

# [***Women lag men in political donating. Why giving circles like J. Smith-Cameron's could help narrow that gap***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C1V-1HY1-DY7V-G004-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** By Simone Pathe, CNN

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; J. Smith-Cameron thinks she's found a secret weapon.

For the past two years, the "Succession" actress has led a giving circle that pools donations from her friends, friends of friends and their friends - more than 400 strong so far in 2024 - to help flip state legislatures blue.

And while most giving circle leaders aren't celebrities, the majority are women - a stark contrast with the gender imbalance that typically characterizes American political donating.

Her circle, called the State Fair, is run through the States Project, which was founded in 2017 to help shift power in state legislatures and has [*emerged as a major player*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/25/us/politics/states-project-democrats.html) on the left countering the right's long-standing investment in state races.

That dominance of women in the States Project's giving circles - they are 82% of leaders and 75% of donors - is revealing when and how women choose to make political donations. And it reflects the heightened salience with which liberal-leaning voters, particularly women, are seeing state races, especially after Donald Trump's presidency and the Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade.

When it comes to traditional campaign contributions, women still lag behind men. Women were about 45% of donors to state House and Senate general election campaigns between 2019 and 2022, according to [*research*](https://cawp.rutgers.edu/research/cawp-women-money-and-politics-series/donor-gap) from the Center for American Women and ***Politics*** at Rutgers University (CAWP). Their representation is even lower as a percentage when looking at the total contributions to state House and Senate races; about 30% came from women, demonstrating how they often give in smaller amounts compared with men.

By contrast, 72% of the money raised through the States Project's giving circles between 2020 and 2023 came from women.

"We know that women out-vote men, but we don't always think about giving as a form of participation and having your voice heard," said Kira Sanbonmatsu, a senior scholar at CAWP. "So mechanisms such as giving circles can make a difference."

The Supreme Court's 2022 abortion decision, which overturned the federal right to abortion and sent the issue back to the states, accelerated the movement. The number of States Project giving circles boomed from 75 in March 2022, before the ruling, to 314 that November. There are now 183 active circles.

On a recent Thursday night, a group of about 20 people - the majority women - gathered over Zoom to learn about how their small donations could help defend the Pennsylvania state House and flip the state Senate this year. Their circle, Wake Up PA!, has already raised nearly [*$64,000*](https://www.grapevine.org/giving-circle/adWhPBD/Wake-Up-PA) of their $100,000 goal.

That may not sound like a lot of money for an election. But that's a central part of the pitch made to newcomers on the Zoom: It doesn't take as much money to sway a state House race as a US House race, and pooling small-dollar donations is a way for voters to shift power in legislatures that may have the authority to draw electoral maps, approve slates of electors to send to Washington, DC, and increasingly have control over abortion rights.

The States Project - which funnels the money to the PAC for America's Future - is projecting it will raise more than $10 million for 2024 through its giving circle program; more than $5 million has been committed so far.

Smith-Cameron is the first to admit that the concept of raising money for state races doesn't always come easily. It didn't for her at first, either. After first hearing about the States Project's giving circles in 2018, she didn't start her own until several years later.

"I couldn't process it. And I think this is an interesting thing - it's such news to people that so many huge, earth-shaking things happen, actually, on the state level. And, like most Democrats, I kind of let it glance off me because we're so dazzled by the big races on the national level," she said.

But now, Smith-Cameron said, she can sleep at night. "I feel like I'm doing something concrete. Doable. Affordable," said the multiple Emmy nominee for her "Succession" role. (The show aired on HBO, which like CNN, is a unit of Warner Bros. Discovery.)

She's hosted virtual silk pajama and martini parties for members of her circle, as well as more intimate soirees at her New York City apartment. Her circle sent money to help flip the Pennsylvania state House in 2022 and flip the Virginia House of Delegates and defend the state Senate last year.

"If you only have $100 to give, that is a perfect place to put it because it won't just be spitting into the wind," Smith-Cameron added, alluding to some "cause celebre" Democratic US Senate campaigns whose social media buzz raised millions of dollars but didn't result in victory.

But any amount will do. "There's no minimum and no maximum," noted Melissa Walker, the head of giving circles for the States Project. Each circle decides for itself what state it would like to direct its money to, with some holding a "state selection party" where members vote.

Regardless of donations, "everyone is valued equally in this giving circle," Jan Swenson, one of the organizers of Wake Up PA!, told the group's Zoom meeting.

"Because our donations are combined, we can see our total grow, and that's incredibly motivating," added co-leader Jessica Diamond. "Part of the brilliance of the model is the exponential growth. ... It's just about the best way to counteract the Koch brothers of the world."

Why women have been so involved in giving circles

Collective giving groups have long been a feature of philanthropy, although they really started to take off around the turn of this century, according to [*a 2024 report*](https://johnsoncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/in-abundance-an-analysis-of-the-thriving-landscape-of-collective-giving-in-the-u-s.pdf) from the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University and Philanthropy Together.

And women have been at the core of that movement - 92% of respondents were women in the researchers' national survey of collective giving group members for that report.

"I think there are gender differences that we see in other forms of data about the tendency of women to be more social, to be more connected," said Michael Layton, one of the authors of the report and the W.K. Kellogg community philanthropy chair at the Johnson Center. That connectedness is part of the beauty he sees in collective giving: "It's grounded in social capital," he said, "rather than financial capital."

Traditional giving circles originated from a time when women didn't have independent income, Walker added. "Men were earning money and not investing in the things maybe that the women wanted to, but the women would pool their pennies together and do something for the community."

It's that strategery that Smith-Cameron sees resonating with her female friends.

"I feel like women are particularly attuned to this kind of powerful thing of gathering in groups and talking about something - it's intimate, it's demystifying," she said, noting how she's observed women are more likely to give repeatedly in smaller amounts.

"My guy friends, they're more concerned about the presidential election or the Senate. And it's very, very hard to get them not to look at the shiny objects," she added.

Giving circles can also be learning circles, said Walker, who was writing young adult novels and working for teen magazines when she said the 2016 election delivered a wake-up call.

Walker admitted she didn't even know who her New York state legislators were before hearing former state Sen. Daniel Squadron - one of the founders of the States Project - speak at a holiday party. She and other children's book authors formed what became the first giving circle in 2017.

"My dream - which is sort of a pipe dream so far but - is to have not the spotlit Senate races being talked about around dining room tables," Walker said. "But actually like what the majorities in Michigan were able to do because we won those chambers by fewer than 400 votes each."

Asked about criticism that this kind of fundraising approach perpetuates out-of-state meddling in other states' elections, Walker said, "State laws spread."

"States are meant to be those laboratories for democracy," she added, "but they can also be laboratories for things like voter suppression bills and abortion bans."

Which is one reason Smith-Cameron has been using her platform as an entertainer to talk about her work with state-level giving.

"If you could get people to get the concept, you could just give this giant vitamin B12 shot to the country," she said. "I feel like it's a secret weapon that's hiding in plain sight."

This story has been updated with additional information.

By Simone Pathe, CNN

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