

How Silicon Valley is rigging elections for the Democrats to capture Congress

Tony Romm, The Washington Post

Lauren Baer faces a tough task on Election Day: She's a first-time Democratic candidate for Congress vying against a veteran Republican in "one of the swingiest swing districts" in southeastern Florida, as she puts it.

Like many in her party, Baer says she benefits from a secret weapon - one that is 2,500 miles away from her slice of the Sunshine State. In Silicon Valley, Baer is among a flood of candidates capitalizing on new apps, activist groups and other organizations that spawned after President Donald Trump's 2016 victory with the explicit goal of triggering a Democratic wave this November.

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As voters prepare to head to the polls, the tech industry's talented, well-heeled engineers and entrepreneurs have been plugging into Democratic campaigns around the country. They've donated their time and money toward giving the party a digital edge, aiding the most distant local candidates and the Democrats' more ambitious quest to snatch control of the U.S. Congress from Republicans' grasp.

Many of these newly awakened tech workers are motivated by Trump's controversial policies on issues including immigration, and they're focused on closing what they perceive to be an innovation gap with the GOP, two years after Trump effectively tapped Facebook, Twitter and other data-heavy tools on his road to victory. One outgrowth of the Valley's efforts, an app called MobilizeAmerica, has helped Baer find potential supporters in Florida's 18th District, a chunk of the state about the size of Rhode Island. The app helped the campaign knock on more than 2,000 doors during a campaign event held a month before Election Day, aides said.

"After the 2016 election, I think we saw a number of individuals in the tech space, in Silicon Valley and also around the country, frankly saying they wanted to use technology for good," said Baer, who stands to become Florida's first openly lesbian representative in Congress if she wins. "And because of that, we've seen a proliferation of new tools."

But Silicon Valley's heightened attention to politics - and its commitment to aiding mostly Democrats - could saddle the tech industry with a new headache in the nation's capital, where Trump and his GOP allies have alleged that tech giants are biased against the right. On Tuesday, Trump's 2020 campaign manager, Brad Parscale, accused Facebook and Google of "ramping up their purge of conservatives" ahead of the midterms.

"While the tech giants, which have deep liberal bias throughout their personnel and practices, place a thumb on the scale against conservatives online, we are undaunted," a spokeswoman for the Trump campaign said this week. "We will continue to build our database of millions of supporters and are confident that they will turn out and deliver victory for the GOP on Election Day."

Democrats' new start-ups and other organizations have attracted high-profile investments from some of the tech industry's deepest pockets, including Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn. They're seeking more than the next great political app: If Democrats succeed on Nov. 6, the tools they funded could be a boon that lasts beyond the midterms - giving the party a technological advantage in its coming rematch against Trump.

"Staying on the sidelines is no longer an option, and we can't wait until 2020," said Ron Conway, an early investor in Facebook and Google who has donated millions of dollars this cycle.

Silicon Valley's political apotheosis began hours after Trump's victory. Many in tech had backed his vanquished Democratic foe, Hillary Clinton, and they quickly set about

protesting the incoming Republican president's agenda. Some rank-and-file tech employees soon pressured their bosses - the leaders of companies including Apple, Facebook and Google - to avoid working with the Republican administration, and many later took to the streets of San Francisco to protest Trump's policies.

The groundswell of activism in the country's tech heartland offered an opportunity for digital strategists like Shomik Dutta and Betsy Hoover to experiment before the midterm elections. Two veterans of President Barack Obama's political campaigns, the duo and their peers teamed up to launch a new Democratic-leaning startup incubator, called Higher Ground Labs, in May 2017. Amassing a roughly \$5 million war chest, they set about trying to seed the next generation of tools that might help Democratic campaigns deploy Facebook ads and tap text messages to get voters to cast ballots on Election Day.

"People are realizing if our old technology is horse and buggy, and a car has just been introduced, we shouldn't be investing in stronger horses," Dutta said.

Since the 2018 race began, Higher Ground Labs has invested in 23 startups, including MobilizeAmerica. Think of it akin to the restaurant-reservation service OpenTable, but for shoe-leather politics: A candidate can post an event for knocking on doors, and interested supporters can snag a spot. Campaigns can also link up with allied political organizations, including the fast-growing progressive outlet Swing Left, which can then direct volunteers on how to take action.

So far, MobilizeAmerica has been used by more than 400 campaigns and groups, which rounded up more than 254,000 volunteers who will try to visit, call or text about 19 million voters by Thursday, said Alfred Johnson, the co-founder of the company.

"A lot of people are very motivated by the presidency," he said, "and we're going to continue to see a ton of investment and activity in this space."

Higher Ground Labs also has invested in VoterCircle, one of many emerging apps that helps organizers tap their address books and text to friends voting reminders and other political messages. Another, called Change Research, relies on Facebook ads to reach specific categories of voters with surveys, rather than querying them through landline phone calls. Its founders - Mike Greenfield, a Silicon Valley data scientist, and Pat Riley, a political veteran - say their polling tools now are deployed in dozens of local races in Oklahoma, Tennessee, Florida and Texas.

"I think it is likely just the beginning" Greenfield said of the Valley's interest in politics, "but I think we've made real progress."

For years, Republican campaigns have relied on powerful tools for finding, tracking and advertising to voters, many created by deep-pocketed donors like the Koch Brothers. For Democrats, some of their most engaged benefactors have long come from Silicon Valley, where tech leaders like Eric Schmidt, a former top executive at Google, played signature roles in helping to assemble digital arsenals for Obama in 2008 and 2012, and for Clinton four years later.

Now, it's Hoffman, the LinkedIn co-founder, who has become one of the Democratic Party's top tech benefactors. He has donated to Higher Ground Labs and some of its portfolio companies, on top of millions of dollars he's contributed to Democratic campaigns just in the past three months. Hoffman pinned his heightened involvement on Trump, charging that the president "attacks the very institutions of democracy." The LinkedIn co-founder added in a statement it's "why I've been asking my technologist friends and other leaders to get engaged too."

Chris Sacca, an early investor in companies such as Uber, hired a former aide to Obama to study dozens of start-up pitches and invest in some "intended for 2020 and beyond," he said. Conway, meanwhile, said he and his peers had deployed and "enormous amount of resources," adding in an email that Trump has been "an urgent wake up call to many in the tech sector."

For Mia Ketterling, a project lead at Pinterest, her epiphany came in September. She opted to join roughly 9,400 of her tech peers in volunteering with Tech for Campaigns, an organization founded in 2017 that seeks to pair the best and brightest in the tech industry with candidates, particularly those at the state and local level, who lack digital savvy and can't afford to hire experts.

"I think there is a strong opposition to Trump and also an awareness," Ketterling said of others in the Bay Area. "Like, 'Wow, we've really been sleeping on the job here, and we need to get more involved.'"

Ketterling is now part of a team assisting Bob Doyel, a Democrat who's running to represent a north-central Florida district of about 150,000 people (and "fields that may have cattle in them," as he put it) in the state's legislature. Doyel himself admits his generation doesn't know "a lot about tech," and he choked up during an interview acknowledging the unexpected support showered on him by Tech for Campaigns and Ketterling, whom he's never met in person.

"As more resources have come in," he said, "we have gotten more digital."

The Democrats' infusion of tech cash and support originated outside party headquarters. Fearing they had lost ground to Republicans after Trump prevailed in

2016, Democrats entered the 2018 cycle and realized they had to allow people to "put their smarts to work," said Caitlin Mitchell, the chief mobilization officer at the Democratic National Committee. The DNC also hired Raffi Krikorian, a former leading engineer at Twitter and Uber, as their chief technology officer last year.

Democrats seek not only to remake the political compositions of state and federal legislatures but to amass critical data about the apps and techniques that might work best for the presidential race. Ahead of 2020, groups like Higher Ground Labs plan to raise an additional \$6 million entering the presidential race, its founders said.

"Technology two years from now will be drastically different from how it is today," said Hoover, the former Obama campaign official who founded Higher Ground. "I hope we never again get to the place where we're like, 'Great, we have this beat, let's move on.'"