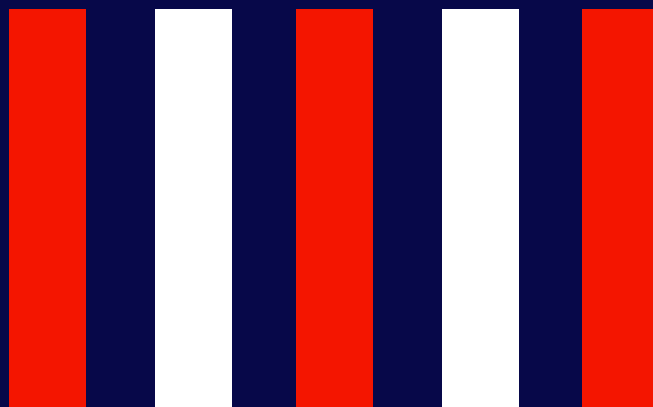


# A Guide for New Political Fundors

**DEMOCRACY  
DONORS**





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# Summary

*What if you interviewed the nation's best political advisors, organizational leaders, and experienced political donors, and asked them:*

## What's the best way to use my money to support American democracy and stop the Trump agenda?

*You'd get this advice.*

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### **Your contributions to political causes will make a difference.**

Federal political spending is just 1% of U.S. philanthropy. Lots of important races and organizations struggle to raise money, and have budgets of just a few hundred thousand or a few million dollars. So the problem isn't too much money; it's too much of the wrong kind.



### **Make candidates part of your political giving.**

Choosing candidates is overwhelming, so find endorsements of an organization that you support. Money can go even farther when you support state-level candidates and ballot campaigns, which are often out of the headlines.



### **Also fund political organizations.**

Campaigns come and go, but organizations build long-term power. Organizations that turn out Democratic voters help all of our candidates, up and down the ballot. Winning elections requires an entire ecosystem of organizations, most of which could make a bigger impact with more funding.



### **Give early.**

Your money is important at any time. But the earlier in a cycle you contribute, the farther your money will go; ad rates are cheaper, and the most effective tactics take time to implement.





### **Give both taxable and tax-exempt gifts.**

Important parts of the ecosystem are funded with tax-deductible donations, including policy research, non-partisan voter turnout, and more. State governments are really, really important. Savvy political donors take this as a given. Not only are states responsible for many policies that directly impact people's lives, they set voting rules and federal House districts. Many states use these tools to suppress Democratic voters and gerrymander away the representation that citizens deserve. What happens in states doesn't stay in states; it affects the balance of power in Congress.



### **There's no perfect way to be a political donor, so don't worry about trying.**

Don't wait until you find the perfect impact-maximizing gift to make; it doesn't exist. Instead, there are plenty of solvable problems to work on, and no single project can solve all of them or produce massively greater impact than others. So just get going; politics is much more art than science.



### **The presidential primary is a guilty pleasure.**

It's exciting to choose from so many great candidates, and can be fun to discuss at parties. But the primary is also a zero-sum contest among candidates who, for all their genuine differences, will produce policies that are more similar than different. Professionals disagree about what type of candidate is most likely to defeat Trump, so it doesn't make sense to invest a ton of money on your opinion about electability. Finally, your money won't go nearly as far in presidential politics as it will elsewhere. So go ahead and participate with your time and money – but remember that the primary is far from the greatest impact-per-dollar.



### **Join or create a donor group.**

Joining or forming a group of political donors makes the process a lot more fun – and helps you to learn from your peers and be more effective. Passion gets people engaged, but relationships keep you engaged.



# Discovering the Need for Giving

*After the shock of the 2016 election, people around the country asked themselves:*

## What can I do?

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Since then, people have marched, phone banked, canvassed, and voted as they never have before – supported by experts who shared their knowledge.

But would-be political donors have been left to navigate the landscape on their own. (Which organizations are actually effective? How do I choose candidates to support when there are so many?) Even donors experienced in non-political philanthropy found themselves overwhelmed and paralyzed in figuring out how best to contribute their resources towards political change.

**If you've ever wondered how to make effective political donations, we're here for you.**

**This guide is a collaboration between:**

- The ultimate insiders in political giving – advisors who help millionaire and billionaire donors make effective political donations;
- Campaign professionals and leaders of political organizations – people who know where the money goes, and how it can have the biggest impact;
- New political donors – people who have been philanthropic but only outside of politics. We felt compelled to get involved after Trump's election, and realized that we weren't sure where to begin. We want to share what we've learned to help you make your contributions go as far as possible.

*Collectively, we have made or advised on hundreds of million dollars of political donations. The annual political giving of the donors and advisors who helped create this guide ranges from \$10,000 to millions of dollars.*

So much that we love about our country is under attack: a free press, common decency and respect for diversity, free and fair elections, the rule of law, Constitutional checks and balances, and more. These important issues are now settled almost entirely by elections. People still hold the most powerful position in our democracy, but until we reform our campaign finance system, they need help that we as donors can and must provide.



With this guide, we invite you to join the community of donors working to fund political change in the most effective ways possible. Our country is at stake, and we need your help to save it. Fired up? Let's get started.

## Correcting wrong ideas

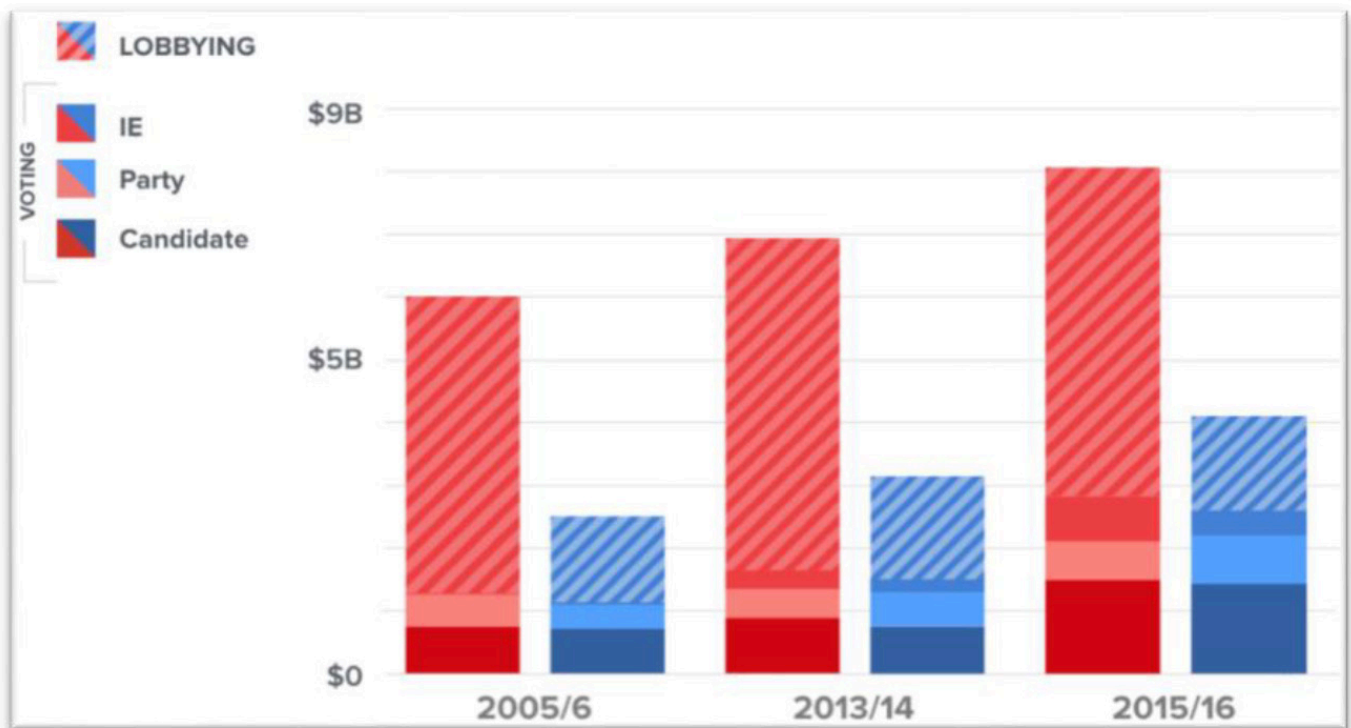
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Many of us shared misconceptions that had kept us from making political donations – but as we learned more, we realized that they weren't true. In case any of these concerns have held you back too, we want to get them out of the way.

Misconception	Reality
You need political expertise to give money effectively in politics.	You just need to know some basic information to feel confident that your political donations are well invested.
There's so much money and so many smart people in politics – what needs funding gets funding.	Many important and impactful political groups scrape by, and could have more impact (and win more elections) with more resources.
There's so much money in politics, my money won't make a difference.	Many important races and organizations have budgets of just a few hundred thousand or a few million dollars.
Making political donations requires giving up my privacy and making my name public.	Not all types of political giving require disclosing your name or the amount donated.
I can't make tax-deductible donations that have a positive impact on politics.	Important parts of the ecosystem are funded with tax-deductible donations, including policy research, non-partisan voter turnout, and more.
Political fundraising occurs mostly at big events with household-name politicians and donors.	Much of the money raised comes from asks between friends. Small- or medium-sized house parties are the most common fundraising events, for candidates and organizations.



## Too much money in politics? - Or too little?



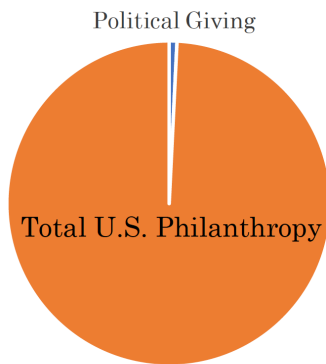
Source: "The Republican Right's Iron Curtain of Political Influence." Democracy Alliance.

Isn't there already too much money in politics? Yes and no. As shown in the adjacent chart, in 2015-16 the two sides combined spent almost \$6 billion total to win elections. (Lobbying adds several billion dollars more.)

Despite these large totals, **we believe that politics is underfunded by public interest philanthropy.** Political giving is just a tiny sliver of philanthropic spending in the United States. That \$6 billion is less than 1% of the \$770 billion of philanthropic spending in 2015 and 2016. This is a rounding error versus the trillions of dollars spent by government that helps or hurts our fellow citizens.<sup>1</sup> Plus, political giving today will preserve a healthy, vibrant democracy. The country needs more funding from donors who are promoting a stronger democracy – rather than trying to buy favors and financial gain.







The most important thing to know about money in politics is this: Your contribution will make a difference. Many of the organizations and candidates that we view as most important could easily do more (and have a better chance of winning), if they could raise more money. The political world is a mosaic of small organizations and campaigns, many of which have budgets of just a few hundred thousand or a few million dollars. You don't have to be a multi-millionaire to be impactful.

<sup>1</sup> For example, the Trump administration defunded \$9 billion from Affordable Care Act subsidies designed to reduce out-of-pocket health care costs for low income Americans; wouldn't it have been worth a fraction of that amount to prevent this?

## Chapter Summary

Do:	Don't
Get excited about becoming a more engaged member of our democracy.	Assume that political organizations or campaigns are adequately funded.
Believe that your money can make a difference.	Accept that there is too much money in politics – the problem is that there's too much of the wrong kind of money (e.g. special interests and extremists).
Remember that you don't have to be a political expert to make effective political donations; the key gap isn't between knowing and not knowing, it's between acting and not acting.	



# What Motivates You?

The world of political giving is broad, so it's easy to get overwhelmed. One way to focus is by selecting some goals that are most motivating for you. There's no silver bullet, and pretty much every area is underfunded. But while there's lots of work to be done, you don't need to do it all. The most important thing is to not be overwhelmed by the work that needs doing, but instead to get started.

Some goals that political donors are currently pursuing are:

## Check Trump by holding The House (and more)

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When Democrats control one chamber of Congress, such as the House of Representatives, we have a lot more power. Not only can we block harmful new legislation, we can also subpoena documents and testimony that are critical to investigating Trump's abuses and conflicts. While the Senate is tougher, it is worth fighting for as well, given its important role in judicial and other nominations.

In addition to Congress, there are important organizations pushing back against Trump's attacks on the rule of law, government ethics, and more.

*Comments: Yes, we won the House in a "blue wave" in 2018; but remember that we have to do it all over again in 2020, and again every two years!*

## Un-rig the system

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Democratic votes aren't appropriately reflected in our politics, because Republicans have rigged the system in their favor. Because the U.S. House districts are so gerrymandered, during 2016-18 Republicans hold 10.8% more seats despite earning just 1.2% more votes. Instead of a chamber that was almost evenly matched at 220-215 (as vote percentages would indicate), Democrats are were in a clear minority, 241-194. Many state legislature districts are gerrymandered in this way as well.

In addition to gerrymandering, Republicans have been pursuing policies at the state level that make it harder to vote, such as eliminating early voting (when working people can most easily visit the polls) and reducing polling locations in Democratic communities. These policies disproportionately impact youth, low-income families, and people of color.



*Comments: Control of statehouses and governorships after the upcoming census will determine who controls drawing new districts after the Census, in 2021. Flipping just one chamber of a legislature, or the governorship, gives Democrats a seat at the table for drawing district lines so that we can't be steamrolled like we were in 2010! State-level races and work are sparsely funded, so a little goes a long way here.*

## **Tackle an issue**

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Reproductive rights. Climate change. Mass incarceration. Many people are moved by their connections to a specific policy area. The organizations that work on these topics are important and longstanding pillars of our movement, and serve as trusted messengers to mobilize aligned voters.

*Comments: Relative to the right, more of the left's funding goes to single-issue organizations, while the right's funding is more focused on campaigns and electoral infrastructure. Some believe that this makes the right more effective at winning elections. We encourage you to fund issue organizations that speak to your priorities, especially to those organizations' electoral efforts.<sup>2</sup> But be sure also to fund campaigns and other general electoral work and electoral infrastructure.*

## **Build grassroots power**

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The story of this political moment is the huge wave of energy unleashed by the 2016 election. Spurred both by startup organizations like Indivisible, and also by established small and midsize organizations, more people are getting involved in politics than ever before.

This energized base rotates between advocacy (like stopping the repeal of Obamacare or passing an anti-gerrymandering ballot initiative in Michigan) and electoral work (where campaign volunteer turnout is up multiples from the past). These groups bring volunteer power to bear in races up and down the ballot, and build organization to maintain this energy and activism going forward.

*Comment: Many believe this is our secret weapon in 2018 and beyond. Volunteer power has been critical to the success of many candidates against far better funded opponents.*

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<sup>2</sup> Speak with the organization's development office for more information.



## Engage young people and communities of color

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Youth and people of color vote less often than other groups, but they are strongly Democratic. Donors have not yet invested enough here, even though these communities are the future of the country. Important organizations working to mobilize minority communities are chronically underfunded – even as their audience consistently proves to be a powerful political force. These efforts are best led by those familiar with or from the targeted community.

*Comments: These organizations are effective both at turning out voters to win elections and doing the on-the-ground organizing around important issues in order to build power for the community and keep them engaged for the next election.<sup>3</sup> A single active donor can have a particularly big effect in this field.*

## Build up infrastructure for the future

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Winning elections requires a whole infrastructure of organizations. These organizations recruit, train and develop leaders who will run for office; they find and deliver opposition research; they research and disseminate progressive policy proposals; and develop technology and data infrastructure to make campaigns' work more effective.

*Comments: Republicans started investing more heavily in these areas long ago and have built a deep bench of candidates, and have surpassed us in technology infrastructure. The Koch brothers, a centralized donor worth \$100 billion, enabled this with their consistent long-term funding. We need to catch up.*

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<sup>3</sup> For example, consider the election defeat of Bob McCulloch, the prosecutor who declined to prosecute the Ferguson policeman who killed Michael Brown. The on-the-ground work to make that happen engaged more people in the democratic process – and the result heartened communities nationwide. Our movement is stronger because that work happened, in a way that both supports and transcends the next election.



## Chapter Summary

Do:	Don't
<p>Get excited about becoming a more engaged</p> <p>Focus your giving towards particular goals, if that feels motivating and clarifying for you.</p>	<p>Feel like you need to cover every single goal with your giving.</p>
<p>Consider goals that overlap with your existing interests and networks.</p>	<p>Feel like you need to choose a goal before doing any political giving; more likely, you will come to favor one area or another through a process of giving and learning.</p>
<p>Get started!</p>	<p>Get paralyzed by worrying about which needs are most important; you can always refocus later. The only wrong answer is to do nothing.</p>



# Two Pages of Background Info

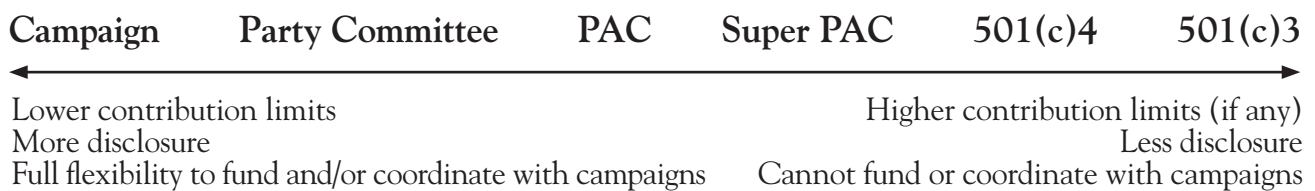
In this chapter and the next one, we’ll share just enough background information to give you the confidence to get started with political giving.

Many of us stayed away from political giving because we felt uninformed – not about policy issues, but about the alphabet soup of political organizations and legal structures. We were concerned that if we donated without getting up to speed, our gifts might have little impact.

It turns out that we shouldn’t have worried. You can get up to speed quickly – and getting started isn’t hard. We know, because we did it ourselves.

## What are all these legal structures I hear about?

The jargon is complicated, but the concept is pretty simple. Campaigns are the heart of the action, and are subject to strict funding restrictions (for federal campaigns, donations are limited to \$2,800 per individual per election, and donations over \$200 are public). Other entities are defined largely by their ability to fund or coordinate with campaigns; the closer to a campaign you get, the more disclosure and restrictions you see. While the chart below is an imperfect generalization, here are the main types of legal entities that you might encounter as a political donor:



**Note:** The finer points of the structures above become most important only for seven-figure donors. Why? A married couple can donate up to \$817,600<sup>4</sup> directly to the 73 candidates on the Democrats’ “Red to Blue” list from the 2018 cycle (dedicated to flipping the House of Representatives), plus at least \$200,000 more to worthy Senate, governor, state legislature, and other candidates – for a total of around \$1 million.

<sup>4</sup> Each individual can donate \$2,800 per election, which includes both the primary and general elections for a total of \$5,600. So two spouses can donate a total of \$11,200 per candidate.



## What do all of these organizations actually do?

Let's start with electoral campaigns. Money donated to candidates funds full-time staff members, including managers, communication directors, policy advisors, on-the-ground organizers, and more. The staff drives strategy, determines messaging, and decides how to spend on advertising and field organizing.

	Low (approx)	Typical	High (approx)	Notice how little a state legislative race costs! Yet states control so much important policy, not to mention drawing the lines for Congressional districts. If you're a donor of almost any capacity, you can make a difference in a state legislative race.
President	\$400 million	\$500 million	\$700 million	
U.S. Senate	\$2 million	\$10 million	\$30 million	
U.S. House	\$200,000	\$1.7 million	\$4 million	
Governor	\$10 million	\$25 million	\$120 million	
State Legislature	\$50,000	\$200,000	\$1 million	

The other various legal entities described earlier support elections in various ways:

- Committees and PACs may fund the campaign directly, and/or coordinate with the campaign in spending on advertising or on field organizing (e.g., sending volunteers or paid staffers to visit homes looking for supporters or persuadable voters).
- Super PACs and 501(c)4's will make "independent expenditures," which are money spent on the election (on things like advertising, get-out-the-vote work, etc.) and not in coordination with a campaign. 501(c)3's must be fully nonpartisan, but may get involved in an election by funding voter education, registration, or get-out-the-vote efforts. Want more details? We've put a lot more in the Appendix.

## Chapter Summary

Do:	Don't
Remember that your money can make a difference – a single race or organization may have a budget of just a few hundred thousand dollars.	Feel like you need to understand all the jargon before getting started.
	Donate to a 501(c)3 organization if you're not claiming a tax deduction; instead, contribute those funds to a more flexible entity.

Note: These figures exclude spending by the Super PACs and other 'independent expenditures' that don't coordinate with the campaign. This spending can exceed the amount spent by the campaign itself – in other words, total spending on these elections can be double (or more) the amounts shown in the table.



# Lifting the Curtain: How the Experts Do It

In this section, we include advice from longtime political donors and their advisors on how they maximize their impact. We also profile some fictional but realistic donors and show how they make their political gifts.

## Make campaigns part of your political giving

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A billionaire political donor told us, “The first money I contribute towards politics goes to maxing out on campaigns. It’s a given.” Many campaign veterans we spoke to said that the best thing to do with your dollar is to give it directly to a candidate’s campaign; no one knows how to spend money on a campaign better than the candidate and campaign manager, they said. But there are important caveats.

***Early money is more important than late money.*** “Candidates get a flood of donations as November nears, but one of the harsh realities of campaigning is that it’s harder to spend money effectively right before an election.”<sup>5</sup> Early money can go into building a team that organizes on the ground and helps to build long-term power. Late money generally goes into advertising and get-out-the-vote efforts, which are important but can’t nearly make up for inadequate early resources. Early fundraising success can impact a race in real ways, by scaring away potential challengers and incentivizing weak incumbents to step down. In addition, strong fundraising attracts press coverage that drives name recognition, which leads to more donations. It’s a snowball effect and it needs early donations to get rolling.

Plus, one donor advisor shared, “if you help the candidates meet their fundraising targets faster, they spend less time talking with out of state donors and more time talking with the people in their own districts. This doesn’t just win them votes, it makes them better candidates (and better elected officials).”

***Don’t worry about trying to pick candidates yourself.*** With 435 Congressional House races, 35 U.S. Senate races and more than 5,000 state legislative races taking place in 2018, nobody has the time to learn everything above about the thousands of candidates running each cycle. If your goal is to help win a chamber of Congress or turn your state legislature blue, look to groups who endorse candidates based on your values and on the impact of your giving.

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<sup>5</sup> Resistance organization Swing Left





*One exception. Some types of races get fewer national-level endorsements but are critical, such as elections for secretaries of state or state attorneys general.*

**Don't overlook state-level races.** State governments matter – a lot. States control voting rights, with many suppressing Democratic turnout by imposing restrictions and inconveniences on would-be voters. State government is responsible for most of what touches citizens' daily lives; paving our roads, providing most civil and criminal justice, determining most details of reproductive rights, and so much more.

After losing 1,000 elected seats nationwide over the last ten years, we have a lot of ground to make up. How did it happen? A finance director told us, “If you can direct \$100k - \$200k to a statehouse race in southern Illinois, you can often flip that seat. It's hard to raise money for those seats, but the Koch brothers were geniuses at it.” And it's not just state legislatures; “The importance of [secretary of state] contests cannot be overstated,” said a longtime political activist and donor.

## **Fund political organizations for long-term power**

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**Age is just a number.** The wave of grassroots activity around the country has been supported largely by new “resistance” organizations like Indivisible, Swing Left, and Sister District. But also critical in driving volunteer energy have been more established groups, both generalists (like MoveOn), issue groups (like various gun safety groups), and local power-building organizations (like those supported by Way to Win and Movement Voter Project).

**Put tax-exempt dollars to good use.** A lot of the work of engaging underrepresented communities, such as young people and people of color, can be done through charitable organizations that accept tax-deductible contributions. Building organizations that are embedded in these communities, and remain in place after elections, mean that your donations have an impact that lasts into the future.

**Expanding democracy isn't just the right thing to do – it's a long-term investment.** Ballot initiatives focused on making voting more accessible, such as permanent no-excuse absentee ballots, early voting, same-day voter registration and even automatic registration for citizens when they turn 18, as well as re-enfranchising returning citizens who have served their time in prison, break down barriers to participation and have implications for future elections.



**Organizing means getting people to act.** Making change in a democracy means getting people to take action; protesting, volunteering, and ultimately voting. The ability to get people to do these things is what makes an organization powerful. When evaluating an organization, ask about its ability to mobilize followers. Don't be swayed by just a large email list; look for evidence that people care about the organization enough to act based on its guidance. Whereas campaigns come and go, local organizing by permanent activist organizations builds and sustains over time (assuming they get funded!).

**Following the herd is OK – but opportunities abound elsewhere too.** “So much money pours into some of the major races and organizations – it could be better used elsewhere,” said one experienced political donor. We believe that your money will be effective almost anywhere it goes; marquee races and organizations that are get the most media attention are (usually) important and deserving of support. **That said, your money will generally go even farther at a smaller race or organization** with a six- or seven-figure budget. Such organizations are a major part of the political world – and too often are scraping for funds. Don't assume that the most impactful organizations are those you've already heard of, or those that get written up in national media.

## Lifting the curtain: political donors' portfolios

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In this section, we lift the curtain and show how several political donors allocated their giving in 2017-18. The donors are illustrative but based on real people. Notice how different each donor is! There is no one right way.

### ***A donor wants to give \$10,000 to help Democrats take the U.S. House.***

This donor gives \$4,000 to be split among all candidates on the DCCC's Red to Blue list.<sup>6</sup> He also gives \$1,000 to the PCCC, to support more progressive candidates nationwide, and \$4,000 to Way to Win, which channels his donation to smaller organizing groups in key states that are turning out voters for races up and down the ballot.



On the Swing Left web site, this donor finds an important race that's a short drive away, and gives \$1,000 to that candidate. He gets on the email list and attends a campaign fundraiser, where he meets the candidate and feels inspired to ask his friends to contribute as well. He also meets some of the other attendees, and gets invited to a small dinner where he meets other political donors to learn what they contribute to.

This donor has a network of friends who can make similar-size gifts, which makes his potential impact really significant. He invites friends (and friends of friends) to dinners at which he explains the basics of political giving and helps people get started with giving to candidates.

***A donor wants to give \$500,000 to support abortion rights (applies similarly to other causes such as environmental protection, civil rights and voting rights, criminal justice reform, etc. )***

The donor contributes \$100,000 to two major reproductive rights organizations, Planned Parenthood and NARAL. Each organization maintains several legal entities (e.g., state or federal PACs, 501(c)4, and 501(c)3). Through discussions with each organization's development staff, the donor allocates among these in order to have the largest impact. He also donates directly to several candidates that the groups endorse.

Because reproductive rights are often won or lost at the state level, he makes a portfolio of relevant investments: Power-building organizations (Sister District, Way to Win), the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, and party organizations (Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, and the Democratic Governors Association 2020 Redistricting Fund).

He also maxes out (\$2,700/person) to the three Democratic incumbent Senators in the closest races as well as to their Victory Funds (\$10,000/person), as the Senate confirms Supreme Court justices.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://secure.actblue.com/donate/2018redtoblue>



***A technology professional in Silicon Valley is excited by innovative approaches to making political change.***

This donor supports New Media Ventures and Higher Ground Labs, both of which fund progressive startups.<sup>7</sup> He also directly supports a few of the entrepreneurs supported by those organizations, particularly resistance startups like Indivisible and Sister District. He also funds some progressive technology startups that he believes have promise, which he meets at NMV's annual conference.

Instead of giving to campaigns, he supports Way to Win and Movement Voter Project, which funnel his gifts to local organizing groups that build long-term power to support campaigns and other progressive initiatives.

The donor joins a group of other people in the technology world who are interested in learning about political giving. They compare notes on organizations that they find compelling, and invite political entrepreneurs to present to the group.

***A donor wants to support Democratic candidates and build progressive infrastructure in their state.***

This donor wants to focus her efforts close to home, and also happens to live in a state that is critical to winning Presidential elections.

She gives to candidates running for Governor, Senate, the U.S. House and her state legislature. She also calls up the state Democratic Party and learns about their work and makes a contribution for their technology and digital ads program.

She joins the state donor table to learn more about where funding is needed, and to meet others equally committed to making a lasting impact in her state. Through this effort, she learns about a few local organizations as well as a ballot initiative that needs completion funding.

As the elections near, this donor hosts a reception for one of the candidates she gave to for the state legislature and invites her neighbors to join her in supporting this campaign. She also volunteers and makes some calls for this candidate to help get out the vote.

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<sup>7</sup> New approaches in politics can come slowly. In the for-profit world, a new technological advance will spawn dozens of competitors so that one or two can become successful. In the political world, a new idea might spawn just a few startups, even fewer of which will obtain any funding at all. Raising the first few hundred thousand dollars for a political startup – whether a new technology, advertising system, texting approach, or anything else – is extremely difficult.



### *A megadonor wants to contribute \$10 million to support the left*

This donor chooses to build a balanced portfolio of political donations, allocating roughly evenly across the following three buckets: supporting candidates to win the House, and supporting two typically underfunded areas - grassroots organizations and state-level races.

This donor hires an advisor to select a slate of campaigns to “max out” on (i.e. give the maximum amount allowed by an individual, which is \$2,700 for a primary and \$2,700 for a general election per candidate). The advisor recommends the candidates on the Swing Left’s Immediate Impact Fund and about a dozen others as well. The donor gives the maximum of \$33,900 allowed to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC). This totals \$231,000. Her spouse makes the same donations. The donor gives \$500,000 to House Majority PAC, a Super PAC dedicated to electing Congressional Democrats. This leaves roughly \$1 million unallocated.

She joins the Democracy Alliance, at whose meetings she meets and learns of other important organizations, many of whom are included in the table in the next chapter. She donates to a broad swath of these, selecting based on her impressions of the quality of their leadership and the recommendations of other donors.

And, finally, she sends \$100,000 each to three efforts doing state-level work: the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, which supports important races for state legislatures, ACRONYM’s Ledge project running digital media for critical state house races, and the Democratic Governors’ Association Unrig the Map Fund to support governors running in states where they have veto power over redistricting in 2021.

Now you know how the experts do it! The next step is to find your own path, and get started yourself. In the next section, we give tips on how to do that.



## What should I discuss with politicians?

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When you become a political donor, you'll have the opportunity to interact with candidates and elected officials. They might even start cold-calling you! Here are some reasons why you might want to speak with a politician:

- Thank them! They are dedicating a portion of their life to public service.
- Interview them to learn if they align with your preferred positions
- Ask questions like whether they pay their staff a living wage

Here are some reasons you might want to avoid speaking with politicians:

- Every minute that a candidate talks to a donor is a minute lost in persuading a voter. Politicians are crushingly busy, as the demands on their time are immense. This is even truer on a campaign, when candidates are racing between events and falling behind on sleep.
- Lots of information about their background and positions is available online.
- The current system means that politicians spend many hours every day speaking with wealthy people, instead of “building relationships with members of the opposing party or developing subject-matter expertise related to their committees and constituents.”<sup>8</sup> This can impact what issues feel important to politicians, and also make them less finely tuned to interact with their constituents.

**A blunt truth:** Conversations with donors don't tend to help politicians much. The reality of our campaign finance system means that politicians will gladly speak with you. But remember that ***your main goal is to help them win***, and one way you can do that is by being judicious with the precious resource of their time. A long-time campaign fundraiser told us, “You have to trust that candidates are employing the right people and using money right, and adding policy [or strategy] advice isn't very helpful.”

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<sup>8</sup> Issue One, an organization dedicated to fixing our democracy



## Chapter Summary

Do:	Don't
Remember there are many ways to be a political donor – and all are valid and valuable.	Only contribute to races or causes highlighted in national media.
Donate as early in the cycle as you can.	Decide that an organization isn't impactful if you haven't heard of it before.
Donate to both federal and state level candidates and organizations.	Feel like you have to do everything – many impactful donors focus on just one area.
Help our side win by being judicious with candidates' time.	



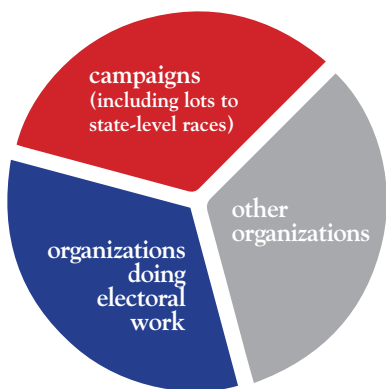
# The Best Way To Start Is To Start

With so many worthy causes, how do you choose? You won't feel certain that you've gotten it right. You could spend a year following politics full-time, hire a donor advisor – and you still won't have a guarantee that you've made the biggest difference you can. So don't worry about whether your political giving decisions are optimal; just get going.

**The key gap isn't knowing vs. not knowing; it's acting vs. not acting.** In this section, we give advice on how to get started from people who have traveled the same path.

In our experience, the best way to start is to set some deadlines:

- Block 20 minutes on your calendar for tomorrow, and write this down: “Make a small donation”
- Set aside a half hour on your calendar for next Monday morning, and schedule two tasks. First, to make another small donation. (There's no better way to start a week than by giving to a good cause.) Then, in your remaining 20 or 25 minutes, set aside time to read through this guide again and reach out to some organizations as described below in the section, “Concrete Next Steps.”
- And then, on the Monday morning after that, find another 10 minutes and add “Make a bigger donation” to your schedule.



There is no one right way to be a political donor; it's fine to devote yourself to a single area. If you want to cover all the bases yourself and aren't sure what areas to prioritize, we suggest keeping it simple at first, and allocating your giving roughly equally to each of three categories. Once you learn more and start to build some relationships, you can decide whether to continue this approach or to focus more.





## How do I choose a candidate?

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Think it's confusing and time-intensive to pick candidates? You're right! That's why very few donors choose to do it themselves. Rather than sorting through the hundreds of races themselves, most donors look to organizations or advisors on which candidates to support. Here are some options:

- For the House: DCCC, House Majority PAC, Swing Left
- For State Legislative and Governor races: DLCC, DGA, Sister District
- For the Senate: DSCC, Swing Left.

When evaluating candidates, longtime donors typically look at a variety of factors, including: Issue positions, race winnability (hard to predict these days!), candidate quality and personal story, and location. More information on selecting candidates is included in the Appendix.

Additionally, check the endorsements of groups that share your values. For example, if you care about reproductive rights, considering donating to candidates endorsed by Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

## Hot Topic: Should I donate to primaries?

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A primary is when candidates compete to be the Democratic party's official nominee in a subsequent general election (typically against a Republican and sometimes other parties as well).

Because resources are limited, many political donors take a hard line against donating to candidates in competitive primaries. These donors ask, "Why would I pay to fight against other Democrats? I'll save my money to win against Republicans." This approach generally makes sense, but there are some exceptions.

In some deep-blue areas, it's overwhelmingly likely that the Democratic nominee will win the general election. Therefore, the Democratic primary essentially *is* the election. For the people's voice to be heard, it needs to happen via the Democratic primary. Supporting primary candidates in these races is an important way of electing candidates who can be outspoken in raising the party's issues as only federal elected officials can do. The most prominent example is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who won an upset primary victory in a deep-blue district. Contested primaries, especially in blue areas, are an integral part of a healthy democratic system.



## How do I make donations?

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### *ActBlue*

A majority of Democratic House and Senate campaigns, along with the DSCC, DCCC, DGA, many state-level campaigns and advocacy organizations, use the website ActBlue to connect with donors. For most candidates and organizations, giving is as simple as visiting ActBlue.com and clicking “Donate,” which takes you to an easy-to-use platform to make an immediate contribution.

### *Reach out to a campaign’s or organization’s fundraising team*

You can reach out to a campaign or organization directly. Political organizations have development staff, just like the broader non-profit world. (On campaigns, the title is “finance director.”) Just reach out to the main phone number or email address, and ask to be connected – they will love to hear from you!

A few tips for these conversations from organizational leaders are in the Appendix. These are equally applicable to political and non-political giving.

### *Emails and Politics*

Giving to a candidate online will put you on a campaign’s email list. If you’ll be giving to many campaigns (and you should be!), you may want to set up a separate email address. Unsubscribing is easy, so don’t let this hold you back from donating.

Sadly, many campaigns use consultants that produce spammy donation requests. The worst of these have misleading and dramatic subject lines to get you to open them. There’s a heated debate within the community about these emails; while some view them as optimal based on past data, others view them as uninspiring at best, and exhausting to the point of driving people out of the movement at worst. We’d like to see a progressive movement full of emails that are inspiring and actionable, rather than seeking to scare people into donating. If you get on these lists, you can always unsubscribe via a link at the bottom.



## Concrete next steps

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### *Here's what we suggest you do to get started:*

#### *I. Get started with an organization*

1. Pick any organization that you've heard of.
2. Spend ten minutes reading their web site.
3. Unless you see anything you hate, make a small gift on their web site.
4. Call their main number and ask for the development department. Tell whoever picks up the phone that you are a new political donor and would like to learn more about their organization. Ask them to send you some further information, and to set up a call with the director of development or executive director about getting more involved.

#### *II. Get started with a campaign (applicable in 2020)*

1. Go to the DCCC Red to Blue list (<https://redtoblue.dccc.org/>) or Swing Left District Fund list (<https://swingleft.org/district-funds>)
2. Pick a race that's either geographically close to you, or in an area you care about. If you don't see any meeting those criteria, pick one at random (seriously!).
3. Spend five minutes reading the candidate's web site.
4. Make a small gift on their web site.
5. Contact the campaign by phone or email. Say that you are a new political donor and would like to speak with the finance director to learn more about the candidate before making a larger contribution.

## Chapter Summary

Do:	Don't
Set a deadline to give.	Be overwhelmed by the vast universe of choices – the only wrong choice is to do nothing.
Set up some calls with fundraising staff at campaigns and organizations. Tell them you're new to political giving and they'll be glad to teach you.	Donate in response to spammy emails.
Donate if you receive solicitations (even mass emails) that inspire you or make you feel closer to a candidate or the movement.	Donate only to national organizations – state and local organizing is critical.

# Everything Is Better With Friends

*“Philanthropy is heavily influenced by people in your network. Some of the folks who have been most effective—in philanthropy and political giving—are those who have sought out networks to do this together.” – Seven-figure political donor*

You might be thinking, “This would be a lot easier if I had someone else who shares my values and could help me think through what’s important.” You’re right. And that’s what’s happening—donors are self-organizing around the country.

Groups of five to 25 donors have formed to learn and act more effectively than their members could do independently. These groups have been rewarding for their members, who have made friends and become more educated and empowered to make a difference. One of the most rewarding parts of this experience has been knowing that we aren’t alone, and that we have peers who share our goals, passions, and fears.

## Why be a part of a political giving group?

### **Reason #1: You’ll Enjoy It**

- It’s fun and inspiring. With everything going on, we know how good it feels to know that you’re working alongside a community of similarly dedicated individuals.
- You will meet people who share your values. Joining a donor group can provide a meaningful community of like-minded, motivated people.

### **Reason #2: You’ll have a bigger impact**

- There’s too much to learn about politics for any one person to handle. No one has the time learn about the nitty-gritty details of every possible giving opportunity. You don’t have to when you can learn from your group’s experience and expertise.
- You may miss important opportunities on your own. With so many candidates and new organizations to choose from, you might miss an opportunity in your own backyard to fund a smaller group that can make a difference.
- You will meet inspiring candidates and organizations. Joining a donor group can help you build relationships with candidates and organizations, giving you the opportunity to discuss our shared visions for a better America. It can give you a seat at the table to fight even harder for the values, rights, and policies you believe in.



## What are some large donor groups I could join?

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### Democracy alliance

The Democracy Alliance (DA) is the closest thing the left has to the Koch network, but not as centralized. It was founded primarily to support Democratic infrastructure organizations (see their roster at <https://democracyalliance.org/investments/>). The DA team selects a roster of important organizations, and members join by committing to fund a certain amount across that portfolio (there is a minimum commitment). The group meets twice a year, along with leaders of progressive organizations and prominent Democratic politicians. (Want a flavor of the meetings? Agendas are confidential, but some have been pilfered and posted online.) The DA recently rolled out a new investment strategy.

### State donor tables

Many states have three types of “tables,” or unofficial coordinating bodies. One is a “donor table,” a fancy name for donors coming together to coordinate their activities to maximize impact and avoid duplication. These donor tables exist in roughly 25 states. The other two “tables” are for 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 organizations, and are often affiliated with State Voices or America Votes, respectively. The donor table coordinates with both organizational tables.

### Strategy-based networks

#### *Way to Win & Movement Voter Project*

These groups connect donors to state-based organizations engaging new voters, building power to elect candidates up and down the ballot in those states, and then holding the elected officials accountable to deliver on their policy promises. Both have full-time professional staff, and run conferences and webinars for members. MVP offers a free discussion with a donor advisor to help get you started, and resources on giving circles. Their web sites are <https://waytowin.us/> and <https://movement.vote/>.

#### *Future Now Fund*

FNF focuses on flipping state legislatures, with the help of several dozen giving circles nationwide. They provide materials on starting and running your own giving circle.

### Patriotic millionaires

More of an advocacy group for progressive taxation than a donor group, but its membership is inherently comprised of political donors.



## What to expect in big donor groups

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From the outside, we always heard about politics happening in smoky rooms. We pictured political donor meetings, especially the larger ones, as dark conspiratorial chambers where major decisions get made. Having been in these rooms, the truth is much less dramatic. (Sorry!) A large gathering of political donors, such as those in the Democracy Alliance or any other, is much like any large conference that you'll attend. People speak from a stage or in smaller groups. In the hallways, organizational professionals have conversations to raise money, share ideas, and learn best practices. Donors meet with professionals and one another to try and make the best possible funding decisions.

## What do smaller / less formal groups look like?

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The smaller donor groups that have formed in the last two years are varied. Here are some examples of actual ones:

### Monthly Dinner Group

- About 15 friends and friends-of-friends
- Monthly evening meetings with an informal dinner discussion, followed by a guest speaker (such as the head of a political organization, or other expert) who shares education and/or pitches for funding

### Quarterly Full-Day Meetings

- About 25 families, found by word of mouth
- Four full-day meetings/year in NYC; a political advisor (see below) helps to organize
- Speaker are mostly organizational leaders, with occasional other political figures
- Some webinars and other events for members
- Focused on infrastructure rather than candidates

Some groups hire an advisor to research potential grantees and more broadly help members make sense of the landscape. These advisors have typically worked on campaigns and/or political organizations and have an established network in the political world.



## Giving Circles

- Members make contributions and decide jointly where to direct the proceeds
- Some giving circle members act as fundraisers, with the members soliciting new members and contributions.
- For more detail on one style of giving circle, you can visit <https://www.futurenow.org/giving-circles>

## How do I start a donor group?

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If you were hoping to join a donor group in your community, but can't find a good fit, then start one!

- Start where you are. If you're in social circles with people who might be interested in joining a group, then start there. If you're not, you'll need to find them somewhere else.
- Identify a few additional co-founders who are interested in joining and recruiting others. Some groups are organized around commonalities, e.g. technology professionals, or philanthropists of a particular faith; others are more general. Both models can work!
- Make a list of friends, family and colleagues in your personal network who you think might want to join you. One new donor told us, "You never know who is going to give. I asked five friends to match my contribution to an organization. Two who gave I didn't expect to give; five others who I expected to give didn't."
- Then, decide if you want to host a meeting, or have small one-on-one dinners to explain what you're hoping to accomplish. One donor told us the best way to convince someone to join your donor group is to invite them to a small dinner, either alone or with just one or two other people, giving you the opportunity to discuss shared values and what goals are important to you.
- Schedule your meetings and decide how to reach out. One donor told us that they don't solicit by phone because it puts pressure on people to respond in the moment, before they might be ready to commit. This person explained that it's better to invite people by email, which gives the recipient time to think and respond. For a sample email, see the Appendix.



- Meet and share. Unless you've recruited longtime political donors, it's unlikely your new group will have great knowledge of their giving opportunities. Let this guide serve as a starting point. Get their story. What issues do they care about? How does the Right's agenda affect their communities and their values? Ask open-ended questions! People are more likely to take action when they articulate what they care about and can connect it to the action they are going to take.
- Consider hiring an advisor. Some groups hire part- or full-time consultants (also known as donor advisors) to help them get up to speed, or to recommend candidates and organizations based on the group's priorities.

## Chapter Summary

Do:	Don't
Join a donor group.	Feel like you need to find, diligence, and select political causes all by yourself.
Learn from other people's experience and expertise.	Feel sheepish about talking with others about your political giving – you are stepping up for your country.
Form relationships with people who share your values to maximize your impact.	
Identify friends and family who might want to join you.	





*“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”  
- Attributed to Edmund Burke*

Congratulations! You’ve made it to the end. Just by reading this guide, you know more about political giving than most people. Now it’s time to put that knowledge to work.

The decisions you make can change our country for the better. Even if you’re far from a billionaire, ***you have power – and your country needs you to use it.***

We know the other side is supported by funders with deep pockets and values we disagree with. If we’re not standing up for our candidates and our causes, who is? And if not now, when?

## Get in touch

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If you have questions, suggestions or criticisms, we’d like to hear from you. We can also provide additional resources or introductions to help you on your journey. You can reach the authors by emailing [PoliticalDonorGuide@gmail.com](mailto:PoliticalDonorGuide@gmail.com).



# Appendix

Here are some more details and sample materials:

- More details on each of the types of political entities (Super PAC, 501c4, etc);
- Additional insights from organizational leaders on giving to political non-profits;
- A deep dive on selecting candidates to give to.

## What do all these political entities actually do?

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### *Party committees*

Party committees provide additional resources to campaigns, as well put additional money on the ground to turn out voters. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) focuses on Congressional campaigns for the US House, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) focuses on campaign for the US Senate. The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (DLCC) works to win state legislative races and the Democratic Governors Association (DGA) works to win gubernatorial races.

The overall national Democratic party committee is the Democratic National Committee (DNC). The Committee, plans the Party's presidential nominating convention and promotes the Democratic Platform, the statement of core principles of the Party. The DNC also raises money, hires staff, and coordinates strategy to support candidates throughout the country for local, state, and national office.

Additionally, the DNC provides the campaign with a database of voters, that includes data from past elections. This helps the campaign figure out their voters already are, and who they need to persuade.

*Contribution limits: \$33,900 per person per year*

### *Pacs and Super Pacs*

PACs, often associated with a company, union or specific individual (such as a member of Congressional leadership), donate money directly to the campaign to use as they see fit.

Super PACs also get involved in races. They aren't allowed to coordinate with or give money directly to a candidate campaign (this is the main difference between PACs and Super PACs), so instead they fund "independent expenditures," which include advertisements (TV, digital, etc.), or canvassing (door-to-door visits to voters by volunteers or paid staff). One Democratic fundraiser explained, "There's



always a shortage of opposition research,” for use against opponents, which Super PACs often employ in advertisements. These activities look to the public as if they are coming from the campaign itself. But these activities aren’t allowed to be coordinated with the campaign.

Additionally, some organizations channel grassroots energy into supporting campaigns; because the bulk of their activities supports specific candidates, these organizations are structured as Super PACs. For example, Win Justice works with grassroots volunteers and staff to engage and vote on issues and candidates that will matter to their communities. They are expressly advocating for candidates and positions on Amendments with the majority of their time and funds.

*Contribution limits: \$5k (PACs), Unlimited (Super PACs)*

#### **501(C)4 organizations**

These organizations have a ‘primary purpose’ that is charitable in nature, typically focused on education or research. They must spend 51% of their spending on their primary purpose work and can work with campaigns and support legislation the other 49%. Donations to 501(c)4 organizations are not disclosed to the public.

*Contribution limits: None*

#### **501(C)3 organizations**

501(c)3 organizations must be nonpartisan, which means they cannot support or oppose a specific candidate or Party, but they can have progressive or conservative values that drive their work and mission.

Much of this work focuses on underrepresented communities in our political process. For example, Voto Latino conducts non-partisan voter registration and get-out-the-vote work focused on the young Latino population; the Voter Participation Center mails similar materials targeting unmarried women, people of color, and millennials; Rock the Vote registers young voters and educates them on the basics of voting (where to go, when to go, what’s on the ballot).

A lot of research and education focused organizations and thinktanks, like the Center for American Progress or the Brennan Center for Justice, are 501 organizations. 501(c)3 organizations are charitable non-profits and all donations are tax-exempt.

*Contribution limits: None*



## What organizational leaders wish donors knew

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Ever wondered what the recipients of your gifts are really thinking? Here's what they shared with us:

***Do: If you're concerned about an issue in the headlines, start by looking for the groups who've been working on it for a long time.***

When an issue attracts a lot of attention, many organizations will shift to working on it or announce new campaigns to take it on. These new efforts are well-meaning, but this phenomenon of “parachuting in” can displace local or more specialized organizations who've already got relationships, expertise, and capacity on the issue.

***Don't: Earmark your donation for a specific project or program.***

With politics changing so quickly, needs change month to month, week to week and sometimes even day to day. Restricting the use of your gift increases the chances that it will be spent on something other than what the organization's leaders view as the biggest impact opportunities. Ideally, build up enough trust with an organization's leaders to feel comfortable that they will put your money to the best possible use.

***Don't: Make a commitment and then delay on sending the money for months.***

This happens a lot(!), and it can cause huge problems for nonprofits or campaigns operating on a shoestring budget. You're going to send the money anyway, do it quickly!

***Do: Remember that a fast “no” helps organizational leaders maximize their time.***

While everyone would prefer a “yes,” if you know that an organization isn't right for you, say so and let them invest time with others.

***Don't: Ignore the “internal stuff.”***

Donors rarely ask any questions about staff, how things are run, or whether the entity is really living its values. This is a missed opportunity. You can be a force for good if you're willing to push on important topics. Ask if all staff are paid a living wage and receive benefits, whether there's a parental leave policy, and how the organization seeks out diverse candidates. For campaigns, ask if their consultants are being paid a percentage of total ad spending, and how they deal with that conflict of interest.



## Selecting candidates to support

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Here are some criteria that a longtime political donor would use – but it’s much more art than science.

Criteria	Description
Issue Positions / Endorsements	Do you care about a particular issue? Find out which candidates running champion those issues. Often there will be an issue-focused nonprofit group who endorses a slate of candidates that are critical to their cause. Additionally, a quick Google search usually does the trick.
Winnability	<p>How winnable is the race? To see the partisan tilt of the district (i.e. whether it is more Republican or Democrat than average, and by what percentage), you can look up the district’s Cook Partisan Voting Index.</p> <p>Beyond the raw demographics, there are a couple of resources you can use to see what the experts say, including the Cook Political Report, or Sabato Crystal Ball. Both issue ratings on races nationally on a six- or seven-point scale, ranging from “Safe Republican” to “Safe Democrat.” (Cook uses slightly different terms.) Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight.com maintains probabilities of victory in races nationwide as well.</p> <p>Note: The experts can definitely be wrong. We’re in an unusual time when some of the old rules may no longer apply.</p>

*Continued on next page*



Criteria	Description
Viability & Electability (synonyms)	<p>These are squishy concepts that can be self-confirming. Early in a race, candidates jockey to become a “front-runner” based on things like fundraising and endorsements, in hopes that this attracts still more support and also scares away challengers.</p> <p>At best, viability is an accurate judgment by donors of which candidate is likeliest to win (either in the primary and/or the general election). At worst, it can be a shorthand that entrenches election-losing biases. Early viability is most attainable by (a) people who can self-fund a campaign, and/or who have networks of early wealthy backers, (b) people whose demographics match donors’ ideas of what voters want, and (c) people already enmeshed in the political world. Therefore, a focus on “viability” can amount to a defense of the status quo – which hasn’t served Democrats well in recent years.</p>
Personal Story	Does their story compel you? It’s natural to gravitate to candidates who have a compelling story, and often when a candidate wins its because they’ve figured out how to relay that story to voters.
Candidate Quality	A host of intangible qualities of both your candidate and his/her challengers, including: Are they a compelling speaker? (You can find a video of them speaking and see if you’re convinced.) (b) Are the grassroots excited by them and turning out to support them? (You can check endorsements from grassroots groups like Indivisible and Sister District.) (c) Do they have any weaknesses or scandals that could derail their candidacy?
Location	Are they in your home state? Being involved locally means you can engage in person with the candidate and other donors, which makes the process more fun and engaging. Or, is the race in a strategically important state?



## Sample email to send to friends

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Subject line: Chat about 2020 political giving strategies?

Hi <insert name>,

<Opening transition...possibilities (pick one or craft your own!)>

- It's been a while since I've seen you, and I wanted to reach out to let you know that I've decided...
- After we chatted last week/month, I realized I should reach out let you know I've decided...
- I hope that life's been treating you well! As we head into the fall and election news starts filling our inboxes, I wanted to reach out and let you know I've decided...

... that I need to step up in order to be a part of saving our democracy. To do that, I'm planning to make some significant gifts to political causes over the next two years. As I was thinking about other friends and donors who might also be interested to talk about political giving, you came to mind. If you're open to it, I'd love to find a time to talk with you about political giving, and how we might do something meaningful together. I'm attaching a guide that was recently published that gives some ideas on where to give.

Hope this sounds like something you'd be interested in... let me know!

Sincerely,

<your name>



# DEMOCRACY DONORS

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