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Wealthy donors on left launch new plan to wrest back control in the states

By Matea Gold

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SAN FRANCISCO — A cadre of wealthy liberal donors aims to pour tens of millions of dollars into rebuilding the left's political might in the states, racing to catch up with a decades-old conservative effort that has reshaped statehouses across the country.

The plan embraced by the Democracy Alliance, an organization that advises some of the Democrats' top contributors, puts an urgent new focus on financing groups that can help the party regain influence in time for the next congressional redistricting process, after the 2020 elections. The blueprint approved by the alliance board calls on donors to help expand state-level organizing and lobbying for measures addressing climate change, voting rights and economic inequality.

"People have gotten a wake-up call," Gara LaMarche, the alliance's president, said in an interview. "The right is focused on the state level, and even down-ballot, and has made enormous gains. We can't have the kind of long-term progressive future we want if we don't take power in the states."

The five-year initiative, called 2020 Vision, will be discussed this week at a private conference being held at a San Francisco hotel for donors who participate in the Democracy Alliance. Leading California Democrats are scheduled to make appearances, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom and California Attorney General Kamala Harris. The alliance, which does not disclose its members, plans to make some of the events available to reporters via a webcast.

The gathering coincides with the long-awaited [launch of Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential bid](#), infusing the event with buzz about the 2016 race. Clinton, who was invited to attend, will instead be on her debut campaign swing. But her campaign chairman, John Podesta, who has worked closely with the alliance, is set to participate in events celebrating its decade-long history.

Much of the conference will focus on the alliance's long-term strategy. The new plan calls on the group's members, known as "partners," to boost the amount they have collectively pumped annually into a core group of liberal organizations in recent years from \$30 million to at least \$50 million.

Among the 35 groups recommended for backing are a dozen new additions, including the Washington-based [Ballot Initiative Strategy Center](#) and the [State Innovation Exchange](#), an organization that will lobby for liberal policies in the states. The alliance also is urging its members to help expand staffing for 20 state-level donor networks, a collaboration with the Committee on the States, a low-profile sister group that helps coordinate such efforts.

Bolstering the left's muscle in the states has long been a goal of the Democracy Alliance, which was [founded](#) 10 years ago with the goal of building a lasting infrastructure of liberal think tanks and advocacy groups to match groups on the right such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute. On that front, it has succeeded, helping launch the Center for American Progress, a think-tank powerhouse once run by Podesta, and Media Matters for America, a media watchdog group.

But the group's focus on state activities has been inconsistent, in part because many donors have been more enthusiastic about national projects. Meanwhile, Republicans have consolidated power in state legislatures, bolstered by lobbying groups such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and a network of think tanks and advocacy groups funded by the billionaires Charles and David Koch and other conservative donors. The GOP now controls 30 state legislatures, while the Democrats control 11, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Reversing the right's momentum — and matching its financial firepower — will not be easy, alliance leaders acknowledge. Earlier this year, the Kochs and their allies [pledged to spend \\$889 million](#) to [fund political advocacy, think tanks and educational projects](#) in the run-up to the 2016 elections. One of the panels at the Democracy Alliance conference will be devoted to discussing the Koch network's influence and "the electoral arms race," according to a copy of the agenda obtained by The Washington Post.

Donor interest in the states "has increased, but it's a daunting task," said Rob Stein, the strategist whose work mapping the influence of conservatives persuaded liberal billionaires such as insurance magnate Peter Lewis, financier George Soros and software entrepreneur Tim Gill to help launch the alliance in 2005.

"After almost 40 years, the right has built a potent, state-based infrastructure to promote its points of view and to counter progressives," Stein said. "We've made some meaningful progress in the states over the past six years. The work is underway, but it's going to take time and significantly more human and financial resources to match the right's formidable state-based infrastructure."

The alliance has slowly been expanding its ranks in the past few years, recruiting San Francisco hedge fund manager Tom Steyer, Houston trial lawyers Steve and Amber Mostyn, and others. The organization now has about 110 partners, who are required to contribute at least \$200,000 a year to groups it vets and recommends. Among its members are some of the country's biggest labor unions, which have seen their power greatly diminish under GOP state leaders.

Even if donors step up their giving, the left is "not likely to be able to match the Kochs' money," LaMarche said. "So therefore we have to be smarter and more strategic."

The new state plan aims to replicate the strategies used in places such as Minnesota and Colorado, where well-funded networks of nonprofit groups have helped Democrats dominate politics. Similar efforts are underway in states such as North Carolina, where Republicans in recent years [gained control](#) of both the legislature and governor's mansion for the first time since 1870.

It remains to be seen how much money will go into direct political activity to help Democrats wrest back control of the redistricting process, viewed by party strategists as key to unlocking the GOP hold on the U.S. House.

The State Innovation Exchange, one of the new groups backed by the alliance, has cast itself as a liberal version of ALEC and plans to promote model bills and arm state lawmakers to fight for their passage.

"I have never seen this amount of energy, enthusiasm and focus from donors in the progressive community," said Nick Rathod, the exchange's executive director. "There is nothing like losing to get people's attention."

In a shift, the alliance is urging its members to invest in a host of groups working on specific policy issues such as the environment, income inequality and campaign finance reform. Among those that got the nod: Americans for Financial Reform, the Roosevelt Institute and LeadingGreen, a joint venture of the Natural Resources Defense Council Action Fund and the League of Conservation Voters.

Top national players are still part of the 2020 plan, including America Votes, which coordinates the efforts of allied interest groups; Catalist, the voter data hub; the Center for American Progress; and Media Matters.