



The Battle for
Worker Freedom:

**HOW GOVERNMENT
UNIONS FUND
POLITICS
ACROSS THE
COUNTRY**

ANDREW HOLMAN

POLICY ANALYST

DAVID OSBORNE

SENIOR FELLOW OF LABOR POLICY

DECEMBER 2023

Authors

Andrew Holman POLICY ANALYST

Andrew Holman is a policy analyst with the Commonwealth Foundation. His research areas include labor policy, fiscal policy, and regulation. His research has been featured in Fox News, *Washington Examiner*, *Daily Wire*, *National Review*, *RealClearPennsylvania* and the *Tribune Review*. Holman joined the Commonwealth Foundation following his internship with Americans for Fair Treatment (AFFT), a nonprofit that educates and empowers public employees to exercise their First Amendment rights.

David R. Osborne SENIOR FELLOW OF LABOR POLICY

David Osborne is the Senior Fellow for Labor Policy with the Commonwealth Foundation. An attorney with a solid history advocating for public employees, Osborne was the CEO of AFFT and, before that, the president and general counsel of the Fairness Center, a nonprofit public-interest law firm providing free legal representation to those hurt by public sector union officials. Osborne has testified before the Pennsylvania House Labor and Industry Committee against unfair government union labor practices and his work has featured in *The Hill*, *RealClearPennsylvania*, and *Delaware Valley Journal*, among others.

Editor

Elizabeth Stelle DIRECTOR OF POLICY ANALYSIS

Elizabeth Stelle is the Director of Policy Analysis at the Commonwealth Foundation. A graduate of Grove City College, Stelle has researched and written on government reform, health care, welfare, energy, and government transparency. Her work has featured in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *PatriotNews*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and she has appeared on a variety of radio and television programs throughout the commonwealth.

Acknowledgement

The authors and the entire research team on this report thank and acknowledge Jonathan McGee for his indispensable assistance while completing his internship at the Commonwealth Foundation.

Guarantee Of Quality Scholarship

The Board of Directors and Staff of the Commonwealth Foundation are dedicated to providing quality and dependable research on public policy issues in the Keystone State. To this end, the Commonwealth Foundation guarantees that all statements of fact in our publications are verifiable and information attributed to other sources accurately represented.

Committed to providing Pennsylvanians with reliable information, the Commonwealth Foundation welcomes critical review of its work. If the accuracy of our research is questioned and brought to the Foundation's attention with supporting evidence in writing, the Foundation will respond.

If an error exists, the Commonwealth Foundation will issue an errata sheet that will accompany all subsequent distributions of the publication, which constitutes the complete and final remedy under this guarantee.

For additional information or questions, email the Commonwealth Foundation at info@commonwealthfoundation.org or call 717.671.1901.

Key Findings

- **The four largest government unions**, the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and Service Employees International Union (SEIU), **spent \$708.8 million on politics during the 2021–22 election cycle.**
- **Membership dues accounted for nearly 60 percent of all union political spending.** Even where unions cannot contribute membership dues directly to candidates, unions routinely donate them to SuperPACs and use those funds for independent expenditures and lobbying or advocacy efforts.
- **Government union political action committee (PAC) contributions accounted for about 40 percent of political spending.** Member PAC deductions must be voluntary but are deducted automatically through the taxpayer-funded public payroll system in many states.
 - PAC contributions were heavily one-sided, with 95.7 percent of contributions going to Democratic candidates and organizations across state and federal elections.
- **Illinois saw the most government union spending** of any state at \$27.9 million.
- Pennsylvania **Gov. Josh Shapiro was the top recipient of government union money**, taking in over \$4.5 million.

Introduction

On May 16, 2023, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee signed Senate Bill 281, which would gradually increase minimum teacher salaries in Tennessee to \$50,000 in the 2026–27 school year.¹ Less than a month later, the Tennessee Education Association, the state’s largest teacher union, filed a lawsuit to prevent SB 281 from taking effect.² Why is a teacher union suing to prevent a pay raise for its members?

SB 281 had another provision, one that would prevent automatic union dues deductions. Teacher unions and other public sector unions oppose this pro-worker and pro-taxpayer reform. However, the provision, commonly referred to as paycheck protection, has become increasingly popular in state legislatures throughout the country. In 2023, five states saw paycheck protection bills advance in their legislature.³

While some states were advancing worker freedom and protecting taxpayers, others deferred to government unions at workers’ and taxpayers’ expense. Illinois voters approved Amendment 1, which creates a fundamental right to collective bargaining. The amendment grants union executives an unprecedented amount of power and will reportedly lead to tax increases.⁴

Public sector unions have had a hand in politics since public sector bargaining became widespread in the 1960s. Now, over 50 years later, states are making widespread changes to their public sector collective bargaining laws. Some changes benefit workers and taxpayers, while

1 Sen. Jack Johnson, Senate Bill 0281 (assigned Pub. Ch. 437, May 24, 2023), 113th Tennessee General Assembly, <https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default.aspx?BillNumber=SB0281>.

2 Jonathan Mattise, “Teacher Group Sues over Tennessee Law That Bans Deduction of Members’ Dues from Their Paychecks,” *Associated Press*, June 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/tennessee-teacher-lawsuit-8fa4e2a6c42215d825064bc72fcfca36>.

3 Workers for Opportunity, “Governors, State Legislatures Line Up Behind Paycheck Protection,” Cision PR Newswire, April 3, 2023, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/governors-state-legislatures-line-up-behind-paycheck-protection-301787302.html>.

4 Mailee Smith and Bryce Hill, “Get the Facts: Amendment 1 Study Guide,” Illinois Policy Institute, August 26, 2022, <https://www.illinoispolicy.org/get-the-facts-amendment-1-study-guide/>.

others increase the power of the already-powerful government unions. This report examines how unions have deployed financial resources—membership dues and PAC deductions—to influence public policy developments in state and federal governments.

During the 2021–22 election cycle, the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU spent \$708.8 million on lobbying, contributions to political organizations, and contributions to candidates in federal, state, and local races for public office. Membership dues funded large contributions to far-left political organizations. Over 99 percent of federal PAC and 95 percent of state PAC contributions favored Democrats.⁵ Top recipients of PAC contributions include Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, California Attorney General Rob Bonta, and Illinois Speaker of the House Emanuel “Chris” Welch.

National Union Membership Dues Spending

Most of a union’s revenue comes from its membership, in the form of member dues. Given this fact, it may make sense for the unions to allocate most financial resources toward membership support. However, this is not the case. The four largest government unions spent over \$2.79 billion in 2021 and 2022, yet **representational activities, the spending category most closely linked to membership support, only accounted for \$554 million, or less than 20 percent of total expenditures.**

Most union expenditures went toward land, buildings, and salaries and benefits for union employees. Political and lobbying expenditures are another top cost. While unions cannot legally use membership dues to contribute directly to campaigns, they frequently spend dues dollars on independent expenditure, contributions to SuperPACs, and other lobbying or political advocacy efforts. In fact, in 2022, both the NEA and AFSCME spent more money on political activities and lobbying than on representational activities. Additionally, these unions often give money under the “contributions, gifts, and grants” category to nonprofits and other organizations that are political in nature.

The NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU must file a Form LM-2 financial disclosure report each year with the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Labor-Management Standards (OLMS).⁶ These reports provide an in-depth look at how unions generate and spend money. Analysis of the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU’s 2021 and 2022 LM-2 financial disclosure reports revealed a combined \$406,287,908 in spending on political activities. In other words, the four largest government unions spent over \$400 million of members’ dues on politics in the past two years.

Of this, about \$85.4 million went to local unions in support of their political and lobbying efforts, and \$37.6 million went to union officers and employees for compensation related to politics and lobbying. The SEIU was the largest spender of the group, with over \$127 million spent on political activity and lobbying. Union membership dues spending on politics accounted for approximately 60 percent of total union political spending. Where did this money go? By law, dues dollars cannot go directly to candidates. However, unions use membership dues to influence politics through contributions to independent expenditure committees, SuperPACs,

5 To the reader, these percentages for the 2021–22 cycle are based on membership dues spending per U.S. Department of Labor OLMS LM-2 reports filed by the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and the SEIU, and on PAC spending per OpenSecrets Organization Summaries and campaign finance reports filed in 50 states by the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and the SEIU.

6 Office of Labor-Management Standards, “Form LM-1 Labor Organization Information Report and Forms LM-2, LM-3, and LM-4 Labor Organization Annual Reports,” U.S. Department of Labor, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/olms/reports/forms/lm-1-lm-2-lm-3-lm-4>; Office of Labor-Management Standards, “Instructions for Form LM-2 Labor Organization Annual Report,” U.S. Department of Labor, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/olms/regs/compliance/electronic-filing/LM2GeneralInstruct>.

and dark money groups. A review of the LM-2 reports for 2021 and 2022,⁷ reveals that the four largest government unions gave:

- \$29,138,171 to the SEIU Political Education and Action Fund (also known as United We Can), a SuperPAC operated by the SEIU that primarily supports Democratic candidates for federal office.
- \$29,016,206 to the NEA Advocacy Fund, a SuperPAC operated by the NEA that primarily supports Democratic candidates for federal office.
- \$16,250,000 to For Our Future, a left-wing advocacy organization founded and funded by billionaire Tom Steyer.
- \$13,000,000 to the State Engagement Fund, a progressive dark money organization.
- \$7,812,000 to Invest in Education, an organization that advocated for a ballot measure to increase taxes for more public education funding. The ballot measure passed but then ruled unconstitutional.
- \$7,264,668 to the SEIU Political Education and Action State Fund, a PAC operated by the SEIU that focuses on supporting Democrats in state and local elections.
- \$5,603,000 to the Strategic Victory Fund, a SuperPAC that funnels money from donors to Democratic candidates and causes.
- \$5,500,000 to the Senate Majority PAC, which dedicates itself to building a Democratic majority within the U.S. Senate.
- \$3,167,238 to Education International, a global teacher union.
- \$3,000,000 to Fair Share Massachusetts, an organization dedicated to supporting Massachusetts' wealth tax.
- \$2,745,000 to the Sixteen Thirty Fund, a left-wing dark money organization that is part of the larger Arabella Network.⁸
- \$2,500,000 to Building Back Together, a lobbying and advocacy organization that seeks to advance President Biden's policy agenda.
- \$2,500,000 to Put Michigan First, an organization with ties to the Democratic Governors Association that spent to oppose Michigan Republicans in the 2022 election.

The trend is clear; through membership dues, government unions have become a cash cow for organizations advancing a progressive agenda. While membership dues spending made up nearly 60 percent of union political spending during the 2021–22 election cycle, unions also gathered money from their members through voluntary PAC deductions. Through their PACs, the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU spent significant sums of money in support of candidates for federal and state office.

7 Office of Labor-Management Standards, LM Reports and Constitutions and Bylaws (Online Public Disclosure Room, Union Reports), U.S. Department of Labor, accessed July 17, 2023, https://olmsapps.dol.gov/olpdr/?_ga=2.136748144.1176562507.1697650749-906770878.1697210649.

8 For more information on the Arabella Network, see: Hayden R. Ludwig, "Big Money in Dark Shadows: Arabella Advisors' Half-billion-dollar 'Dark Money' Network," (Washington, DC: Capital Research Center, April 2019), <https://capitalresearch.org/article/crc-exposes-left-wing-dark-money/>.

Federal Election PAC Spending

During the 2021–22 election cycle, the four largest government union PACs spent \$157.4 million on federal political campaigns. Only 5 percent, or \$8.3 million, of these union’s PAC expenditures went toward candidates for federal office. The remaining \$149 million went to various PACs and interest groups.⁹

CONTRIBUTIONS TO FEDERAL PACS AND INTEREST GROUPS

Contributions to federal PACs and interest groups accounted for over \$149 million of government union political expenditures. Most of these contributions went to liberal and Democrat-affiliated organizations. Often, these union PAC contributions went to organizations that also received membership dues dollars from the unions. Notably, according to OpenSecrets data,¹⁰ the four largest government union PACs contributed:

- \$38,200,000 to the Senate Majority PAC.
- \$30,899,682 to the NEA Advocacy Fund.
- \$24,113,629 to the SEIU Political Education and Action Fund/United We Can.
- \$8,789,862 to For Our Future.
- \$8,459,917 to AFT Solidarity, a political arm of the American Federation of Teachers.
- \$7,065,000 to the House Majority PAC, which dedicates itself to building a Democratic majority within the U.S. House of Representatives.
- \$4,600,000 to In Union USA, an organized-labor funded SuperPAC that supports Democrats and opposes Republicans for elected office.
- \$3,954,000 to America Votes Action Fund, the SuperPAC affiliated with the “coordination hub of the progressive community,” America Votes.
- \$3,000,000 to the Committee to Build the Economy, a Democrat-affiliated SuperPAC.
- \$2,450,000 to WorkersVote, a liberal SuperPAC bankrolled by labor unions.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO FEDERAL CANDIDATES

In partisan terms, most of the PAC money given directly to federal candidates went to Democrats. Of the \$8.34 million directly contributed, \$8.29 million went to Democrats. Republicans received \$39,000 and independents received \$7,000. Raphael Warnock, the Democratic U.S. Senate candidate from Georgia, was the top recipient of government union money, taking in \$60,500 in contributions. In fact, as Figure 1 shows, the ten largest recipients of government union money were all Democrats. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate in Alaska, was the top Republican recipient at \$15,000. Brian Fitzpatrick, a Republican candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in Pennsylvania, also took in \$15,000.

9 To the reader, calculations based on PAC spending per OpenSecrets Organization Summaries for the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU. (see: OpenSecrets, “Organization Profiles,” accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/all-profiles>.)

10 OpenSecrets, National Education Association (Summary, Cycle 2022), accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/national-education-assn/summary?id=d000000064>; OpenSecrets, American Federation of Teachers (Summary, Cycle 2022), accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/american-federation-of-teachers/summary?id=d000000083>; OpenSecrets, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (Summary, Cycle 2022) accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/american-fedn-of-state-county-municipal-employees/summary?id=D000000061>; OpenSecrets, Service Employees International Union (Summary, Cycle 2022), accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/service-employees-international-union/summary?id=d000000077>.

FIGURE 1: TOP FEDERAL RECIPIENTS OF GOVERNMENT UNION PAC MONEY, 2021–22 CYCLE.

Ranking	Candidate	Party	Race	Amount
1	Raphael Warnock	Democrat	Georgia Senate	\$60,500
2	Troy Carter	Democrat	Louisiana HD 02	\$58,000
3	Hakeem Jeffries	Democrat	New York HD 08	\$50,000
4	Alex Padilla	Democrat	California Senate	\$45,000
5	Mandela Barnes	Democrat	Wisconsin Senate	\$45,000
6	Melanie Stansbury	Democrat	New Mexico HD 01	\$43,000
7	Tim Ryan	Democrat	Ohio Senate	\$42,000
8	Steven Horsford	Democrat	Nevada HD 14	\$41,500
9	Shontel Brown	Democrat	Ohio HD 11	\$41,000
10	Susie Lee	Democrat	Nevada HD 03	\$40,000

Source: OpenSecrets Organization Summaries for the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU.

Outside of \$3,422 donated to President Joe Biden, all union PAC donations went to candidates for the U.S. House and Senate.¹¹ The NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU showed a preference for U.S. House candidates, with those candidates receiving 91 percent of PAC contributions. In total, PACs tied to the four largest government unions contributed to 282 candidates for the House of Representatives. Of those, 273 were Democrats, seven were Republicans, one was a third-party candidate, and one was an independent. In the Senate, the four unions gave to 48 Democrats, three Republicans, and one independent (Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont).

Extensive spending on federal politics may explain the preferential treatment of the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU, especially during the Biden administration. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Biden’s Center for Disease Control directly adopted language suggestions from the AFT into the organization’s school reopening guidelines.¹² The Biden administration also proposed nearly half of a billion dollars in funding for union-backed community schools.¹³

Using political power to influence federal policy is important to unions. However, public sector collective bargaining policy is determined at the state level. As such, unions also allocate significant financial resources to influence public policy in state capitals throughout the country.

State Election PAC Spending

Campaign finance reports reveal that government union PACs spent approximately \$145.1 million on state and local politics during the 2021–22 election cycle. Of this, \$118.1 million went directly toward candidates for public office and partisan PACs, while \$26.9 million went to nonpartisan candidates, staff costs, membership mailers, and other miscellaneous costs. Unsurprisingly, an overwhelming majority of the partisan contributions went to Democratic candidates.¹⁴

11 OpenSecrets, National Education Association (All Recipients, Cycle 2022), accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/national-education-assn/recipients?candcycle=2022&id=d000000064&toprecipcycle=2022>

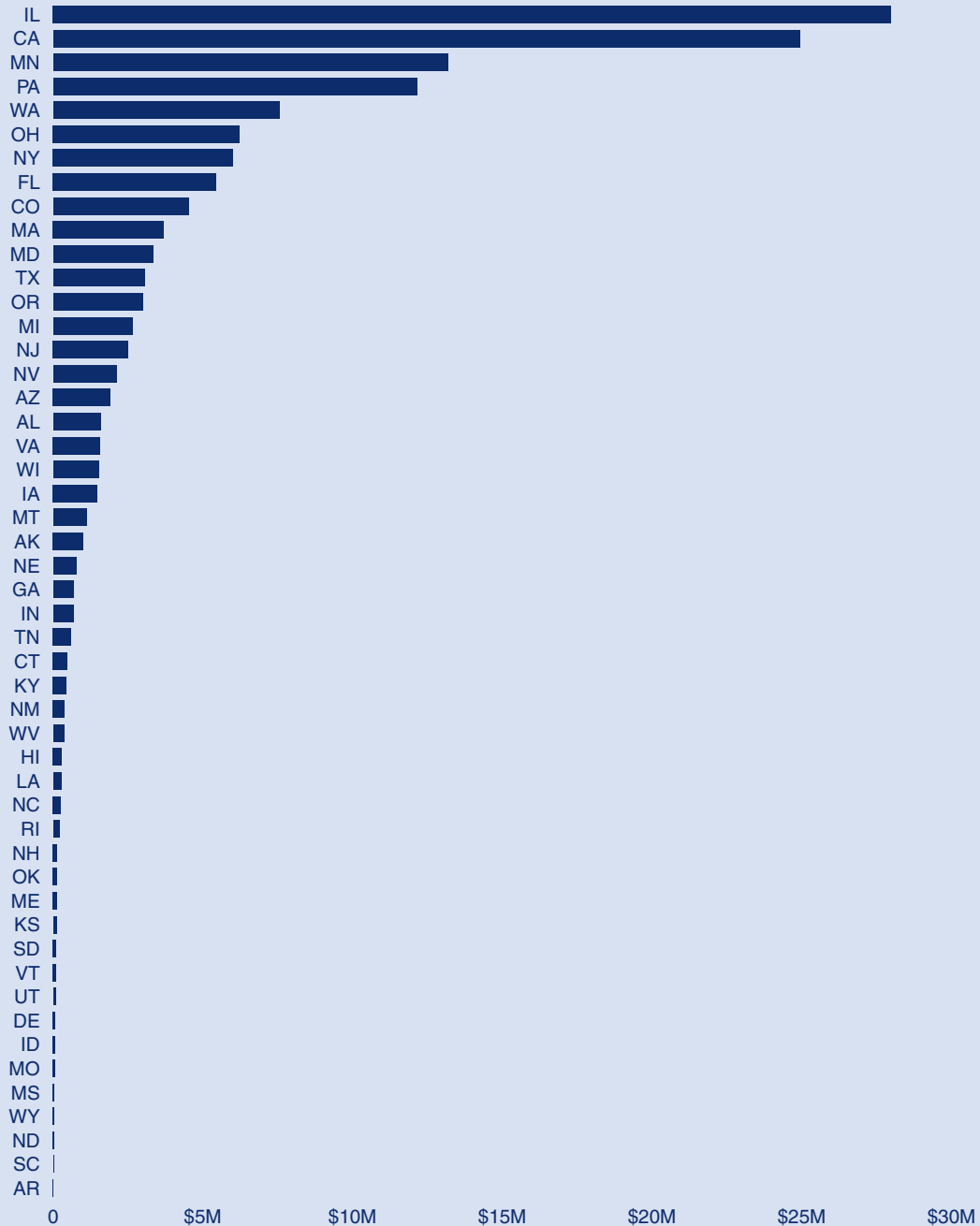
12 Jon Levine, “Powerful Teachers Union Influenced CDC on School Reopenings, Emails Show,” *New York Post*, May 1, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/05/01/teachers-union-collaborated-with-cdc-on-school-reopening-emails/>.

13 Ashley Varner, “Race-baiting, CRT Still High on Teachers Unions’ To-Do List,” *RealClearPolicy*, October 11, 2022, https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2022/10/11/race-baiting_crt_still_high_on_teachers_unions_to-do_list_858228.html.

14 To the reader, this follows campaign finance reports filed by the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU, and their affiliated unions with the responsible campaign finance reporting entity in each state. See also the report appendix, “Summary of Union Political Spending in Each State.”

The four largest government unions were active in every state, but to varying degrees (Figure 2). They spent the most in Illinois (\$27.9 million), California (\$24.9 million), Minnesota (\$13.2 million), Pennsylvania (\$12.1 million) and Washington (\$7.5 million). In total, spending in these five states accounted for nearly 60 percent of all state PAC expenditures. The 15 states with the lowest spending saw a combined \$1.16 million, showing that state-level PAC spending is top-heavy.

FIGURE 2: UNION PAC SPENDING IN STATE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS, 2021–22 CYCLE.



Source: Campaign finance reports filed by the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU, and their affiliated unions with the responsible campaign finance reporting entity in each state. See also the report appendix, “Summary of Union Political Spending in Each State.”

Government union PAC spending concentrated mostly within deep blue states such as California, Illinois, Minnesota, and Washington. As of the time of writing, these four states have Democratic trifecta governments—where the Democrats hold the governor’s office and legislative majorities in each chamber. This helped provide for numerous union-related policy developments in these states. Illinois voters approved a union-backed “Workers’ Rights Amendment,” to put collective bargaining in the constitution, while Minnesota Democrats have advanced numerous left-wing policies since taking control of the legislature.^{15,16} In both California and Washington, lawmakers advanced government union pet projects, including expanded public sector collective bargaining in Washington and a tax credit for union dues in California.¹⁷

Pennsylvania is the exception to this. School choice, which government unions oppose, was a central theme of the Pennsylvania gubernatorial election. Additionally, government unions have been historically active in Pennsylvania. Former Gov. Tom Wolf received over \$10 million from government unions during his two elections.¹⁸ The 2021–22 election cycle presented a unique opportunity for these unions in Pennsylvania. A new governor and a chance at a Democratic majority in the House of Representatives for the first time in decades incentivized government unions to invest heavily in Pennsylvania Democrats.

PAC CONTRIBUTIONS TO STATE PACS AND INTEREST GROUPS

The NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU’s PACs also sought to elect Democrats through contributions to other PACs and organizations. Figure 3 shows the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party State Central Committee (a state affiliate) was the top recipient, taking in nearly \$3.9 million from government unions. The party’s House and Senate caucuses also made the top 10, each bringing in over \$1.6 million from government unions. California had the most organizations in the top 10, with five, including the California Democratic Party, the California Teachers Association’s Independent Expenditure Committee, and a PAC opposing the recall of Gov. Gavin Newsom. All these groups are left-leaning, as are the rest of the ten largest organizational recipients of government union money.

15 Illinois Policy Institute, “The Policy Shop: How The ‘Workers’ Rights Amendment’ Hurts 93 Percent of Illinois Workers,” November 2, 2022, <https://www.illinoispolicy.org/policy-shop/ep-60-how-the-workers-rights-amendment-hurts-93-of-illinois-workers/>.

16 Abigail Tracy, “‘We Don’t Know How Long We Have’: Minnesota Democrats Are Passing as Many Progressive Laws as They Can,” *Vanity Fair*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/06/minnesota-democrats-progressive-laws>.

17 Ballotpedia, “Public-Sector Union Policy in the United States, 2018-2023,” accessed September 26, 2023, https://ballotpedia.org/Public-sector_union_policy_in_the_United_States,_2018-2023.

18 Commonwealth Foundation, “Government Unions ‘All-In’ for Wolf, Give Over \$10 Million in Political Support,” news release, October 4, 2018, <https://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/2018/10/04/government-unions-all-in-for-wolf-give-over-10-million-in-political-support/>.

FIGURE 3: TOP PAC/ORGANIZATION RECIPIENTS OF GOVERNMENT UNION PAC MONEY, 2021–22 CYCLE.

Rank	Recipient	State	Partisan Lean	Amount
1	MN DFL State Central Committee	MN	Democrat	\$3,889,155
2	California Democratic Party	CA	Democrat	\$3,116,260
3	Opportunity PAC	CA	Democrat	\$2,505,000
4	New Direction PAC	WA	Democrat	\$2,168,333
5	California Teachers Association IEC	CA	Democrat	\$2,000,000
6	Stop the Republican Recall of Gavin Newsom	CA	Democrat	\$1,890,305
7	Nurses and Educators for a Brighter California Future	CA	Democrat	\$1,807,570
8	DFL House Caucus	MN	Democrat	\$1,696,588
9	DFL Senate Caucus	MN	Democrat	\$1,650,062
10	2022 Fund	MN	Democrat	\$1,340,000

Source: Campaign Finance reports filed by the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU and their affiliated unions with the responsible campaign finance reporting entity in each state. See also the report appendix, “Summary of Union Political Spending in Each State.”

CONTRIBUTIONS TO STATE AND LOCAL CANDIDATES

The NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU’s partisan PAC spending patterns continued at the state level throughout the country. In total, 95.5 percent of partisan contributions at the state and local level went to Democratic candidates and PACs. The SEIU had the most partisan PAC expenditures of the unions, with 99.1 percent of contributions going to Democrats. The NEA was the least partisan, with 90.6 percent of PAC contributions going to Democrats.

While partisan trends heavily favored Democrats, this was not the case in every state. Figure 4 shows only five states (Alabama, Mississippi, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming) where government union PACs contributed more to Republican candidates than Democratic candidates. Illinois had the most contributions to Republican candidates with \$1.3 million, which was dwarfed by the \$19.7 million contributed to Democrats in the state.

FIGURE 4: PARTISAN TRENDS IN GOVERNMENT UNION PAC SPENDING IN STATE AND LOCAL ELECTIONS, 2021–22 CYCLE.

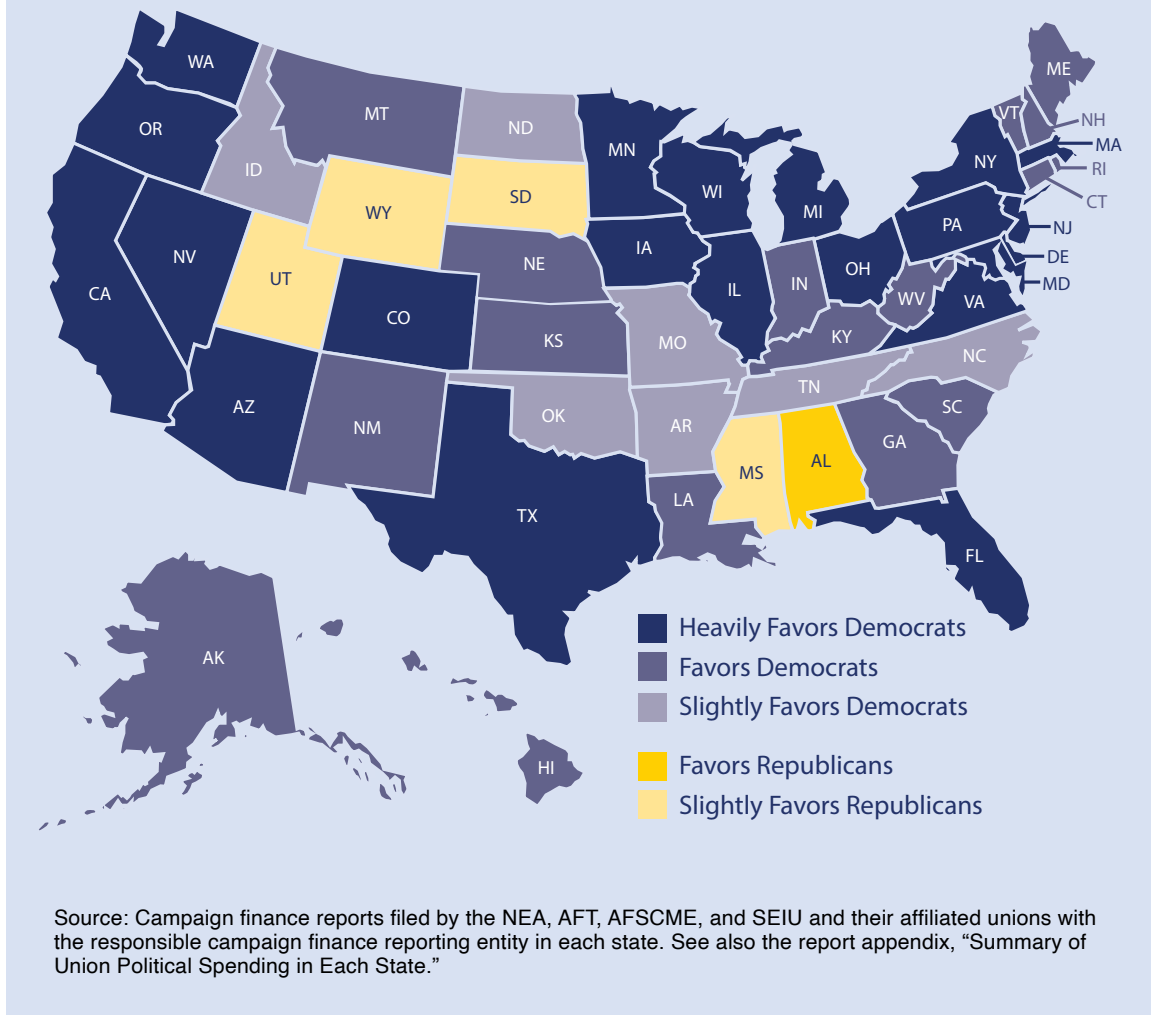


Figure 5 shows each of the ten largest recipients of government union PAC money at the state and local level were Democrats. Seven of the ten candidates brought in over \$1 million; the four largest government unions spent less than \$1 million combined in 27 states. As mentioned, Pennsylvania’s Shapiro received the most money from the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU, bringing in over \$4.5 million on the campaign trail. Bonta, California’s attorney general, followed at nearly \$1.3 million. Welch, the Illinois Speaker, was the largest legislative recipient, while Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson was the highest local recipient.¹⁹ Generally, government union contributions favored candidates for statewide office as only two of the top 10 recipients were not running for a statewide

¹⁹ To the reader, this research tracks political contributions from January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2022. The report appendix shows how Shapiro’s funding (see: Pennsylvania Department of State, “Shapiro, Josh for Pennsylvania, Campaign Finance Summary: Year 2021, 2022” accessed July 11, 2023, <https://www.campaignfinanceonline.pa.gov/Pages/CFAnnualTotals.aspx?Filer=20160016>) compared among the 50 U.S. states. Meanwhile, Johnson declared his candidacy in October 2022 and won in February 2023. According to the Illinois Policy Institute, he received nearly \$5.6 million from teacher unions (see: Mailee Smith, “Three Ways Chicago Mayor Johnson Is Likely to Repay Unions for Bankrolling Him,” Illinois Policy Institute, August 24, 2023, <https://www.illinoispolicy.org/3-ways-chicago-mayor-johnson-is-likely-to-repay-unions-for-bankrolling-him/>).

position. Of the 10 largest recipients, Beto O'Rourke was the only candidate who lost their election.

FIGURE 5: TOP INDIVIDUAL RECIPIENTS OF GOVERNMENT UNION PAC MONEY, 2021–22 CYCLE.

Rank	Recipient	State	Office	Party	Amount
1	Josh Shapiro	PA	Governor	Democrat	\$4,540,000
2	Rob Bonta	CA	Attorney General	Democrat	\$1,297,200
3	Emanuel "Chris" Welch	IL	HD 7/Speaker	Democrat	\$1,250,310
4	Brandon Johnson	IL	Mayor of Chicago	Democrat	\$1,179,100
5	Tony Thurmond	CA	State Superintendent of Public Instruction	Democrat	\$1,158,100
6	Tina Kotek	OR	Governor	Democrat	\$1,155,000
7	Malia Cohen	CA	State Controller	Democrat	\$1,034,800
8	Beto O'Rourke	TX	Governor	Democrat	\$990,000
9	Don Harmon	IL	SD 39/Senate President	Democrat	\$904,600
10	Mary O'Brien	IL	Supreme Court	Democrat	\$785,300

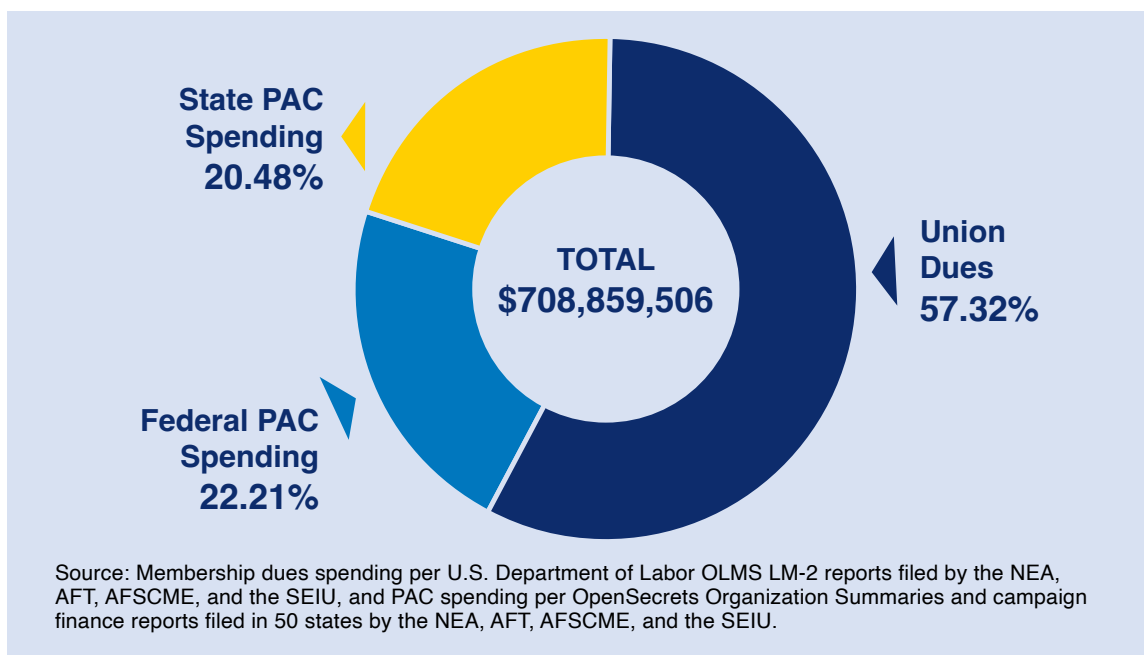
Source: Campaign Finance reports filed by the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU and their affiliated unions with the responsible campaign finance reporting entity in each state. See also the report appendix, "Summary of Union Political Spending in Each State."

Discussion: Trends and Impacts of Political Spending

Public sector union executives are heavily involved in politics, spending millions in membership dues on lobbying and issue advocacy. They maintain PACs to get their preferred political candidates elected despite the obvious conflicts of interest surrounding future bargaining for new contracts with the same politicians. For example, during the 2021–22 election cycle, Pennsylvania saw the fourth most union political spending of any state, all while Shapiro was the top individual recipient of public sector union PAC contributions in the country.

Membership dues were the largest source of government union political spending (Figure 6), accounting for nearly 60 percent of the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU's total political expenditures during the 2021–22 election cycle. Splits between state and federal PAC contributions were relatively even, with these unions' federal PACs spending \$157.4 million and state and affiliate PACs spending \$145.1 million.

FIGURE 6: GOVERNMENT UNION POLITICAL SPENDING, 2021–22 CYCLE.



Union political spending remains largely one-sided. Unions gave membership dues to left-wing groups such as For Our Future, the State Engagement Fund, and the Sixteen Thirty Fund. **When combining state and federal campaign finance data, government unions made 95.7 percent of contributions to Democratic candidates, causes, and PACs.** All top 10 candidates who received the most government union money at the state and federal level were Democratic candidates. All the 10 largest committee recipients at the state and federal level were explicitly or ideologically aligned with the Democratic party.

While these unions may reap political benefits from their spending, such one-sided political spending funded by membership dues can present difficulties with their membership. In 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court landmark *Janus v. AFSCME* decision freed public employees from mandatory union dues. Since then, the four largest government unions have lost a combined 357,000 members.²⁰ While not all membership losses may be because of union politics, it can be a factor. Americans for Fair Treatment (AFFT), a non-profit organization that helps public employees escape their unions, has a membership spotlight series showing membership dues going to politics as a leading reason for employees leaving their unions.

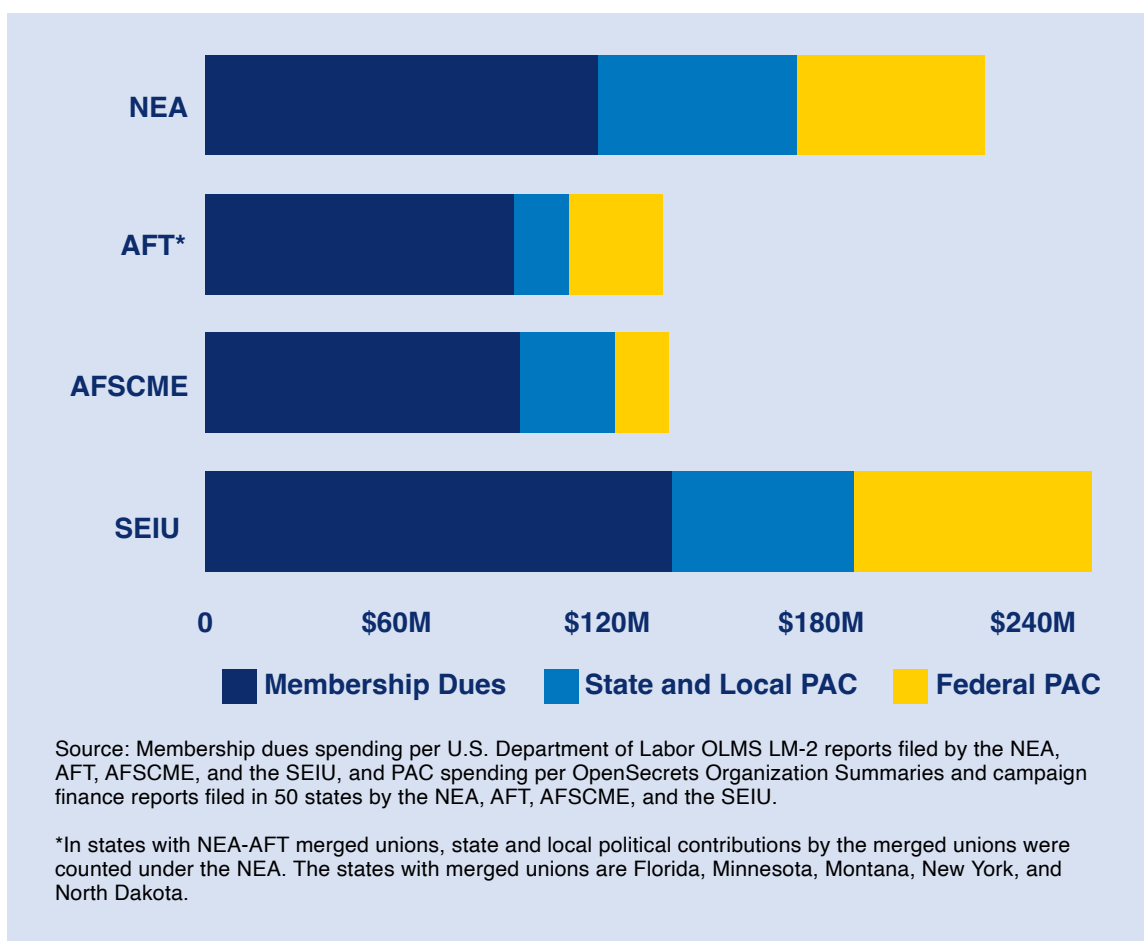
The SEIU was the most politically active union (Figure 7), spending over \$242 million on politics during the 2021–22 election cycle. Most of this was done with membership dues, where the union spent \$127.2 million on politics. The NEA was the largest contributor in state and local politics, while the SEIU was the most active federally.²¹ The AFT, the least politically active union, still spent \$125 million on politics and was the 24th most active federal committee in the country, according to OpenSecrets. **At the federal level, the four unions combined to spend the 10th most of any industry, outspending the defense, transportation, and construction industries.** In total, labor was the seventh-highest spending industry at the federal level.²²

²⁰ Office of Labor-Management Standards, LM Reports and Constitutions and Bylaws.

²¹ To the reader, in states with NEA-AFT merged unions, state and local political contributions by the merged unions were counted under the NEA. The states with merged unions are Florida, Minnesota, Montana, New York, and North Dakota.

²² OpenSecrets, "Interest Groups (Sector Totals, 2021–2022)," accessed September 26, 2023, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/>.

FIGURE 7: POLITICAL SPENDING BY UNION, 2021–22 CYCLE.



Several political and public policy developments—during and ahead of the 2021–22 election cycle—likely incentivized union political spending in certain states. They include the chances to expand bargaining in Washington, a labor-backed ballot initiative in Illinois, and a consequential gubernatorial race in Pennsylvania. Aside from these developments, state law often encourages more union political spending. **In many states, government unions have special legal privileges that help them build and expand political power.**

To better understand the legal privileges granted to government unions, the Commonwealth Foundation researched laws governing public sector labor relations in all 50 states. In the latest edition of this study, “The Battle for Worker Freedom in the States: Grading State Public Sector Labor Laws,” California, Illinois, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Washington, the five states with the highest union political spending, all received grades of “D” or worse.²³

These legal privileges create an incentive for government unions to spend heavily in states that grant them. As public sector labor policy continues to evolve throughout the country, expect unions to continue spending money to exert their influence.

²³ Andrew Holman and Priya Brannick, “The Battle for Worker Freedom in the States: Grading State Public Sector Labor Laws,” (Harrisburg: Commonwealth Foundation, September 22, 2022), <https://www.commonwealthfoundation.org/research/grading-state-public-sector-labor-laws/>.

Conclusion

Government unions are a top influence in Washington, D.C. and state capitals throughout the country. Armed with millions of members and numerous special legal privileges, the four largest government unions have amassed significant political power. With this power, government unions have dedicated significant financial resources toward maintaining and expanding the legal structures from which they derive their power.

During the 2021–22 election cycle, the NEA, AFT, AFSCME, and SEIU spent \$708.8 million on politics and lobbying. Members funded this activity, through membership dues and PAC deductions. Membership dues spending accounted for most of the unions’ political expenditures, but union PACs had a significant influence on federal and state elections.

This spending led to political rewards for government unions. Nine of the ten top recipients of union money won their elections. Illinois passed a constitutional amendment that has significantly expanded government union legal privileges. California and Washington expanded collective bargaining and created tax breaks for union members. Minnesota’s union-backed Democratic trifecta passed several progressive policies.

In spite of all this spending, government unions are facing steep membership declines in a post-*Janus* world. A new lawsuit from Alaska, currently on appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, could permit states to take a more active role in protecting government workers from union executives.²⁴ Meanwhile, in the past year, 70 percent of voters in Tennessee voted to enshrine Right-to-Work in the state constitution. Five states advanced paycheck protection. Union-opposed school choice policies are rapidly expanding throughout the country.²⁵

As more lawmakers and stakeholders become aware of government unions’ political power and the legal inequities that grant them this power, unions will focus more resources on fighting against reform. This has consequences; government unions are already losing membership due to their extensive one-sided political activities. With less membership, these unions have less influence. Reforms in Florida, Kentucky, and Tennessee show that it is possible to take on government unions and win, much to the benefit of workers and taxpayers.

24 Mark Sabbatini, “Alaska Asks U.S. Supreme Court to Hear Case about State Employee Union Dues,” *Juneau Empire*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.juneauempire.com/news/alaska-asks-u-s-supreme-court-to-hear-case-about-state-employee-union-dues/>.

25 Jeremiah Poff, “Every State that Passed or Expanded School Choice in 2023,” *Washington Examiner*, July 16, 2023, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/education/every-state-passed-expanded-school-choice-2023>.

Appendix: Summary of Union Political Spending in Each State

State	Total State Union PAC Spending	Union PAC Spending Rank	Top Spending Union	Top Individual Recipient (Amount)	Top PAC/Org Recipient (Amount)	Partisan Split
Alabama	\$1,588,696	18	NEA	Phillip Ensler (\$70,000)	N/A	62% R, 38% D
Alaska	\$1,003,779	23	AFSCME	Gary Stevens (\$14,000)	Putting Alaskans First (\$297,000)	91% D, 9% R
Arizona	\$1,919,366	17	AFSCME	Katie Hobbs (\$30,900)	Arizona Democratic Party (\$1,007,000)	100% D, 0% R
Arkansas	\$8,500	50	NEA	Andrew Collins (\$500)	N/A	76% D, 24% R
California	\$24,933,379	2	SEIU	Rob Bonta (\$1,297,200)	Opportunity PAC (\$2,505,000)	100% D, 0% R
Colorado	\$4,522,132	9	SEIU	David Ortiz (\$45,100)	All Together Colorado (\$1,025,000)	100% D, 0% R
Connecticut	\$478,625	28	SEIU	Jason Rojas (\$2,000)	Senate Democrats Victory PAC (\$20,000)	99% D, 1% R
Delaware	\$77,050	43	NEA	Eric Morrison (\$1,200)	House Democrats (\$25,000)	98% D, 2% R
Florida	\$5,439,576	8	NEA/AFT	Charlie Crist (\$219,000)	Building the Bay PC (\$384,000)	79% D, 21% R
Georgia	\$687,163	25	SEIU	Bee Nguyen (\$29,944)	New Georgia Project Action Fund (\$100,000)	95% D, 5% R
Hawaii	\$288,200	32	AFSCME	Josh Green (\$12,000)	N/A	98% D, 2% R
Idaho	\$69,497	44	NEA	Scott Bedke (\$5,000)	Stronger Idaho (\$25,000)	75% D, 25% R
Illinois	\$27,978,691	1	AFT	Chris Welch (\$1,250,315)	All for Justice (\$785,000)	94% D, 6% R
Indiana	\$675,819	26	NEA	JD Ford (\$74,555)	Senate Majority Campaign Committee (\$25,000)	88% D, 12% R
Iowa	\$1,469,724	21	NEA	Zach Wahls (\$50,000)	Iowa Democratic Party (\$1,185,500)	99% D, 1% R
Kansas	\$123,975	39	NEA	Chris Mann (\$0,000)	Keep Kansas Courts Impartial (\$25,000)	99% D, 1% R
Kentucky	\$443,340	29	NEA	Josie Raymond (\$3,000)	Liberty and Justice for Kentucky (\$100,000)	94% D, 6% R
Louisiana	\$279,728	33	AFT	Lauren Jewett (\$5,500)	House Democratic Campaign Committee (\$15,000)	78% D, 22% R
Maine	\$129,908	38	NEA	Janet Milles (\$5,900)	Rebuild Maine (\$12,753)	99% D, 1% R
Maryland	\$3,338,205	11	NEA	Tom Perez (\$36,000)	Maryland Opportunity Inc. (\$645,000)	98% D, 2% R
Massachusetts	\$3,694,067	10	SEIU	Jason Lewis (\$5,000)	Fair Share Massachusetts (\$825,000)	99% D, 1% R
Michigan	\$2,647,658	14	NEA	Jocelyn Benson (\$209,000)	Michigan House Democratic Fund (\$145,925)	99% D, 1% R
Minnesota	\$13,176,122	3	NEA/AFT	Tim Walz (\$16,000)	Minnesota DFL State Central Committee (\$3,889,155)	99% D, 1% R
Mississippi	\$40,900	46	NEA	Delbert Hosemann (\$10,000)	Mississippi House Leadership Fund (\$6,000)	99% R, 1% D
Missouri	\$63,655	45	NEA	Megan Green (\$7,500)	Serve Missouri (\$10,000)	98% D, 2% R

State	Total State Union PAC Spending	Union PAC Spending Rank	Top Spending Union	Top Individual Recipient (Amount)	Top PAC/Org Recipient (Amount)	Partisan Split
Montana	\$1,119,384	22	NEA/AFT	John Repke (\$400)	Working Montana PAC (\$280,000)	100% D, 0% R
Nebraska	\$769,137	24	NEA	Bret Lindstrom (\$25,225)	Preserve the Good Live (\$188,000)	90% D, 10% R
Nevada	\$2,108,889	16	AFSCME	Aaron Ford (\$21,000)	Home Means Nevada (\$500,000)	99% D, 1% R
New Hampshire	\$135,312	36	SEIU	Tom Sherman (\$20,000)	New Hampshire House Democratic Campaign Committee (\$10,000)	97% D, 3% R
New Jersey	\$2,503,037	15	NEA	Phil Murphy (\$32,900)	New Jersey Democratic State Committee (\$200,000)	96% D, 4% R
New Mexico	\$382,308	30	AFT	Michelle Grisham (\$128,400)	Democratic Party of New Mexico (\$10,500)	100% D, 0% R
New York	\$6,015,241	7	SEIU	Kathy Hochul (\$294,200)	Progress NYS (\$750,000)	99% D, 1% R
North Carolina	\$262,239	34	SEIU	Warren Daniel (\$11,200)	North Carolina Democratic House Caucus (\$5,000)	53% D, 47% R
North Dakota	\$37,000	48	NEA/AFT	Jim Dotzenrod (\$5,000)	North Dakota Democratic Party (\$7,000)	77% D, 23% R
Ohio	\$6,227,986	6	NEA	Nan Whaley (\$79,808)	Ohio Democratic Party (\$1,121,000)	95% D, 5% R
Oklahoma	\$134,682	37	NEA	Joy Hofmeister (\$13,000)	N/A	63% D, 37% R
Oregon	\$2,996,351	13	SEIU	Tina Kotek (\$1,155,000)	Southern Oregon Priorities (\$110,100)	99% D, 1% R
Pennsylvania	\$12,145,545	4	SEIU	Josh Shapiro (\$4,540,000)	Pennsylvania United (\$250,000)	95% D, 5% R
Rhode Island	\$209,386	35	SEIU	Dominick Ruggerio (\$5,275)	Rhode Island Democratic State Committee (\$11,000)	99% D, 1% R
South Carolina	\$21,000	49	NEA	Lisa Ellis (\$3,500)	N/A	67% D, 33% R
South Dakota	\$102,364	40	NEA	Richard Thomason (\$4,000)	Senate Republican Campaign Committee (\$2,000)	65% R, 35% D
Tennessee	\$596,474	27	NEA	London Lamar (\$15,500)	Vote No On 1 (\$50,000)	52% D, 48% R
Texas	\$3,060,844	12	SEIU	Beto O'Rourke (\$990,000)	Fair Shot Texas (\$565,435)	90% D, 10% R
Utah	\$81,578	42	NEA	LeAnn Wood (\$3,000)	Utah Democratic Party (\$2,000)	51% R, 49% D
Vermont	\$101,930	41	NEA	David Zuckerman (\$8,210)	Vermont Democratic Party (\$10,510)	100% D, 0% R
Virginia	\$1,572,443	19	AFSCME	Terry McAuliffe (658,890)	Energized for Change PAC (\$145,000)	100% D, 0% R
Washington	\$7,552,394	5	SEIU	Sharon Wylie (\$9,000)	New Direction Pac (\$2,168,333)	99% D, 1% R
West Virginia	\$373,115	31	AFT	Barbara Fleischauer (\$6,600)	West Virginia Democratic House Legislative Committee (\$1,400)	77% D, 23% R
Wisconsin	\$1,524,217	20	NEA	Tony Evers (\$83,500)	A Better Wisconsin Together (\$834,000)	100% D, 0% R
Wyoming	\$37,172	47	SEIU	Mark Gordon (\$2,500)	N/A	52% R, 48% D

Note: Respective source date linked to each state's name.



**COMMONWEALTH
FOUNDATION**



commonwealthfoundation.org

717.671.1901

