

Swing Left

What Donors Need to Know

Swing Left is one of several organizations formed in 2017 by desperate and depressed Democrats in the wake of the shocking election of former President Donald Trump in 2016. Founded by a trio of relative political outsiders looking ahead to the 2018 midterms, the group's initial goal was simple: Its website would match Democrats by zip code with their nearest swing congressional district, defined as one where a Republican had won by fewer than 15 points.

Thanks to early support from [celebrities](#) and partnerships with DailyKos, ActBlue and Pod Save America, Swing Left became one of the primary groups of the "Resistance." It was instrumental in channeling anti-Trump anger into constructive endeavors; in one memorable day in 2017, it helped [raise \\$2 million](#) for Democratic candidates hoping to unseat Republican incumbents, even though 2018 primaries were months away and neither the donors nor the fundraising groups knew which candidates would eventually run. As the midterms approached, Swing Left mobilized volunteers who knocked on 5 million doors and made 2.5 million calls, according to the group's [2018 impact report](#). Along the way, Swing Left earned plaudits for being more nimble and more responsive than official party institutions. "The energy around Swing Left has highlighted the apparent lack of proactive and reactive organization within the Democratic Party," Jia Tolentino [wrote](#) in the *New Yorker* in 2017.

Swing Left has since evolved into a one-stop shop for Democrats hoping to help their party, providing opportunities for volunteering and donating while promising to channel voters' frustrations and hopes in productive directions. It has given donors of all sizes tools that allow them to give to the most important elections, and is now working on elections up and down the ballot, from state legislative seats to presidential races. Because of its record of innovation, Blue Tent **highly recommends** Swing Left and advises donors to make this group a **priority**.

What are its core strategies?

Swing Left has evolved quite a bit since its early days, but is still essentially a platform that allows rank-and-file Democrats to participate in the most important races in any given electoral cycle. Instead of spending a lot of money intervening in elections, as many PACs do, Swing Left instead pushes donors and volunteers to give money and time to candidates.

The biggest shift since its founding in 2017 is that it no longer confines itself to congressional races, but targets Senate seats as well as some state-level races. This reflects the increasing attention being paid across the progressive movement to securing state legislative chambers and governors' mansions, a priority that lags well behind right-wing efforts at the state level. These offices are vital to passing policies at the state level that immediately and materially affect daily life in critical ways; they are also critical to securing voting rights and to drawing legislative maps so vital to free and fair elections.

How does it spend money?

Swing Left has been very successful at fundraising. According to FEC records, it raised \$14 million in the 2018 cycle and \$15.7 million in the 2020 cycle, some of that in the form of six-figure gifts from people like fashion designer Tom Ford and Broadway producer Edward Snowden. In the latest cycle, it has raised \$3 million—as was the case in 2020, this money came largely from donations over \$2,000.

It spends this money on several core programs:

Swing Left groups. These are autonomous collections of volunteers who hold meetings and do things like [remote phone-banking](#) or letter-writing. They often collaborate with other organizations like Indivisible or Sister District (whose aims are similar to Swing Left's). Swing Left provides resources and guidance to these groups, but doesn't tell them exactly what to do. You can find these groups in swing states like Georgia, but they're thicker on the ground in the deep-blue precincts of states like California, where they can provide an outlet for Democrats who want to help win elections at a distance. Swing Left's website has an easy-to-use tool that lets you find your nearest group by entering your zip code; the idea is to bring people to these groups, and then guide the groups to intervening in close races.

Funds. In 2017, Swing Left launched funds for targeted congressional seats that would essentially hold donors' money in escrow until a Democratic candidate for a given seat won their primary. This allowed Democrats to give money earmarked for a general election, and it gave the primary winners an infusion of cash as soon as they reached the point where they would be spending it to defeat Republicans. Swing Left has refined this model, and today, [you can give](#) to the "Swing Left National Congressional Defense Fund," which will give money to Democratic incumbents in

swing seats—even though redistricting is still going on, so we don't even know which seats these will be.

Blueprint. Launched in 2020, this is a tool that allows donors to easily spread out their money to multiple candidates and groups. As we [wrote recently](#), “donors create a profile on the Swing Left website and select their priorities, choosing from options like “engaging voters in battleground states” or “defending the House majority.” After assigning percentages to each of these, donors can then donate via ActBlue and split their gift among these categories. Each category, in turn, represents a pool of money that is shared among candidates or organizations in battleground states.”

What are the strengths and weaknesses of its strategies?

Swing Left's mission could be described as trying to solve a singular problem facing the Democratic Party in recent cycles, which is that many Democrats want to contribute time and money to winning elections but live in areas so blue that there aren't local Republicans to defeat. These Democrats, especially ones activated by Trump's 2016 victory (as Swing Left's founders were), may not be plugged into the official party machinery either, and are more comfortable clicking around a well-designed website than finding their local Democratic Party.

In 2018, Swing Left reported that it encouraged [73,000 people](#) to donate to Democrats, a measure of how much enthusiasm the group had tapped into. The “Resistance” sometimes gets mocked by leftists online, but groups like Swing Left were enormously successful at channeling anti-Trump feelings into useful political action that helped retake Congress in 2018 and 2020.

By virtue of how it organizes Democrats, Swing Left may have unintentionally created an imbalance: Its supporters are heavily concentrated in urban centers with lots of agitated blue voters and activists. If you want to find a Swing Left group in Seattle, you have several options; if you want to find one in Tupelo, Mississippi, you're out of luck. Other groups will have to do the work of growing the Democratic Party in rural areas. (Though to Swing Left's credit, it does channel money to many other groups through Blueprint.)

One question for Swing Left—and for the rest of the Democratic coalition—is whether they'll be able to keep up the energy going into the 2022 midterms. Swing Left was effective when many Democratic-leaning people felt threatened by Trump, but now that there is less of a sense of

menace emanating from the White House, will Swing Left continue to be a hub for Democratic activity?

What is its track record of achieving its goals?

Maybe because Swing Left is still a relatively new organization, it has shown a willingness to change tactics and shift priorities, going from a group fixated on Congress in 2018 to one that takes an up-and-down-the-ballot approach as of 2021.

In that time, it has achieved quite a lot in terms of fundraising, attracting media attention, and involvement on the winning side of important elections. Though Swing Left doesn't deserve sole credit for winning the 2018 midterms, it contributed a lot, mostly in the form of volunteer hours.

The group's [2018 impact report](#) highlights California's 25th district, where eventual winner, Democrat Katie Hill, was inspired to run after visiting Swing Left's website, punching in her zip code, and realizing her own district was a swing district. Swing Left volunteers knocked on 294,000 doors, made 65,000 calls, and raised \$354,000 for Hill during the general election; Hill won by fewer than 22,000 votes. (She was later forced to resign from Congress after a bizarre scandal.) That amount of fundraising may be impressive from a new group, but it was just a sliver of the \$8.4 million Hill [raised](#). The more notable thing is that Swing Left was able to mobilize volunteers in that race and other races.

The following year, Swing Left merged with Flippable—an organization with similar goals—and focused on the state legislative elections in Virginia. There, it had made an undeniable impression, knocking on 88,000 doors, writing 229,000 letters, and raising \$863,000 for candidates, a substantial sum by the standards of these elections, as Democrats won both chambers of the state legislature.

In 2020, Swing Left continued to run the playbook that it developed in 2018, with some tweaks. The pandemic caused most Democratic-leaning organizations and campaigns to curtail canvassing operations, and Swing Left emphasized letter-writing through a partnership with Vote Forward. Its biggest investment in both volunteering and money came in Georgia, where, according to its [2020 impact report](#), Swing Left raised \$3.4 million, made 1.7 million calls and sent 4.1 million letters, all of which no doubt contributed to the eventual victories of Sens. Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock.

Does it have strong leadership and governance?

Swing Left is unusual in that it was founded by a relative outsider, Ethan Todras-Whitehill, who had volunteered for the John Kerry and Barack Obama campaigns, but had never run anything approaching the scope of Swing Left. And he was apparently surprised by how large and successful Swing Left became so quickly. “I remember thinking, ‘What are we going to do with all these people?’” [he told a reporter in 2018](#).

As it has transitioned from a web tool for voters to a permanent player in the Democratic coalition, Swing Left has staffed up. Todras-Whitehill still serves as executive director, but the group also employs many experienced, long-time Democratic operatives. It is well-positioned to continue its record of innovating and organizing.

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

The numbers that Swing Left seems to care the most about and frequently highlights are how many voter contacts their volunteers made and how much money Swing Left routed to Democratic candidates.

One difficulty in evaluating Swing Left—and this is common to many groups—is that its focus on swing states and swing races makes it essentially impossible to judge whether its support was decisive in any individual contest. In Arizona in 2020, for instance, Swing Left volunteers made 965,000 calls and sent 880,000 Vote Forward letters. Joe Biden won the state by 10,000 votes, so it wouldn’t be wrong to describe Swing Left’s contribution as critical to the outcome, but you could say the same thing about many groups that were active in Arizona reaching out to mostly the same universe of voters.

Swing Left also closely tracks the amount of money it raises, which in federal races isn’t enormous—that \$3.4 million it raised in Georgia, for instance, was a mere drop in the bucket, as the two Senate races wound up [costing more than \\$800 million combined](#). In state legislative races, where Swing Left is a relatively new player, the amount of money the group wields is smaller, but also more significant. In 2020, Blueprint raised \$1.5 million for state legislative candidates; by way of comparison, Sister District, a group that focuses exclusively on state-level races, raised \$1.8 million, just a little bit more.

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

Swing Left serves many of the same purposes as the official Democratic Party committees, but is much more transparent. Like most of the other groups that have appeared on the scene since 2016, it regularly publishes impact reports breaking down how many volunteers it organized and how much money it put into which states. It is also notably transparent about how it [chooses its races](#), reflecting an admirable willingness to communicate with its supporters as equals.

Swing Left will also occasionally explain what went wrong during an election, as its Blueprint team did in its latest impact report with a “note on polling” that described how recent surveys did not accurately predict the level of support for Trump, leading Swing Left (and Democrats as a whole) to be overconfident about their chances.

“As far as Blueprint’s strategy going forward, incorporating more candidate-agnostic measures—such as modeled partisanship or perception of the economy—alongside polling may make it easier to gauge race competitiveness if polling participation continues to have a partisan skew,” the authors of the report wrote.

This sort of memo isn’t groundbreaking—a lot of organizations have been issuing 2020 post-mortems about the disappointing results—but it’s refreshing for a group built on fundraising and volunteering to acknowledge failures as well as trumpeting successes.

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

Like pretty much every Democratic-aligned group, Swing Left says it values “diversity, equity and inclusivity,” and it supports many candidates of color. Through Blueprint, it funds groups that work to organize voters of color, like North Carolina Asian Americans Together.

But Swing Left is not primarily focused on diversity as a goal. Unlike Movement Voter Project, another organization that allows donors to contribute to “funds” that disperse money to a variety of groups, Swing Left’s Blueprint doesn’t feature funds that go toward Black-led, Native-led or AAPI-led groups. (If you contact the Blueprint team, they can likely help you create a custom portfolio that contributes to such groups, but it’s not a default option on their site.)

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

Swing Left by its nature is collaborative. Its volunteers often also volunteer with other groups, and

local Swing Left chapters will work with other groups (like Indivisible or Sister District) to support Democratic campaigns. At a higher level, Swing Left partners with groups like Vote Forward and, through Blueprint, is routing money to swing state groups that could contribute to Democratic victories. It's an important part of an ecosystem that exists in parallel to the official Democratic Party, but is working hard to give Democrats ways to help win elections—a sort of outreach that the official party does not always prioritize.

Does it have clear and realistic plans for the future?

Swing Left is open about its plans. You can read a “10-year plan to strengthen democracy” on its [website](#), and though this plan isn't super-detailed (it boils down to “Democrats should win more elections”), it does mark Swing Left's maturation into an organization that fights on multiple fronts, not just House races. It plans to help Democrats win races in the Senate as well as at the state level, from gubernatorial contests to state legislative battles.

In 2018, the House was the major battleground, and it made sense for a new group to harness the Democratic energy building around those races. Swing Left's shift toward other types of elections recognizes that all these fights are interconnected. If Democrats win state legislatures, they can redraw congressional maps during Census years; if Democrats hold governorships, they can (hopefully) prevent Republican-led state legislatures from hijacking the 2024 presidential election. After 2022, we will likely be heading into another period of divided government and choosing which elections to prioritize will be more complex than it was in 2018, when Democrats had dozens of pickup opportunities in the House. Swing Left intends to be a player for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Swing Left provides a great conduit for Democrats, especially those in blue states, to get involved in important elections. Joining a local Swing Left group is a terrific way to make yourself useful, and donating to Swing Left's funds or through its Blueprint portal is a great option for donors a little uncertain about which candidates or groups to support.

Swing Left promises to do great work in the 2022 election and beyond. Donating to Swing Left will help the group maintain and expand its operations, a goal important enough that we **highly recommend** Swing Left. Nonetheless, Swing Left has never been starved for cash and raises quite a lot from major donors. For that reason, we are rating Swing Left a **priority** rather than a high priority.

You may also want to check out:

- [The Fairness Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Sister District Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Emily's List/Women Vote!: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [People's Parity Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)

