

Alexandra Ackers-Lyons
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BIO: Over the past 15 years, Alexandra Acker-Lyons has worked for candidates and campaigns, party committees, and progressive organizations, with an emphasis on youth politics.

*Alexandra is the President and Founder of AL Advising, a philanthropic and non-profit consulting firm, whose clients include Electing Women Silicon Valley, NextGen Climate, and Project New America. She is a recognized political commentator and also travels internationally as a trainer for the National Democratic Institute. Alexandra is also the author of *The Political Ladder: Insider Tips on Getting a Job in Politics*, published in 2012.*

From 2011-2015, Alexandra served as Director of the Youth Engagement Fund at the Democracy Alliance, raising and re-granting over \$5 million to youth-focused civic engagement efforts. She also led the Young Democrats of America as Executive Director during the historic 2008 election cycle. Alexandra served as the Executive Director of Democratic GAIN, professional organization for political operatives, for the 2010 election cycle, having previously worked for GAIN as Training Director. She has also worked in various capacities for the John Kerry for President Campaign and the Democratic National Committee, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and Congresswoman Nita Lowey (D-NY).

Alexandra currently serves on the Board of the Bus Federation Action Fund and New Leaders Council. She graduated summa cum laude from the State University of New York at Binghamton and lives in Palo Alto, CA. Follow her at @alackerlyons.

There are so many stories of people waking up the day after the election and having to tell their daughters Hillary didn't win.

I worked 7 years in political philanthropy. Now I do independent political and philanthropic advising. I want to help donors make more informed decisions. Now that we have tons of organizations and tons of things on the ballot – all deserving and needing of funds – it's almost paralyzing the number of choices we have.

We have 34 US Senate seats up for election. 26 of those held by Democrats. Only 2 Republican seats are considered up. Control of the Senate is up for grabs, as it is in the House.

In California, 10 or 11 seats are in play. Some of the districts that Hillary won, the Republicans won by double digits, even where she won. It's hard to knock out an incumbent.

Over 100 competitive seats, but only about 45-50 that are truly in play and that will narrow after primaries. We have to net 24 for Democrats to get a majority; that is an uphill battle. It could be between 12 to 50.

We have 35 governors and at least 23 of these races are open, because states have term limits. Governors who were elected with Tea Party movement in 2010 and reelected in 2014 are all up for reelection.

All of the state level work leads into the US Census and redistricting, etc. When we say everything is on the ballot, it's not an exaggeration. It's a busy, busy year, and if you're feeling overwhelmed, you are not alone.

POLITICAL MONEY

I'm not a lawyer, I have worked for every type of 501C3, 501C4, Superpac, you name it... but if you are making donation here are some differences:

501C3 - You can conduct leadership training, non-partisan training that does not expressly name or support a candidate.

New Leaders Council – www.newleaderscouncil.org

Ignite – www.ignitenational.org – They do wonderful political development work

Non-Partisan voter registration; non-partisan get out the vote activities

You can do voter education if you talk non-partisan.

Many of these orgs have affiliated 501C4s, Super PACs, no limits as to what you can give but organizations have to say who their donors are, but you can anonymize that.

It's very easy for organizations to target hard to reach voters; you can have a voter registration campaigns that target specific Latino voters that are 501C3.

SuperPAC, 501C4, is sometimes called dark money. It's not all evil. Most of it goes to issue advocacy campaigns. MoveOn tells you to contact your senator on a specific issue; that is probably happening through their 501C4. You can engage in direct grass-roots lobbying. No limits on giving. General support funds for 501C4s are generally not disclosed

SuperPACs must disclose donors. This is not tax-deductible money.

527s have become irrelevant in the era of SuperPACs. But here you can exclusively name candidates. The plus is that the party committees can coordinate directly with the candidates. The California Democratic Party, your local Democratic party, etc. There are limits, but there are no aggregate federal limits any more. And donations over \$200 are disclosed. If you give over \$200 to a candidate, that is disclosed and its searchable on the

web site.

Q – Do I as an individual donor, need to keep track of that?

A – It's the campaign's responsibility to do that.

Yes, you can use 501C3s money to further your political goals.

Non-partisan voter registration.

Issue-focused that doesn't name a candidate within a certain time frame for an election.

Leadership development organizations fall into this category.

TIPS FOR POLITICAL GIVING

Be pro-active, rather than reactive. You are all doing this.

If you set a parameter and a budget, it makes it easier to say no.

Resist the urge to spread the love. I encourage people to go deep rather than wide. Pick a couple of issues, a couple of priorities or even a couple of candidates and give as much as you can to those folks.

You aren't going always to win. That's OK.

I encourage giving not only to national orgs and federal candidates, but adopt your home state or your neighbor's home state.

When in doubt, go local. Smaller budgets; your dollar goes further. Same thing for local candidate, except in expensive California.

Save 10% of your money for last minute money, like September. If you're going to give serious political money, do it before summer and certainly by Labor Day weekend make your last decisions.

Consider 70/30 split for 501C3/other giving for the first time.

You may be giving to a 501C3 that has a 501C4 or an affiliated PAC. Planned Parenthood and League of Conservation Voters all have different entities.

If you know and trust that organization, you can talk to them about the political stuff they're doing.

If possible, give to general support funds rather than project-specific funds.

For many organizations, the first 6 months after an election are the hardest time to raise money, so try to make multi-year grants.

WHY GIVE TO GROUPS AND NOT JUST CANDIDATES?

Candidates have more flexibility with what they can do with your money.

But for many things, like voter registration and the mechanics of voting, that is most effectively done with 501C3 money and then you're not using that harder to raise, harder to spend political money. That can be done with the vast majority of giving, which is 501C3 money.

These groups can hold politicians accountable. Some immigration groups etc are holding politicians feet to fire. You can move public opinion on key issues. The marriage equality movement has shown this.

For under-represented communities, having a community based organization that talks to them all the time (about housing and services and then maybe later about a candidate) it's the best way to get unlikely voters to vote. It's a trusted messenger that perhaps provides services and layers in talking about voters.

Allows you to organize beyond one election cycle. Keeping and maintaining those groups and the infrastructure.

Charity Navigator, Give Well and GudeStar only give part of the story. For many organizations, the vast majority of the money goes to overhead and staff. Good staff is essential to good work.

HOW TO EVALUATE

Authenticity in the community versus the fly-in organization or out-of-state organizers. That trusted messenger, "I'll be knocking on your door in 6 months for now." Make sure the staff and board are reflective of the community. So many progressive organizations have all white staff.

Make sure people represent the communities they are trying to organize. If you are good at organizing your community on one thing, you can be taught how to do good voting work.

My theory of porn: the Supreme Court decision that said you'll know porn when you see it. If you are considering an organization, go see what they are doing. Often non-profits don't have a development team. They would often welcome the opportunity to show off their work.

Many groups do voter registration poorly. They get A for effort. In-person voter registration is really hard to do well.

ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE GOOD:

Alliance for Youth Organizing – www.allianceforyouthorganizing.org – students and young people (Ackers-Lyons is on the board)

Center for Popular Democracy – <https://populardemocracy.org/> – [ACORN was a low income community organization, brought down by "scandal," which was really Republicans bringing them down on minor technicalities]

State Voices – www.statevoices.org – and affiliates

Vote.org - www.vote.org – based in SF / Obama tweeted about them

Voter Participation Center – www.voterparticipation.org – focuses on women turning

18 and unmarried women

CALIFORNIA STATEWIDE ORGANIZATIONS

Advocacy or Direct Services organizations that also do voter registration
Some are very local and some are coalitions of larger groups

California Calls – <http://www.cacalls.org>

Communities for a New California – www.anewcalifornia.org

Engage San Diego – <http://thecentersd.org/programs/engage-san-diego>

Fresno County Civic Engagement Table (sponsor is The Center)

Inland Empowerment – www.inlandempowerment.org

Korean Resource Center – www.krcla.org

Orange County Voter Information Project

PICO California – www.picocalifornia.org

Q – Should we focus on CA or outside it?

A – There are no wrong answers this year, as there are a lot of good candidates. We think we are a blue state, but we have a really strong moderate caucus that is largely controlled by corporate interests and they get to write the agenda when they want to. California has a lot going on. Governors race may be Democrat versus Democrat, but there's an opportunity for communities to push them on issues.

For every purple state, there are states like Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, Florida – they have a Senate race, governors race, key state for redistricting where so much is going on. Some states have better get out the vote infrastructure than others. It's hard to find in a group this large consensus in adopting another state. You can think of a geography or demography that is important to you. You can say my family is from Ohio or I care about African-American women... you can think of it that way.

Q – What think of Swing Left of Sister District?

I adore the Sister District – www.sisterdistrict.com – model. I think it's the way to go. You really get to know the district and the candidate. You're making calls to the same narrow geography, so it feels more authentic. And state legislative races are super important.

I'm working directly with Swing Left – <https://swingleft.org/> – on one project.

What I like about Swing Left are the district funds. They are focused on swinging Congressional districts and they have created mechanisms where you can put money into a district fund and whoever emerges from that primary - whichever Democratic emerges, will get piles of money. It's a genius way of organizing it.

The way they do volunteer engagement feels a little inauthentic. You can call and not really know where you're calling. People still want their Congressman to ensure their trash is picked up. That's not something that we as Bay Area liberals can really talk to a

low-income voter in Fresno about.

I love the lane that Indivisible – www.indivisible.org – had carved out. In April, co-director Ezra Levin was in a pretty large room and a significant donor asked about messaging. He said, we don't work in Democratic messaging. For a brand new organizational leader to know their lane and their mission and to not have "mission creep" where you're trying to keep all the donors happy, that blew me away. Will be interesting to see how they switch to an electoral mindset. They have been good at arming people with information and very specific tasks. They've got a really good team.

Q - In which states does turnout matter?

A – This entire election in those states it's going to be about turnout. It's going to be about his poll numbers and his numbers with Republicans and how closely tied is the the Republican brand tied to Trump.

Pollsters try to do models based on likely voters and there's no such thing on this cycle. It will come down to Republican and independent women.

I consult on millennials – we're trying to figure out how much he purity test matters to them. If a Democrat voted well 90% of the time, is that going to make a millennial stay home or will they be pragmatic enough to vote anyway?

Q - How do people make the decisions they make?

A- I'd love to know how much of the 2016 vote was misogyny was general or how much was against Hillary, as she was so negatively defined for so long, so well.

The biggest thing people are grappling with now is how much has changed post Trump. If 30% will always be with him and 40% will always be against. What about that other 30%?

We don't know if things have to change tactically. One of the lessons I took away from 2016 is that being against Trump is not enough. People know who he is but they look away because they think he'll bring jobs back or the stock market is doing well or they don't want Democrats in control of abortion legislation. There is a huge chunk of the progressive base who stayed home or voted third party. It's a huge chunk.

Q- Is that a reason to focus on groups that get women to vote?

A - I think at this moment in time, I don't know that were going to win back an Obama-Trump voter. In places like California and South and Southwest, populations of young people and people of color are booming, we can make those calculations. It's harder in Wisconsin, which is getting older and whiter

Q - What Dem candidates are you excited about in 2020?

A - I would have wanted Al Franken. It's really early. I would much rather support a

governor or a mayor. They have never elected a mayor directly to the presidency. A lot of the type of person we want will depend on what happens in 2018, on the Mueller investigation. I'm not sure a woman from MA whose a Senator (Elziabeth Warren) is right. It's early. It's going to be a brutal primary. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. As donors, you get to meet all the candidates, if you open your checkbook big enough. Seeing Congressional candidates coming to Palo Alto to raise money was unheard of, We've replaced NYC as the ATM.