

# Full Court Press: Pennsylvania Union Political Spending in 2025

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## KEY POINTS

- Political action committees (PACs) affiliated with trade unions and government unions spent \$22.4 million in monetary and in-kind political activity in 2025, a year with few legislative elections and in which the Pennsylvania Supreme Court retention elections were the only statewide elections.
- Trade union and government union PACS spent \$2,229,661.58 on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court judicial retention elections.
- PACs operated by Pennsylvania's largest government unions—state-level affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)—collectively spent over \$5 million on electoral politics in 2025.
- Two political organizations, in particular, [Pennsylvanians for Judicial Fairness](#) and [Vote Yes for Fair and Independent Courts](#), received substantial sums from government unions. Both used that money to defend the sitting Pennsylvania Supreme Court justices facing judicial retention votes; [all three won](#) last November's off-year election.<sup>1</sup>
- Government unions overwhelmingly supported Democrats for political office. Roughly 91 percent of partisan candidate donations went to Democrats, while Republicans received just over 9 percent.
- Government unions use taxpayer resources to collect their political money. This practice should end to ensure that taxpayers are not funding unions' partisan political operations.

## OVERVIEW

Government unions rank among the most powerful and well-funded interest groups in Harrisburg. State law grants many special legal privileges to government union executives, including monopoly representation over public sector workplaces, the ability to collect membership dues and other deductions through the public payroll system, and other legal tools that allow them to escape accountability from their membership.

Armed with these legal privileges, government unions advocate for policies that entrench their power and increase the size of government. At the same time, these unions oppose any policy they perceive as a threat to their power, including school choice, tax and expenditure limits, and welfare reform.

In addition, government unions contribute to preferred politicians, that is, those that union executives want elected, reelected, and/or elevated into positions of power. Many of these politicians then vote for union-friendly policies. Meanwhile, others end up directly or indirectly bargaining with the same union executives

over taxpayer-funded union contracts. Either way, union executives have greater leverage to enact policies that further strengthen union power, even at the expense of individual workers.

This report examines a single year of union political PAC spending by private and public sector unions in Pennsylvania. It does not track their additional political spending sourced from membership dues, which unions have not yet fully reported.

## PENNSYLVANIA SUPREME COURT JUDICIAL RETENTION ELECTIONS

In 2025—an election off-year shaped by municipal contests and statewide judicial retention elections—unions focused much of their political activity on supporting the three Pennsylvania [Supreme Court](#) justices, who had faced potential removal from the seven-member bench. Collectively, private-sector and government unions spent \$2,229,661.58 on their retention elections.<sup>2</sup>

- Justice Kevin M. Dougherty (\$1,179,795.60) received the most from unions overall. His largest donation came from International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Locals 5 and 98 (\$180,000.00), the latter of which Justice Dougherty’s now-incarcerated brother, John Dougherty, once led. He also received significant funding from the Sheet Metal Workers’ Local 19 (\$160,000), International Union of Operating Engineers Local 542 (\$103,613.60), and the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry (\$100,000).
- Justices David Wecht and Christine Donohue received far less (\$180,133.99 and \$167,667.33, respectively) from union PACs, and many of the trade unions supporting Justice Dougherty either declined to support Justices Wecht and Donohue or gave them significantly less.
- The commonwealth’s largest government unions also supported Justices Dougherty, Wecht, and Donohue, though largely through contributions to one of two other PACs also engaged in the retention elections. Here, the top recipient was Pennsylvanians for Judicial Fairness, an independent expenditure committee—or SuperPAC—formed in 2023 to engage in Pennsylvania judicial elections, which received \$350,000 from the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare contributed \$300,000, for a combined \$650,000.
- These and other government unions also sent a total of \$445,000 to the PAC Vote Yes for Fair and Independent Courts, set up to support Justices Dougherty, Wecht, and Donohue. AFSCME contributed \$250,000; SEIU sent \$85,000; NEA state affiliate, the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), contributed \$100,000; and UFCW contributed another \$10,000.

All told, Pennsylvania’s largest government unions spent nearly \$1.2 million defending three Pennsylvania Supreme Court justices.

# Government Union Political Spending

## Pennsylvania Supreme Court retention races contributions by unions

Union	Pennsylvanians for Judicial Fairness	Vote Yes for Fair and Independent Courts	Dougherty	Donohue	Wecht	Total Supreme Court Related
AFT			\$20,665	\$19,667	\$19,667	\$60,000
AFSCME	\$350,000	\$250,000				\$600,000
SEIU	\$300,000	\$85,000	\$35,500			\$420,500
PSEA		\$100,000				\$100,000
UFCW	\$10,000	\$3,500			\$13,500	
Totals	\$650,000	\$445,000	\$59,665	\$19,667	\$19,667	\$1,194,000

Source: Pennsylvania Department of State, "Full Campaign Finance Report Export: 2025 Full Export," accessed March 30, 2026.

# Recipients of Union PAC Contributions

## Top ten recipients of union PAC contributions in 2025

Politician	Public Sector Union	Private Sector Union	Total
Josh Shapiro	\$5,000	\$2,264,000	\$2,269,000
Cherelle Parker	\$21,800	\$253,400	\$273,200
Austin Davis	\$20,000	\$215,500	\$235,500
Kenyatta Johnson	\$25,300	\$201,400	\$231,700
Matt Bradford	\$58,000	\$154,500	\$212,500
Jordan Harris	\$57,000	\$140,500	\$197,500
Joanna McClinton	\$63,500	\$129,250	\$192,750
Vincent Hughes	\$42,500	\$104,800	\$147,300
Tina Davis	\$15,500	\$129,250	\$144,750
Jay Costa	\$13,900	\$114,400	\$128,300

Source: Pennsylvania Department of State, "Full Campaign Finance Report Export: 2025 Full Export," accessed March 30, 2026.

## UNION PAC CONTRIBUTIONS TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

Union executives also directed PAC contributions to politicians not facing reelection in 2025. These contributions serve to help bankroll a future election, should the politician choose to run for reelection or higher office, but the funds also work to curry favor with those politicians while they are still serving their terms. The top ten individual recipients of union contributions outside of the judicial elections include:

- **Gov. Josh Shapiro** (\$2,269,000) faces reelection in 2026, and he has already raised [\\$30 million](#)—more than any previous governor heading into an election year.<sup>3</sup> For comparison, according to the

Virginia Public Access Project, Virginia Gov. Abigail Spanberger received approximately the same amount (\$2,499,921) from union-sponsored PACs in 2025—her election year. Among government unions, the Pittsburgh Fire Fighters Local 1 (\$5,000) contributed the most to Shapiro’s campaign.

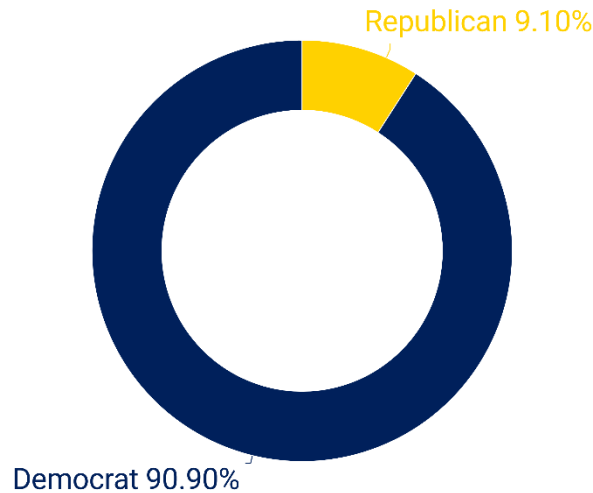
- **Philadelphia Mayor Chelle Parker** (\$273,200) will not face reelection until 2027. Meanwhile, in 2025, she raised a “hefty” \$1.7 million—more than any Philadelphia mayor since campaign finance reporting for city offices.<sup>4</sup> Among government unions, the SEIU (\$14,800) contributed the most.
- **Lt. Gov. Austin Davis** (\$235,500) did not announce his intent to seek reelection until early January 2026. However, many of his largest donors so far have been union PACs.<sup>5</sup> Among government unions, Davis received the greatest amount from UFCW (\$11,500).
- **Philadelphia Council President Kenyatta Johnson** (\$231,700) does not face reelection until 2027, when many, if not all, other councilmembers will most likely run for reelection. Johnson reportedly raised over \$950,000 in 2025 and currently holds a campaign stockpile of more than \$1.1 million.<sup>6</sup> The government union contributing the most to Johnson was the SEIU (\$14,800).
- **Majority Leader Matt Bradford** (\$212,500), with the largest government union amount (\$35,000) coming from the PSEA. Bradford, before becoming majority leader in 2023, served as minority appropriations chair. All 203 state representative seats are on the ballot in the upcoming 2026 midterm elections.
- **House Majority Appropriations Chair Jordan Harris** (\$197,500), with the largest government union amount (\$17,500) coming from the PSEA. Harris, elected majority appropriation committee chair in 2023, has represented the 186th Legislative District since 2013.
- **Pennsylvania House Speaker Joanna McClinton** (\$192,750) with the largest government union amount (\$23,500) coming from the PSEA. McClinton presides over a narrow Democratic majority in the Pennsylvania House, which effectively blocked school choice reforms Shapiro supported during his campaign.
- **Senate Minority Appropriations Chair Vincent Hughes** (\$147,300), with the largest government union amount (\$18,000) coming from the PSEA. Hughes, a Democrat serving the Senate’s District 7, does not face reelection in 2026.
- **House Majority Caucus Secretary Tina M. Davis** (\$144,750), with the largest government union amount (\$7,500) coming from AFSCME. Davis is serving her eighth two-year term as the House Democrats’ caucus secretary, an important leadership role.
- **Senate Minority Floor Leader Jay Costa** (\$128,300), with the largest government union amounts (\$5,000) coming from AFSCME and UFCW. Costa leads the Democratic Caucus in the Pennsylvania Senate, where Republicans have maintained a slim majority.

## GOVERNMENT UNION POLITICAL SPENDING

PACs operated by Pennsylvania’s largest government unions—AFT, AFSCME, SEIU, PSEA, and UFCW—collectively spent over \$4.7 million on politics in 2025. Of the money given to party committees and state and municipal candidates, these unions gave 90.9 percent (\$546,233.33) to Democrats and 9.1 percent (\$55,000) to Republicans.<sup>7</sup>

# Government Union Political Spending

In 2025, government unions overwhelmingly supported Democrats for political office.



Source: Pennsylvania Department of State, "Full Campaign Finance Report Export: 2025 Full Export," accessed March 30, 2026.

- AFT political spending totaled \$1,779,586.09, and its top candidate recipients were Pittsburgh former mayor Ed Gainey (\$17,000), Justices Donohue (\$19,667.33) and Dougherty (\$20,665.33), and Philadelphia Mayor Parker (\$7,000).
- AFSCME political spending totaled \$1,532,367.86, and its top candidate recipients were Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner (\$14,800), House Speaker McClinton (\$13,500), House Appropriations Chairman Harris (\$12,500), and newly elected Pennsylvania Superior Court Judge Brandon Neuman (\$11,000).
- SEIU political spending totaled \$759,912.58, and its top candidate recipients were Justice Dougherty (\$35,000) and Speaker McClinton (\$15,000).
- PSEA political spending totaled \$577,415.43, and its top candidate recipients were all state lawmakers: Majority Leader Bradford (\$35,000), Speaker McClinton (\$23,500), Rep. Tom Mehaffie (\$20,000), Sen. Vincent Hughes (\$18,000), the Senate minority appropriations chair, and Rep. Jordan A. Harris (\$17,500), the House majority appropriations chair.
- UFCW political spending totaled \$377,662, with Harris (\$15,000) also among its top candidate recipients alongside newly elected Rep. Dan Goughnour (\$12,500) and Lt. Gov. Davis (\$11,000).
- House Speaker McClinton (\$57,500), with the largest amount (\$23,500) coming from the PSEA. McClinton has been the Speaker since February 2023.

## POLICY SOLUTION: PAYCHECK PROTECTION

Pennsylvania law allows government unions to use the public payroll system to collect payroll deductions. Under this system, taxpayers, rather than unions, are responsible for collecting an employee's union dues and PAC contributions. [Pennsylvania's Ethics Act](#) dictates that lawmakers cannot use taxpayer resources to

collect political contributions.<sup>8</sup> Yet, public payroll systems remain in use to collect overtly political funds for some of the state’s largest public interest groups.

A “paycheck protection” law would prevent government unions from collecting their PAC deductions through the public payroll system.<sup>9</sup> Unions would be responsible for collecting their own PAC deductions, rather than relying on taxpayers. A January 2025 [poll](#) shows 88 percent of Pennsylvania voters support this reform.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Armed with millions of dollars in resources and given special legal privileges, union executives exert undue influence on Pennsylvania’s political process. During the 2025 election cycle, government union PACs used taxpayer resources to collect and spend over \$4.5 million on politics, the vast majority of which went to Democratic candidates. Lawmakers should act to make unions responsible for collecting their own political money and end the taxpayer funding of partisan union politics.

This year, heavy political spending is on the horizon. In Pennsylvania, there is a lot at stake for the upcoming 2026 midterm elections. In addition to the 17 U.S. representatives—the governorship, all 203 state House seats, and half of the 50-member state Senate—will be on the November ballot.

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, “Pennsylvania Supreme Court Retention Election Results: All 3 Democratic Judges Hold Seats,” *The Morning Call*, November 5, 2025, <https://www.mcall.com/2025/11/04/pennsylvania-supreme-court-retention-election-results-2025/>.

<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania Department of State, “Full Campaign Finance Report Export: 2025 Full Export,” accessed March 30, 2026, <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/dos/resources/voting-and-elections-resources/campaign-finance-data>.

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press, “Pennsylvania Gov. Shapiro Has \$30 Million for His Reelection Bid, a New State Record,” WHYY, January 6, 2026, <https://whyy.org/articles/pa-election-2026-gov-shapiro-reelction-fundraising/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sean Collins Watch, “Mayor Chelle Parker’s Campaign Raised an Eye-Popping \$1.7 Million Last Year Though She Won’t Face Reelection until 2027,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 9, 2026, <https://www.inquirer.com/politics/philadelphia/mayor-chelle-parker-off-year-campaign-fundraising-20260209.html#loaded>.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Taylor Jr., “McKeesport’s Own Austin Davis Announces Re-Election Campaign for Lieutenant Governor,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 16, 2026, <https://newpittsburghcourier.com/2026/01/16/mckeesports-own-austin-davis-announces-re-election-campaign-for-lieutenant-governor/>; Transparency USA, “Friends of Austin Davis: Committee for Candidate Austin Davis,” December 31, 2025 (data through), <https://www.transparencysusa.org/pa/committee/friends-of-austin-davis-20170281-pac/contributors?cycle=2026-election-cycle&page=1>.

<sup>6</sup> Philly Politics Money Tracker, “Philadelphia City Council President Keyatta Johnsons Raised 958k in 2025,” Instagram, March 6, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DVjUmDiKEB/>; Andy Smith, “Political Armistice: A Race to Stockpile,” *The Villanovan*, February 18, 2026, <https://villanovan.com/33337/opinion/political-armistice-a-race-to-stockpile/>.

<sup>7</sup> Pennsylvania Department of State, “Full Campaign Finance Report Export.”

<sup>8</sup> 65 Pa. C.S. § 1101–1113.

<sup>9</sup> Rep. Milou Mackenzie, House Bill 466,” Pennsylvania General Assembly, Regular Session 2025–26, <https://www.palegis.us/legislation/bills/2025/hb0466>.

<sup>10</sup> Public Opinion Strategies, “Commonwealth Foundation Statewide Survey,” January 9, 2025, <https://commonwealthfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/250009-Pennsylvania-Statewide-Interview-Schedule-Public.pdf>.