



2016

# Major donors consider funding Black Lives Matter

Activists for the protest movement are meeting in secret with liberal funder club.

By KENNETH P. VOGEL and SARAH WHEATON | 11/13/2015 05:11 AM EST



Neal Blair wears a hoodie that reads "Black Lives Matter" as he stands on the lawn of the Capitol during a rally to mark the 20th anniversary of the Million Man March on Oct. 10, 2015, in Washington. | AP Photo | AP Photo

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Some of the biggest donors on the left plan to meet behind closed doors next week in Washington with leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement and their allies to discuss funding the burgeoning protest movement, POLITICO has learned.

The meetings are taking place at the annual winter gathering of the Democracy Alliance major liberal donor club, which runs from Tuesday evening through Saturday morning and is expected to draw Democratic financial heavyweights, including Tom Steyer and Paul Egerman.

The DA, as the club is known in Democratic circles, is recommending its donors step up check writing to a handful of endorsed groups that have supported the Black Lives Matter movement. And the club and some of its members also are considering ways to funnel support directly to scrappier local groups that have utilized confrontational tactics to inject their grievances into the political debate.

It's a potential partnership that could elevate the Black Lives Matter movement and heighten its impact. But it's also fraught with tension on both sides, sources tell POLITICO.

The various outfits that comprise the diffuse Black Lives Matter movement prize their independence. Some make a point of not asking for donations. They bristle at any suggestion that they're susceptible to being co-opted by a deep-pocketed national group — let alone one with such close ties to the Democratic Party establishment like the Democracy Alliance.

And some major liberal donors are leery about funding a movement known for aggressive tactics — particularly one that has shown a willingness to train its fire on Democrats, including presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders.

“Major donors are usually not as radical or confrontational as activists most in touch with the pain of oppression,” said Steve Phillips, a Democracy Alliance member and significant contributor to Democratic candidates and causes. He donated to a St. Louis nonprofit group called the Organization for Black Struggle that helped organize 2014 Black Lives Matter-related protests in Ferguson, Missouri, over the police killing of a black teenager named Michael Brown. And Phillips and his wife, Democracy Alliance board member Susan Sandler, are in discussions about funding other groups involved in the movement.

The movement needs cash to build a self-sustaining infrastructure, Phillips said, arguing “the progressive donor world should be adding zeroes to their contributions that support this transformative movement.” But he also acknowledged there's a risk for recipient groups. “Tactics such as shutting down freeways and disrupting rallies can alienate major donors, and if that's your primary source of support, then you're at risk of being blocked from doing what you need to do.”

The Democracy Alliance was created in 2005 by a handful of major donors, including billionaire

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Matters and the Democratic data firm Catalist, though members also give heavily to Democratic politicians and super PACs that are not part of the DA's core portfolio. While the Democracy Alliance last year voted to endorse a handful of groups focused on engaging African-Americans in politics – some of which have helped facilitate the Black Lives movement – the invitation to movement leaders is a first for the DA, and seems likely to test some members' comfort zones.



## Ash Carter fires three-star general for 'allegations of misconduct'

By BRYAN BENDER

“Movements that are challenging the status quo and that do so to some extent by using direct action or disruptive tactics are meant to make people uncomfortable, so I'm sure we have partners who would be made uncomfortable by it or think that that's not a good tactic,” said DA President Gara LaMarche. “But we have a wide range of human beings and different temperaments and approaches in the DA, so it's quite possible that there are people who are a little concerned, as well as people who are curious or are supportive. This is a chance for them to meet some of the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement, and understand the movement better, and then we'll take stock of that and see where it might lead.”

According to a Democracy Alliance draft agenda obtained by POLITICO, movement leaders will be featured guests at a Tuesday dinner with major donors. The dinner, which technically precedes the official conference kickoff, will focus on “what kind of support and resources are needed from the allied funders during this critical moment of immediate struggle and long-term movement building.”

The groups that will be represented include the Black Youth Project 100, The Center for Popular Democracy and the Black Civic Engagement Fund, according to the organizer, a DA member named Leah Hunt-Hendrix. An heir to a Texas oil fortune, Hunt-Hendrix helps lead a coalition of mostly young donors called Solidaire that focuses on movement building. It's donated more than \$200,000 to the Black Lives Matter movement since Brown's killing. According to its entry on a philanthropy website, more than \$61,000 went directly to organizers and organizations on the ground in Ferguson and Baltimore, where the death of Freddie Gray in police custody in April sparked a more recent wave of Black Lives-related protests. An additional \$115,000 went to groups that have sprung up to support the movement.

She said her goal at the Democracy Alliance is to persuade donors to “use some of the money that's going into the presidential races for grass-roots organizing and movement building.” And she brushed aside concerns that the movement could hurt Democratic chances in 2016. “Black Lives Matter has been pushing Bernie, and Bernie has been pushing Hillary. Politics is a field where you almost have to push your allies hardest and hold them accountable,” she said. “That's exactly the point of

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That view dovetails with the one that LaMarche has tried to instill in the Democracy Alliance, which had faced internal criticism in 2012 for growing too close to the Democratic Party.

In fact, one group set to participate in Hunt-Hendrix's dinner — Black Civic Engagement Fund — is a Democracy Alliance offshoot. And, according to the DA agenda, two other groups recommended for club funding — ColorOfChange.org and the Advancement Project — are set to participate in a Friday panel “on how to connect the Movement for Black Lives with current and needed infrastructure for Black organizing and political power.”

ColorOfChange.org has helped Black Lives Matter protesters organize online, said its Executive Director Rashad Robinson. He dismissed concerns that the movement is compromised in any way by accepting support from major institutional funders. “Throughout our history in this country, there have been allies who have been willing to stand up and support uprisings, and lend their resources to ensure that people have a greater voice in their democracy,” Robinson said.

Nick Rathod, the leader of a DA-endorsed group called the State Innovation Exchange that pushes liberal policies in the states, said his group is looking for opportunities to help the movement, as well. “We can play an important role in facilitating dialogue between elected officials and movement leaders in cities and states,” he said. But Rathod cautioned that it would be a mistake for major liberal donors to only give through established national groups to support the movement. “I think for many of the donors, it might feel safer to invest in groups like ours and others to support the work, but frankly, many of those groups are not led by African-Americans and are removed from what's happening on the ground. The heart and soul of the movement is at the grass roots, it's where the organizing has occurred, it's where decisions should be made and it's where investments should be placed to grow the movement from the bottom up, rather than the top down.”

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