

Dana Nessel: Attorney General, Michigan

Recommendation Level: High Priority



Like many progressive incumbents, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel was elected in the blue wave of 2018, becoming the first Democratic AG of Michigan since 2002. Democrats in the Great Lakes State also won the governorship and secretary of state's office, giving the party three vital statewide offices to defend in this year's midterms. As we discussed in our [candidate recommendation](#) for Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson, because of Republican attempts at election subversion in 2020 and Michigan's status as a likely swing state in 2024, retaining these state-level offices must be a top priority for the 2022 midterms.

Nessel's Republican opponent in the fall will most likely be either Tom Leonard or Matthew Deperno. Leonard is the former speaker of the Michigan state house who lost to Nessel in the 2018 election for attorney general; Deperno is a Trump-endorsed tax lawyer who made a name for himself in 2020 by filing suits to challenge the presidential election results in Michigan, alleging widespread voter fraud. Leonard has also voiced his support for a "forensic audit" of the 2020 elections, citing allegations of fraud.

Given the crucial role attorneys general in swing states could play in guaranteeing a free and fair election in 2024, Blue Tent is recommending donors give to Nessel and see supporting her candidacy as a **high priority**. ([Read more about how we recommend candidates.](#))

Is this election important?

Yes. Michigan is a battleground state, and Nessel's possible opponents favor continuing investigations into baseless voter fraud claims from 2020, and pose an outright threat to free and fair elections in the state in 2024. Michigan is also one of many states that could see previous abortion restrictions return if the Supreme Court were to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, as the state banned abortion in 1931 and never repealed the statute. Nessel has pledged not to enforce the law if *Roe* is overturned, while Leonard and Deperno both competed for the endorsement of Right to Life (the pro-life group endorsed Leonard).

Can Nessel win?

Yes. While Michigan famously turned red for Trump in 2016, the state elected Democrats to all three executive offices in 2018 and Joe Biden won the state in 2020. But 2022 promises to be a tough year for Democrats everywhere, and while [polling from early January](#) found that Nessel led both Leonard and Deperno, more than 20% of voters still identified as undecided. Thanks to increased partisanship and the decline of ticket splitting, the outcomes of the races for both the attorney general and secretary of state in Michigan will likely track closely with the results of the gubernatorial election. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has [polled above](#) her likely Republican opponents, but it may be too early to draw any strong conclusions.

Another important factor working in favor of Nessel and her Democratic colleagues is incumbency. The last time that an incumbent governor, secretary of state, or attorney general from either party lost an election in Michigan was in 1994. The reason why is not entirely clear, but may have something to do with the state's late gubernatorial primary, which takes place in August and gives non-incumbent candidates only a few months to fundraise and campaign with the gubernatorial nominee.

Does she need money?

Nessel had \$1.6 million in cash on hand at the end of 2021, raising \$277,954 between October 21 and December 31. Leonard outraised Nessel in the last months of 2021, hauling in \$283,481 to bring his cash on hand to \$665,968 ([Nessel raised about \\$2 million total in 2018, with Leonard raising about \\$2.1 million](#)). As we wrote in our guide to winning [attorneys general races](#), these campaigns also tend to see larger hauls than secretary of state races due to attention from special interests, primarily corporations on the right and trial lawyers on the left. Michigan Campaign Finance Network labeled 2018's election "the most expensive in state history," and given the stakes in 2022, we expect fundraising numbers to only increase further in 2022.

Nessel is well positioned to win reelection in 2022, with strong fundraising and an early lead in the polls. However, 2022 will be a challenging year for many Democratic incumbents, making Nessel vulnerable as she works to keep a critical state office in Democratic hands. The Michigan attorney general could play a decisive role in the outcome of the 2024 presidential election, and could even be in a position to prevent the criminalization of abortion in the state. Given these high stakes, Democratic donors should support Nessel's campaign and give as early as possible.