

New Digital Platform Connects Last-Minute Democracy Donors to Grassroots Civic Groups

[Sarah Henry](#) | October 18, 2024



Credit: MargJohnsonVA/shutterstock

With less than three weeks to go until the election, it's crunch time for democracy donors who still want to support important and impactful grassroots programs to make a difference in November. The needs are many, including poll-site protection, rides to the polls, campus events, relational texting, phone banking and ballot curing during the final weeks of the campaign.

A new online tool is seeking to fill the void, particularly for individual donors, donor-advised funds and family foundations, which frequently lack the capacity to research the most effective and efficient ways to channel their pro-civic-engagement giving, especially at the tail end of election season.

This year, [Clean and Prosperous America](#), an environmental nonprofit whose goal is to empower voters to create a healthier climate and economy, launched a digital platform that helps donors identify community-based groups around the country doing electoral work — including hundreds of 501(c)(3) organizations, as well as 501(c)(4) groups and political action committees, or PACs. The tool tracks the funding shortfalls of some 450 civic groups — many of them small startups — working on key races in battleground states, districts and elections.

The organization's [CaPA Connector](#), a free, filterable, public database of grassroots groups running nonpartisan voter education and engagement programs, is unique in that it allows donors to find and fund groups through a multipronged search function. Philanthropists can choose to support the programs of specific organizations serving specific demographics in specific

geographic locations using specific approaches. Or they can also donate a lump sum and have CaPA make the call about where the funds are most needed.

The CaPA Connector is the result of a request for proposals from grassroots groups vetted by an in-house review team. The crew behind the platform wanted to build a specialized infrastructure for the 2024 election that can move money fast to the best and most effective pro-democracy programs with low resistance, said Seattle-based CaPA Executive Director Greg Rock. The [CaPA Connector+](#), which so far has been accessed by a few dozen democracy donors, also allows trusted users to review details about a group's proposal, budgets, action metrics and funding gaps — as well as the organization's CaPA program priority score, ranked by CaPA's grant review team, according to Rock.

The goal is to identify and develop high-potential, hyper-local efforts that can fuel long-term voter engagement. And CaPA, a pooled intermediary, 501(c)(4) and PAC, wanted to back organizations that are unlikely to receive funding from large, national donors. It supports groups that are creative in their approach to engaging voters (as in willing to try new things), even if their primary mission is not election-centric. Whether a nonprofit's focus is cultural events, immigrants' rights or social services, Rock said, they may still be well positioned to do voter registration and education work.

To date, CaPA's [Strategic Grassroots Empowerment Fund](#) has moved about \$7 million into the field this election cycle and Rock said he expects that figure to climb by another million before election day. "Many of our large donors move late," he said.

Pro-democracy donors sing the praises of the CaPA Connector. "This platform is for people who can move quickly. It's not really for the philanthropy industrial complex," said Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, co-founder of the [Mizrahi Family Charitable Fund](#), a donor-advised fund based in Maryland. "But it's perfect for people like me, who made and are spending their own money, and who don't mind taking risks where the rewards in terms of achieving our goals are so great." Laszlo Mizrahi described herself as a "relatively small donor" for CaPA "but I've taken what I have learned from them to share with other donors. They've created a platform of knowledge that is a force multiplier."

Still in its start-up phase, the product has the potential to attract large, institutional donors, too, said board member Ning Mosberger-Tang, founder of [1.5°C Climate Strategies Group](#) and a major CaPA contributor. "We encourage donors to check out the connector with an open mind," said Colorado-based Mosberger-Tang. She said she has given "significant funding" through the organization. Her advice to interested donors: "Come willing to support groups other than the usual suspects, which are probably doing just fine getting help elsewhere."

A track record in the democracy donor world

This is not CaPA's first pro-democracy rodeo. Launched at the end of 2019 under the leadership of the late serial inventor and entrepreneur David Giuliani, who co-created the electric Sonicare Toothbrush, the group sunk \$1.25 million into the 2020 election cycle. The majority of that investment supported grassroots groups focused on turning out young voters — particularly

persuadable but low-propensity BIPOC voters in non-urban areas in crucial states such as Arizona, Georgia and North Carolina.

In Arizona, for example, CaPA investments helped local groups engage Latino and Indigenous young people through innovative approaches such as distributing boxes of vegetables along with voting kits in the Apache and Navajo nations and training BIPOC youth to lead voter registration efforts in their underserved neighborhoods.

CaPA helped to develop, launch and support an effort that blossomed into the [Rural Youth Voter Fund](#), a network now led by the [Rural Democracy Initiative](#) (RDI) and supported by the [Movement Voter Project](#). Rock said CaPA gifted \$2 million to RDI this year, but it has passed the baton in terms of executing its vision. (For more on these efforts, see [this April 2024 IP op-ed](#) by RDI's executive director and an [April 2023 story](#) on the Rural Youth Voter Fund by IP's Martha Ramirez.)

For 2024, CaPA wanted to connect donors to a broader swath of grassroots groups. A bequest from Giuliani allows the organization to pool and deploy resources free of operating and overhead charges (no credit card, brokerage or fiscal sponsorship fees), said Rock.

This means 100% of donor contributions reach the grassroots groups organizing on the ground. CaPA also has a loan reserve account of \$1.5 million that allows the nonprofit to move resources fast to the field upon pledge, so no time is lost waiting on donor funds to arrive. Days are meaningful to grassroots groups down the stretch, and CaPA funds capacity gaps and emergency needs all the way up to election day, according to Rock.

While many democracy funders — including CaPA — have embraced the ethos of encouraging philanthropists to [give early](#) this election year, Rock wants donors to understand that it's also crucial to give in October. “One of the particular gaps that we saw doing this work is that there's a lot of late-moving money in election cycles that struggles to get to grassroots organizations,” said Rock.

“We have been beating the drum: Give to grassroots groups early,” he added, noting that this messaging may have backfired a bit. “Unfortunately, that mantra has convinced a lot of donors that you cannot give money to grassroots groups late in the cycle, which is completely false. There is desperate need for funding in the final weeks — even days — of the campaign.”

Related Inside Philanthropy Resources:

FOR SUBSCRIBERS ONLY

- [State of American Philanthropy: Giving for Democracy and Civic Life](#)
- [Civic & Democracy Funders](#)
- [Donor Brief: Democracy and Civic Life](#)

Why funders give to CaPA Connector grantees

To that point, several funders interviewed for this story were still weighing where to contribute additional dollars to democracy causes in the final weeks before voting. “This election is tied, and educating and turning out less-informed voters is critical. Every vote matters — especially in swing states and races,” said Laszlo Mizrahi, spelling out the current reality in the lead-up to Election Day. “Many voters still won’t make up their minds until the very end. Early voting has started, so campaigns have to be up and running from now through when the polls close. That is very expensive and help is urgently needed.” She added: “It’s one thing to know we need to win the presidential election and the Senate. It’s another to know where an influx of money at the state level can make a big difference ”

Other donors share this sense of urgency. “I want my grandchildren — of which I have 8 — to grow up in a democracy and not in a dictatorship,” said San Carlos, California-based donor Caroline Wood, who typically gives to cultural, education and medical causes. She comes to CaPA from a personal connection with the founder and his late wife, whom she met in the 1970s. “This election is terrifying. I was born in 1945 and I think it’s the most important one in my lifetime, because this election is going to determine whether we’re still a democracy,” she said. Wood also said she appreciates CaPA’s transparency, trustworthiness, accuracy and thorough vetting of grantees and their needs.

Veteran philanthropists are also fans. “Clean and Prosperous America and the CaPA Connector are invaluable resources for donors and foundations interested in protecting our democracy and advancing voter participation,” said Betsy Taylor, a long-time [philanthropic donor advisor](#) who currently works with the [Maine Community Foundation](#) and the Janelia Foundation. A former executive director of the [Merck Family Fund](#), the Stern Family Fund and the Ottinger Foundation, Taylor said the organization has helped her track the budget gaps, needs and opportunities of local civic engagement groups that are doing high-impact local voter registration, education and protection. “Best of all, they offer all of this for free,” said Taylor. “I’ve moved several hundred thousand in part with their help... I have found this team to be reliable, service-oriented and up to date on where funds can make the biggest impact.”

Supporting under-the-radar efforts making a difference appeals to many donors. “Clean and Prosperous America is a linchpin in my donation portfolio because of their ability to identify and evaluate these high-leverage, neglected funding opportunities,” said Steve Newman. “Often, they play a critical role in supporting important projects that would otherwise go unfunded.”

Strategic support in tossup states

Grassroots efforts the organization has supported in the past include [Sisters in Service of Southwest Georgia](#), which represents the four largest African-American sororities in the country. Through its 501(c)(3) [Clean & Prosperous America Education Fund](#), CaPA helped rapidly scale the group’s operations in 2020, which included such innovative tech strategies as voter-registration car parade parties during COVID. The group was also active during the 2022 Georgia Senate runoff race, canvassing infrequent, registered-but-reluctant and inactive rural voters and running phone banks and help hotlines, among other efforts. Long dominated by Republican leaders, the Peach State’s growing and diversifying population helped to secure a narrow win for President Joe Biden in 2020, and two Senate seats for Democrats in 2021.

CaPA has also funded [1 Vote Counts](#), a small organization that educates and empowers youth and underserved communities, including citizens returning from incarceration, in what Rock dubbed “chronically underfunded” Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Through voter registration pop-up events, door-to-door canvassing and phone and text banking, the group has registered BIPOC residents, prison detainees and citizens in pre-release and juvenile centers. The Keystone State may well be the most critical battleground this year, given the tightness of the race and the fact that Pennsylvania has the highest number of electoral votes of any of the so-called tossup states.

Rock pointed to Nebraska as another example of a state where CaPA uncovered an uncrowded space, a candidate name-recognition gap, and organizations addressing that deficit until election day. In 2022 and this year, the CaPA Education Fund has supported the [League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha](#) to boost distribution of a nonpartisan ballot guide to raise awareness about the highly competitive Senate race between independent Dan Osborn and incumbent Republican Deb Fischer.

As part of their reporting, grant recipients produce a two-minute video explaining their program to donors in their own words. “The pooled resource grant giving space is great because it makes giving easier for donors,” said Rock. “What’s not so great with an intermediary is donors never get to interact with grassroots groups, and the grantees never get to interact with the donors. We’re trying to do a better job of bridging that gap, of having some connectivity between the donors.” For instance, Tammye Pettyjohn Jones, formerly with Sisters in Service of Southwest Georgia, talked in a [CaPA video](#) about how the organization’s support helped her grassroots group educate and excite voters — young and old — through the power of creative messaging in complex rural counties.

Rock compared the grantee group to a layer cake, with the core civic groups forming the base. The connector also includes a smaller group of organizations — the second layer of grantees — that work around climate issues, social service issues or immigration issues, and which have unique membership lists. “We believe one of the most effective tactics in the ecosystem is warm contacts,” said Rock, “and so we want to be leveraging all of those unique lists for warm contacts during the election cycle.”

There is also a third layer that CaPA has started courting this year: volunteer-led organizations. “There are a lot of volunteer groups doing phenomenal work. They reach into their own pockets for pizza parties and printing budgets and fuel,” said Rock. “So we launched a micro-grant program this year to support individuals that are looking to receive money for hard costs.”

There’s plenty of room for growth. Rock said that when CaPA did its grassroots group solicitation, it identified \$600 million of programming gaps across the country. Rock would also like to see infrastructure to allow other pooled resource grant givers to share where they’re moving money to avoid duplicative efforts to the same groups on any given day.

“The connector fills a vacuum in the progressive democracy philanthropy ecosystem — one not filled by large, national organizations or state-based groups,” said Mosberger-Tang. A computer scientist who formerly worked at Google, she would like to see buy-in from institutional funders for the connector. “It’s crucial to support local groups doing amazing work that don’t have the

visibility, aren't connected to donors, but need to raise money for their work," she said. "It's critical they receive the support they need, especially in a time of disinformation, when citizens want to get their messaging from trusted community sources."