narrow control of the Senate.

Zooming out a little bit, the DSCC has suffered through some bad losses in the last several cycles. Democratic power in the Senate peaked when the party occupied (very briefly) 60 seats near the beginning of Barack Obama's first presidential term; since then thanks to partisan sorting and other large-scale phenomena Democrats have lost a lot of Senate seats in red states.

Retaining the Senate majority is vital for Democrats in 2022 and beyond. But there are many organizations working on that goal, not to mention the Senate campaigns themselves, that are eager to get donor money and can offer more bang for the buck to donors. By law, political candidates are entitled to the best rates when buying TV and radio spots; PACs and party committees sometimes pay several times as much. This means that if you gave \$1,000 to Raphael Warnock's Senate campaign and it's then used to purchase a slot for a TV ad, that money will buy more time than the same \$1,000 donated to the DSCC. In general, donations to individual Senate campaigns are therefore a better use of dollars.

But campaign finance law strictly limits how much a donor can give directly to a campaign (the amount is \$2,900 per donor in the 2021-22 cycle), so the DSCC could be an option for donors who have maxed out to candidates. For this reason, and also due to its importance in the Democratic Party, Blue Tent is tentatively **recommending** the DSCC. For most donors, though, giving to this organization should be seen as a **low priority**. ([Explore our methodology.](#))

What are its core strategies?

The DSCC is the arm of the Democratic Party that is exclusively focused on winning and holding the Senate. To pursue this goal, it uses a variety of tools:

Media. Most visibly, it produces political ads, primarily negative messages that target Republican candidates, and distributes these ads on television and online. There are very few competitive Senate races every cycle so the DSCC focuses its resources on those contests. (This isn't unique to the DSCC, pretty much every large group and PAC concerned with the Senate does this.)

Contributions to candidates. The DSCC contributes directly to candidate committees (though the size of these transfers is limited by law), state parties, and other PACs. For instance, in the lead-up to the 2021 runoff elections in Georgia, the DSCC transferred over \$4.3 million to the state's Democratic Party office.

Cooperative strategy. Unlike PACs, which also transfer money between each other and routinely produce negative ads, the DSCC engages in various forms of behind-the-scenes work. It sends joint fundraising emails to a huge audience of donors, asking them to split donations between the candidates and the DSCC. It endorses candidates in primaries in an effort to signal to donors and voters that it thinks that it thinks those candidates are more likely to win general election contests. It collects resumes to help state parties and Senate campaigns in hiring, to name one example of functions unrelated to direct messaging to voters. Presumably because of these functions, it spends less of its money on media than Super PACs unconcerned with infrastructure building.

How does it spend money?

The biggest chunk of its spending is on advertising. According to OpenSecrets, DSCC allocated around \$132 million to media in the 2020 cycle, which was more than 54% of its total spending. Roughly \$105 million was classified as "independent expenditures" that targeted particular races, and 69% of that money was concentrated on contests in Iowa, North Carolina and Montana.

It follows a similar pattern when it comes to transfers, giving money to state parties in battleground states. In 2020, targets other than Georgia included Iowa, which received more than \$5 million in transfers; North Carolina (over \$1.5 million); and Montana (over \$3.5 million).

It spends about 7% of its budget on staffing, which is more than PACs wholly devoted to media, but on par with comparable committees. It needs a staff to do that party-supporting stuff that otherwise doesn't show up in the bottom line.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of those strategies?

The DSCC's interventions in elections come in the form of traditional messaging: i.e., direct mail, radio and television ads, and, increasingly, digital ads. (The DSCC spent \$20 million on digital in 2020, nearly twice the amount of its Republican counterpart.) There is a lively debate in political science circles about how effective these forms of messaging are. Some research has found that TV ads in particular have basically no persuasive effect on voters, while a prominent paper found that actually commercials did help the side that ran them.

As critics have complained that Democrats spend too much money on TV, enthusiasm for more on-the-ground approaches to campaigning has grown. These approaches include door-to-door canvassing, phone banking and "relational organizing," a term that describes volunteers reaching out to people they already know and convincing them to vote or get more involved in the political process. Though the DSCC will promote relational organizing events on occasion, it is not focused on the "ground game," leaving that to campaigns and state and local Democratic parties. Donors who want to grow Democratic power could look for groups investing in these tactics in purple or emerging blue states; the DSCC, by design, is more interested in dropping money via advertisements on a few high-profile races.

One advantage of TV, radio and digital messaging in Senate races is that winning a statewide race requires reaching a lot of voters, and individually reaching out to residents (though door-knocking may not be a scalable strategy). Senate contests are expensive, which is why donors seeking to have maximum impact per dollar will sometimes focus on local and state legislative races where a gift, even a relatively small one, could help a campaign. Senate races, by contrast, are flooded with money, with the top five contests in 2020 costing more than \$250 million each, according to the [Center for Responsive Politics](#). This raises questions for donors about whether their money might be better deployed in other arenas, such as down-ballot state legislative races.

What is its track record of achieving its goals?

Senate races have been extremely hostile territory for Democrats in recent years. As the electorate has become more polarized, and in particular, as rural white people have become more reliable Republican voters, Democrats have lost Senate seats in states like Missouri, North Dakota, Indiana and Montana. The DSCC spends significantly in about nine races every cycle. In the past four cycles, the record of the candidates it has backed in the 36 races on which it has focused the most money is 10-26. Democrats have had some success in formerly red states that have shifted to the

left, like Arizona and Georgia, and a couple of idiosyncratic Democrats (Sens. Jon Tester and Joe Manchin) have held on in rural states, but overall, the Democrats' record in Senate races is not good.

Prior to the victories in Georgia, 2020 was shaping up to be a particularly disappointing cycle. Despite receiving huge amounts of money and support from the DSCC (along with other organizations), Democrat and former state representative Sara Gideon lost badly in Maine, and candidates in Montana, North Carolina and Iowa also faltered despite DSCC backing. (Part of the surprise around the extent of these losses can be chalked up to [polling errors](#).) It's difficult to criticize the DSCC's resource allocation strategies—there simply weren't more viable targets than those races.

A more substantive critique of the DSCC regards its strategy of endorsing candidates in primaries—a thing that state parties do not generally do. DSCC-backed candidates rarely lose primaries, even when facing a viable challenger, so the endorsement clearly has some value. ([Only one](#) DSCC-endorsed candidate lost in the 2020 cycle.) In theory, by putting its thumb on the scale, the DSCC can select candidates that are more likely to beat Republicans in November. But it doesn't have a consistent track record of picking general election winners.

In 2020, DSCC endorsed Kentucky Democrat Amy McGrath in a close primary against the more left-wing Charles Booker. McGrath, who had become a celebrity because of a viral 2018 campaign ad and earned additional attention because she was running against widely despised Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell, was subsequently featured in many joint DSCC fundraising emails that implied that she had a viable chance of unseating the powerful Senate leader. Instead, she lost by nearly 20 points. The DSCC also endorsed Cal Cunningham in the North Carolina primaries, a decision slammed by progressive icon Rev. William Barber, who called on the DSCC to [stay out of primaries](#) and noted that the national party had a habit in North Carolina of picking a white candidate over a Black one and going on to lose the election. (Cunningham lost a close race in 2020 after [texts came to light](#) that exposed his extramarital affair.)

Finally, more centrist figures in the party have said that the DSCC and Democrats generally do not have a good message to counter the GOP in red states, where the party also tends not to have the organizational infrastructure to compete.

Taken together, the criticism of the DSCC might be summarized as: “The DSCC has responded to adverse conditions by throwing its support behind largely white candidates who theoretically appeal to moderates, but except in rare cases, these candidates don’t actually have the tools to win.” After the 2020 elections (but before the Georgia runoffs), outgoing Alabama Senator Doug Jones [told Politico](#) that “DSCC and DCCC spend too much time investing in candidates and not the electorate. They don’t invest in House districts, they don’t invest in states.”

Does it have strong leadership and governance?

The DSCC is chaired by a senator selected by the party’s leader in the upper chamber, and each chair normally serves for a single cycle. The chair’s main duties are fundraising for the committee and recruiting candidates to run for open or Republican-held seats. It requires a lot of travel and massaging of donors and is sometimes seen as a grueling, thankless task; some senators have publicly stated [they don’t want the job](#). The chair also appoints senior staff who handle strategy, run departments ranging from communications to finance, and hire lower-level staffers. Though the committee’s decision-making is sometimes opaque—it’s unclear who directs its endorsements during primaries, for instance—ultimately, the DSCC is aligned with the Senate leadership.

As noted above, some prominent Democrats have registered their disapproval with the decisions of leadership. Of course, it’s been a very tough environment for Democrats in the Senate lately, so not all of the blame should be shouldered by leadership.

What metrics and milestones does it use to measure its success?

If you judge the DSCC by its record, it doesn’t look good. But there are mitigating factors to consider, so we should probably use some other metric. What that metric is isn’t clear though—whatever analyses the DSCC does of its own performance are not made public.

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

The DSCC did not respond to Blue Tent’s request for comment and discloses very little about its internal operations. This is typical for a major party committee, but it makes evaluating it difficult.

Is it committed to racial and gender equity both internally and in its strategies?

The DSCC’s prominent place in the Democratic party means that it generally is run by experienced campaign veterans. It’s the very definition of the Democratic Party establishment. It has been

plagued by problems common to that establishment, including a lack of diversity. The DSCC has made an effort to address this issue, creating a diversity and inclusion officer this cycle for Jessica Knight Henry, the former DSCC political director and the head of the Congressional Black Caucus PAC. But the organization is still criticized for a lack of diversity; in one recent Roll Call story, a Democratic strategist said that because there aren't many senators of color, there's not much pressure to hire a diverse team.

A trio of senators of color—New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, Hawaii Sen. Mazie Hirono and California Sen. Alex Padilla—are co-chairs of the new Majority Rising Leadership Council, which aims to make the DSCC more diverse while at the same time sharpening messaging aimed at voters of color, which Democrats of all ideological stripes agree was lackluster in 2020. Inadequate or clumsy outreach to Black and Latino, and AAPI voters was clearly a problem in the last cycle—and likely related to the whiteness of campaign staff—but the DSCC is at least aware this is a problem.

When it comes to candidate endorsements, there were at least four cases where the DSCC endorsed the white candidate in an open primary that included at least one candidate of color. This happened in North Carolina, which drew a complaint from Barber, and it also happened in [Texas](#), [Kentucky](#), and [Tennessee](#) (in Tennessee the endorsed candidate lost anyway, and in all three cases Republicans eventually won in the general).

Does it collaborate well and is it respected by its peers?

This habit of interfering in primaries has [upset progressives](#), who would prefer that it stay neutral. The DSCC would no doubt argue that it's only picking the candidate with the best chance to win—but that shows that it's attitude isn't all that collaborative. It has a huge war chest and massive amounts of institutional power, so it doesn't really need to compromise with other parts of the Democratic coalition, and for the most part, it doesn't.

Does it have clear and realistic plans for the future?

The DSCC hasn't released any of its endorsements for 2022 yet, but it's almost a certainty that it will run the same playbook as it has in previous cycles—hand-selecting candidates it thinks have a good chance to win, and pouring money into swing contests.

Conclusion

Given the parameters of its mission, it's impossible for the DSCC to be truly efficient. Senate races, especially the competitive ones that the DSCC focuses on, are money pits. The DSCC is, of course, right to spend large sums trying to win swing races, because the value of a single win or loss is immense, but the 2020 cycle demonstrates that even if Democrats have fundraising advantages, there are states where it's difficult for them to win. The experience of Gideon, the Maine Senate candidate who lost badly to incumbent Republican Sen. Susan Collins in 2020 despite having more money than she could spend, shows that factors donors and organizations cannot control (like the political environment and candidate quality) sometimes matter more than any amount of cash.

The fact that the DSCC usually pays more than campaigns for the same amount of air time is also a mark against it. And in high-stakes races where voters are saturated with TV, radio, direct mail and digital ads, there's an argument that additional spending really doesn't do that much. Did the \$3.8 million the DSCC spent opposing Georgia's Kelly Loeffler have an impact, given that the total cost of the race (including the primaries) was more than [\\$360 million](#)? Either way, DSCC doesn't have much of a choice: During campaign season, its role is to funnel money to high-leverage races. But donors may decide that there are better ways to spend their money.

The Senate is so important that we recommend donors—especially large donors—give to the DSCC. But most lower-level donors will get more bang for their buck by giving to campaigns directly, and also should consider giving to down-ballot candidates instead, where their money will go further. Given the DSCC's already massive wallet and spotty track record, though, we believe giving to this organization is a low priority for all donors. ([Explore our methodology.](#))

You may also want to check out:

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