

Who 2016 Democratic Donors are Supporting in 2020

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Sanders draws most votes from 2016 contributors but has not consolidated support among his 2016 donors; Warren draws support from diverse parts of the 2016 donor base, especially when looking at broader measures of support than just first-choice preference, indicating potential for growth.

New York, NY -- A new poll of 2016 Democratic presidential donors conducted in the run-up to the first presidential primary debates show that [Bernie Sanders is the first choice candidate of only 42% of his 2016 donors, while Elizabeth Warren is drawing support from multiple parts of the 2016 donor base.](#) Meanwhile, Joe Biden is the leading answer when the 2016 donors were asked which candidates they will *not* support.

In a first-of-its-kind survey of progressive donors, the Voters Speak Project from Gradient Metrics and Survey 160 polled 2016 Democratic presidential campaign donors — an activist group with outsized influence in the nominating process — on their support for 2020 presidential primary candidates.

The live-interviewer SMS survey asked support in four ways: respondents' first-choice candidate, respondents' second-choice candidate, other candidates that the respondent was considering supporting, and any candidates that the respondent had ruled out supporting.

This survey shows that [Bernie Sanders leads the first-choice vote of this 2016 donor population with 34% of the sample, followed by Elizabeth Warren at 23%.](#) However, when looking at the broadest measure of support, [Elizabeth Warren comes out on top with 68% of respondents listing her as their first choice, second choice, or someone they would consider, followed by Bernie Sanders at 57%, Kamala Harris at 40%, Pete Buttigieg at 38%, and Joe Biden at 26%.](#) When asked if there were any candidates that they would not support, [34% named Joe Biden.](#)

Full results of the survey [can be found here.](#)

Because the population of 2016 activist donors is heavily tilted towards Bernie Sanders supporters (see more on this in the methodology section), it is instructive to look at support by who these donors supported in the primary four years ago. [Sanders is now earning a 42% plurality of first-choice support among respondents who only donated to Bernie Sanders in the 2016 primary, followed by Warren at 23%. Among donors who exclusively gave to Hillary](#)

[Clinton in the 2016 primary, Warren is earning 26% of the first-choice vote, followed by Joe Biden and Kamala Harris at 21% and 18% respectively.](#)

Using the broader measure of support -- first-choice, second-choice, or considering future support-- among former 2016 primary donors to Sanders, [Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders are effectively tied at 69% and 68% respectively.](#) Among 2016 primary donors to Clinton, [Kamala Harris leads in this broader measure of support with 75%, followed by Warren, Pete Buttigieg, and Joe Biden at 63%, 45%, and 42% respectively.](#)

Elizabeth Warren also has broader support across gender and age grouping than do other candidates. Again considering this broader measure of support that includes first-choice, second-choice, and considering, among female donors, [Warren has 66% support, compared to Sanders' 47%, Harris's 44%, Buttigieg's 37%, and Biden's 27%. Among male donors, Warren earns 71% support, compared to Sanders' 67% Buttigieg's 37%, Harris's 35%, and Biden's 25% support on this broader metric. Sanders commands significantly more support among men than women across definitions of support.](#)

[When looking at age, Warren again leads or is tied in all three age groupings \(18-40, 40-60, and 60+\) with 72%, 71%, and 60% support.](#) By way of comparison, in these three age groupings [Bernie Sanders yields 73%, 55%, and 37% support, Kamala Harris has 32%, 42%, 47% support, Pete Buttigieg has 32%, 43%, and 39%, support, and Joe Biden has 18%, 27%, and 34% support.](#)

[The value of donations made in 2016 provide another way to examine support. Considering first choice support, Joe Biden leads among donors who gave \\$1,000 or more in 2016 at 30%, followed by Bernie Sanders at 26% and Pete Buttigieg at 14%. However, among donors who gave under \\$200 in 2016, Bernie Sanders leads in first-choice support with 36%; Joe Biden is the first choice of only 6% of these 2016 donors.](#)

But when looking at the broader measure of support, donors favor other candidates. When considering first-choice, second-choice, and considerations, [Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren leads the field among \\$1000+ donors with 71% and 62% support, followed by Pete Buttigieg \(48%\) and Joe Biden \(47%\); only 28% of these donors support Bernie Sanders as someone whom they would at least consider. Among donors who gave \\$200 or less, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders lead with 69% and 61% of respondents indicating that they will at least consider their candidacy.](#)

“When examining a broader metric of support beyond first choice, Elizabeth Warren draws the most support from across the field of 2016 presidential campaign donors, however you want to cut them,” said Tom Vladeck, Managing Director of Gradient Metrics.

The survey's results also indicate what 2016 voters may be looking for during the upcoming presidential debates in terms of the candidates' traits and policy positions. When asked about

what traits they are prioritizing in a candidate for president, donors favored “Shares your policy positions” and “Ability to beat Donald Trump” at 35% and 32% respectively. The donors did not place as much value on “Experience in politics”, which earned only 3%.

The survey also asked about top policy priorities. [Climate change, health care, and income inequality lead the way with 30%, 28%, and 20% respectively. Respondents were much less likely to suggest Immigration or Democratic reform, which garnered only 2% and 9% support.](#) And this donor base is very interested in policy. [Asked whether the eventual Democratic nominee should focus on outlining the Democratic policy agenda or standing up to Donald Trump, 79% favored a focus on policy, while only 18% favored a focus on standing up to the president.](#) But these different donors favor different candidates. [Among those who favor outlining the policy agenda, Elizabeth Warren enjoys the first-choice, second-choice, or consideration of 70% of respondents, followed by Bernie Sanders at 60%, Kamala Harris at 39%, Pete Buttigieg at 37%, and Joe Biden at just 22%.](#) But among those who want the Democratic nominee to stand up to Trump, [Joe Biden does much better at 41%, similar to Pete Buttigieg \(43%\), Kamala Harris \(45%\) and Bernie Sanders \(40%\). Elizabeth Warren still earns 62% support on this broader measure among those who want the Democratic nominee to focus on standing up to Trump.](#)

“The data suggests that despite overwhelming attention on President Trump, Democratic donors report that they are more focused on policy goals than beating the president. Further, those donors say that their top priorities are addressing climate change and improving the health care system,” said Nathaniel Lubin, CEO of Survey 160 and former Director of the Office of Digital Strategy in the Obama White House.

Additionally, the survey asked donors who they expected to win the primary, regardless of who they themselves preferred. Despite his lower support among many of these donors, Biden came away on top by this measure (42%), followed by Sanders (25%), Warren (16%), Harris (4%) and Buttigieg (3%). When asked which candidate they believed had the best chance of beating President Trump, donors were more split, [with Biden topping the field at 25%, followed by Warren and Sanders \(20% each\), and Booker \(11%\).](#)

Donors to the 2016 presidential campaign represent an important and influential group of 2020 presidential primary voters in two ways. First, they are an activist base of support that can provide critical resources to candidates. Second, as highly attentive voters, their preferences may signal the direction that the broader primary electorate will go as the primary progresses or as the field shrinks. Like the electorate, the donor population is not a fixed group of people; new donors who did not give in the 2016 presidential contest will contribute to candidates in 2020, and conversely some 2016 donors will sit on their hands and wallets in 2020. Nevertheless, like surveying of activists or counting endorsers, tracking support among likely donors provides another important indication of how candidates are faring during the invisible primary before actual voting begins.

Methodology Statement

Constructing the Sampling Frame and Sample

The sampling frame for this study comes from the political scientist Adam Bonica's [Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections \(DIME\)](#). This database draws from FEC and state elections agency data to create a deduplicated list of donors. We limit this list to people who donated to (a) any candidate in 2016 Democratic primary, and/or (b) a Democratic candidate during the 2016 general election. We define the dividing line between the primary and general election to be July 25, the date of the start of the Democratic National Convention that year. These records were then matched by name and address to the Catalist voter file, and cell phone records were drawn from the Catalist records. All contact information came from the voter file data.

This approach has some known biases that are important to recognize. The Federal Government only requires that donors names, employers, and addresses be disclosed for donors who give \$200 or more. However, for campaigns using ActBlue, technically a [separate political committee](#) under a requirement to disclose all pass through donations, to manage their fundraising, these details are provided for all donors. In 2016, Bernie Sanders' campaign relied heavily on ActBlue while Hilary Clinton's campaign largely managed donations itself, and as a result more small dollar donor information is available about Sanders small donors than Clinton small donors.

From the data in the DIME dataset, we construct sampling strata based on four variables:

1. Donations in primary: Did the donor give to Clinton only, Sanders only, Multiple/other candidates, or no candidates between January 1 2015 and July 24, 2016
2. Donations in general: Did the donor give to Clinton on or after July 25, 2016, through December 31, 2016
3. Total dollars donated in 2016 primary: Summing across donations, did the donor give less than \$200, \$200 to \$2699, or \$2700 (the legal maximum) between January 1, 2015 and July 24, 2016?
4. Donor ideology: Is the donor's CF score above or below the sample median of -1.953

We fully factorialize these variables, omitting only the combinations that have no entries (e.g. did not donate in primary and donated \$200 to \$2699). This yields 30 separate strata. We use the proportions of these strata in three separate stages of the project to ensure that the resulting sample of respondents is representative to the sampling frame on the basis of these categories. First, we draw a sample proportional to these strata for matching. Second, among records successfully matched to the voter file we draw a sample proportional to these strata for surveying. And finally, we use these proportions to construct rake weights, which we use to weight the resulting set of respondents back to the sampling frame.

To obtain phone numbers for this set of donors, we worked with the voter file data firm Catalist. Based on this match, we append not only cell phone number, but age and gender. We then deduplicate this list to ensure there is only one unique phone number, randomly dropping duplicates. Based on this deduplicated list, we then draw a sample for interviewing proportional to strata size.

Fielding the Interviews

The survey was fielded using Survey 160's software for live-interviewer SMS interviewing. More details on that methodology can be found in Collins' (2019) description of their 2018 pre-election polling. In brief, respondents are contacted with an initial message, sent by a live human interviewer as are all questions in the survey, asking them to take part in a short survey. If and only if they agree to participate, they are told how to opt-out mid survey and then asked the survey questions.

The survey script follows. Of particular note is the way candidates are listed. At each point where a list of candidates is provided, they are presented in alphabetical order so that respondents with candidate preferences can locate them more easily. But to avoid primacy effects in survey response, the point in this order at which the list starts is randomized across respondents. It is consistent for each respondent each time they are presented with the list.

The survey was fielded between 29 May 2019 and 21 June 2019. The survey response rate (AAPOR RR1) is 4.9%, and the weighted number of total completes was 977 . The survey software implemented quotas based on the sampling strata to minimize divergence from the distribution of survey responses and the distribution of the sampling frame with respect to the sampling strata. After the survey was completed, the set of respondents who completed the interviews was weighted back to the sampling strata, yielding a design effect of 1.36. Accordingly, the largest 95% confidence interval / margin of error in the survey is +/- 3.8 percentage points. Confidence intervals around smaller proportions can be notably smaller, while margins of error for subgroups are larger.

For more information, contact Tom Vladeck, Managing Director of Gradient Metrics at info@gradientmetrics.com, or Nate Lubin, CEO of Survey 160, at nlubin@survey160.com.

Question Wording

- Q1) First, for statistical purposes, what is your gender? 1) Female 2) Male
- Q2) Again for statistical purposes only, in what year were you born? Please respond with the 4-digit year
- Q3) Next, are you planning on voting in a Democratic primary or caucus in 2020? 1) Yes 2) No [If no ⇒ ineligible]
- Q4) If the primary election was held today, who would be your first choice for the Democratic nominee for President: **[ROTATE]** 1) Joe Biden 2) Cory Booker 3) Pete Buttigieg 4) Julian Castro 5) Kirsten Gillibrand 6) Kamala Harris 7) Amy Klobuchar 8) Beto O'Rourke 9) Bernie Sanders, 10) Elizabeth Warren, 11) someone else (please specify), or 12) are you undecided?
- Q5) Who would be your *second choice* candidate for the Democratic Democratic nominee for President: **[ROTATE]** 1) Joe Biden 2) Cory Booker 3) Pete Buttigieg 4) Julian Castro 5) Kirsten Gillibrand 6) Kamala Harris 7) Amy Klobuchar 8) Beto O'Rourke 9) Bernie Sanders, 10) Elizabeth Warren, 11) someone else (please specify), or 12) are you undecided?
- Q6) Are there any other candidates who you are considering supporting for the Democratic presidential nomination? Please list any or all that come to mind.
- Q7) Are there any candidates who you will *not* support for the Democratic presidential nomination? Please list any or all that come to mind.
- Q8) Have you donated to any of the 2020 Democratic presidential campaigns? 1) Yes 2) No
- Q9) [If donate == 1] To which 2020 Democratic presidential campaign have you donated? Please list the names of the candidates whose presidential campaigns you have donated to in the past year. (open-end)
- Q10) [if donate == 1] Have you made your donations 1) online, 2) at an in-person event, or 3) both?
- Q11) [If donate == 1] How much have you donated in total to 2020 presidential campaigns to date ? Please provide an estimate in dollars.
- Q12) [if split == 1] Looking ahead, do you plan to donate to any of the 2020 Democratic presidential campaigns before the nominee is chosen? 1) Yes 2) No

- Q13) [If donatefuture == 1 & split == 1]. To which 2020 presidential candidate(s) are you planning on donating to? Please list the names of the candidate(s) to whose presidential campaigns you plan to donate before the nominee is chosen. (open-end)
- Q14) [If donatefuture == 1 & split == 1] When do you plan to next make a donation to a 2020 presidential campaign? 1) Within the next week 2) After the first debates 3) In the fall, or 4) not until 2020 5) After a nominee is chosen
- Q15) [if split == 2] Regardless of the candidate you prefer, which candidate do you think has the best chance of winning the Democratic nomination? **[ROTATE]** 1) Joe Biden 2) Cory Booker 3) Pete Buttigieg 4) Julian Castro 5) Kirsten Gillibrand 6) Kamala Harris 7) Amy Klobuchar 8) Beto O'Rourke 9) Bernie Sanders, 10) Elizabeth Warren, 11) or someone else (please specify)
- Q16) [if split == 2] Regardless of the candidate you prefer, which Democratic candidate, if nominated, do you think has the best chance beating Donald Trump in the November 2020 election? 1) Joe Biden 2) Cory Booker 3) Pete Buttigieg 4) Julian Castro 5) Kirsten Gillibrand 6) Kamala Harris 7) Amy Klobuchar 8) Beto O'Rourke 9) Bernie Sanders, 10) Elizabeth Warren, 11) or someone else (please specify)
- Q17) Which of the following qualities is the most important to you in a Democratic presidential nominee? 1) Ability to beat Donald Trump, 2) Shares your policy positions, 3) Strong personal character, 4) Experience in politics, 5) Leadership ability, or 6) Something else (please specify)
- Q18) Which of the following statements comes closer to your view? **[ROTATE]** 1) The eventual Democratic nominee should focus on standing up to Donald Trump, or 2) The eventual Democratic nominee should focus on outlining a vision for a Democratic policy agenda
- Q19) If you had to choose just one, what policy area do you want the Democratic nominee for president to prioritize? **[ROTATE EXCEPT 6]** 1) health care, 2) climate change, 3) income inequality, 4) immigration, 5) democratic reforms, or 6) something else