

Democratic Small Donors Have Found a New Hole to Throw Money Into

Marcus Flowers has raised \$10 million in his race against Marjorie Taylor Greene. But he's spending more to raise new money than to go after Greene.

Marcus Flowers speaks with a supporter at a campaign event in Powder Springs, Ga., on April 30, 2022.

Photo: Elijah Nouvelage for The Washington Post via Getty Images

Marcus Flowers should start a band.

He's got the Stetson and the bass in his voice, and an affable plain-spoken way with an audience. And if the way he was swarmed at the Georgia Democratic state convention earlier this month is any indication, he's got the fans. From the moment he took the stage until the hour Stacey Abrams left it, the congressional candidate was mobbed by supporters looking for photos and a word, and an autograph now and again.

"I enjoy it. Yeah, I enjoy people. I enjoy having conversations. But that was too much," he said later, with a sly guffaw at the

absurdity. "I couldn't even eat. I had to go get lunch in the car."

Some of this is because of who he is: a young, moderate military veteran incensed by the January 6 Capitol attack. Much of it is because of who he isn't: his opponent, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Half the country hates her, and not without reason. She's become the face of the Christian nationalist movement in America. Greene was also a prominent and vocal election denialist in right-wing extremist circles leading up to the Capitol riot. Her bigoted public comments led to her being [stripped](#) of House committee assignments; her spreading of Covid-19 misinformation got her suspended from Facebook. On any given day, she's bound to say or do something inflammatory and stupid. Just Thursday, she [posted video](#) on Twitter of her apparently kicking an 18-year-old gun control activist. Posting things like this, even when it is vile, has the benefit of drawing attention.

Attention — and money. To her, and now to Flowers.

Both Greene and Flowers raised more than \$10 million each through the end of July. To date, they are running the most expensive congressional race in America so far this cycle, in a contest that should not be competitive by the laws of political physics.

No national group rates this district as competitive. None of that \$10 million is from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which invests in competitive House races. And yet, hundreds of *thousands* of people are laying \$20 bets on Flowers. Because fuck Marjorie Taylor Greene, that's why. (Even I feel marvelous saying it.)

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"I'm humbled by the number of Americans that have donated to our campaign. I mean, over 600,000 people from all over the country have invested, not in me, but in Georgia's 14th Congressional District. And that's those people saying, 'We believe in this district, we believe that you can get rid of Marjorie Taylor Greene and get rid of that white hot rhetoric and bring back decency, integrity, and common sense.' That's what those donations are, to me, and I'm truly humbled by it," Flowers told me.

Still, it's hard not to look at this in the same light as [Amy McGrath's \\$94 million bid](#) against Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell or Jaime Harrison's \$130 million shot at South

Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham in 2020. Both broke fundraising records challenging political figures that were deeply despised by Democrats and the left. Both lost by double digits.

Georgia as a whole is about to enter yet another excruciating campaign cycle as the center of the political universe. Herschel Walker's campaign — all gaffes and scandals aside — is within the polling error of unseating Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock, who waged the second-most expensive Senate run in American history [only two years ago](#). His "brother from another mother," as he calls Sen. Jon Ossoff, holds the record for *his* run at the same time. Warnock has raised more than \$60 million so far, leading all other Senate candidates in America. Georgia's statewide elections, particularly the one between Republican Gov. Brian Kemp and Stacey Abrams, are likely to be within 5 percentage points.

Georgia's 14th District? Probably not so much.

Greene beat Kevin Van Ausdal in 2020's November election by about *50 percentage points*. The Georgia legislature reapportioned Georgia's 14th District last year to make it marginally more liberal, changing it from a 74-26 Trump district to one that's about 69-31: still a next-to-impossible lift in a conventional election. Part of northwest Cobb County, an Atlanta suburb that has increasingly grown

hostile to Republicans, is now part of the district. But Flowers would still have to flip more than 1 in 4 Trump voters to compete, or make up the difference in improved Democratic voter turnout. Is that realistic?

"It could be looked at as a long shot," deadpanned David Boyle, chair of the Walker County Democrats, in Georgia's northwest corner just south of Chattanooga, Tennessee. "I mean, we're just so red up here right now. And there's just so many, so many Republicans up here that more or less hate Democrats so much that they'd vote for anybody."

"It's not a zero-sum game," Flowers said. "The money that people are donating to our campaign, to get Marjorie Taylor Greene out of Congress is not taking away from any other candidates anywhere else."

Flowers served as a unit supply sergeant in the Army in Iraq before working as a defense contractor and at the Department of Defense. He speaks directly, in short sentences. He rejects the idea of running as the opposite of Greene; he's running an overtly moderate political campaign, he said. Flowers frames his candidacy as an extension of his call to service, with Greene's activities around January 6 triggering his reaction. "You know, as soldiers, we're taught to run toward the sound of gunfire. So, I'm looking at it in the same way."

There's also the moral question of offering opposition, to allow the dissenters of northwest Georgia a protest vote. "I hear this every day out on the campaign trail — and I'm not exaggerating, it's not hyperbole — she truly is not representative of the district. And I get why most Americans from outside of Georgia look at the representative that we sent to Washington, D.C., and say, 'Oh, that must be who they really are.' But, well, it's not."

Nonetheless, when looking at the raw politics of the 11 counties in Georgia's 14th District, one has to ask what you get politically for \$10 million-plus. McGrath and Harrison spent most of their campaigns' money on advertising, consulting fees, and the means to raise more money.

"What has that money has gone toward? We're spending it wisely. It's going towards building the infrastructure here in Georgia's 14th," he said. "That money is going toward building the Democratic Party infrastructure, organizing all 11 counties together, doing things we've never done before."

Flowers said his campaign has hired 16 field organizers and has hundreds of volunteers. He talks affably about the travails of knocking on doors, which is a challenge in some rural counties but beats the hell out of making phone calls for money. "I'm organizing it on the ground," he said. "I'm building that infrastructure that wasn't there."

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His financial disclosures tell a somewhat different story.

Through the second quarter, Flowers has spent \$4.4 million on digital advertising and fundraising, another \$580,000 on direct mail for fundraising, and \$375,000 on direct mail production, according to the mid-year disclosures. He's spent about \$321,000 renting or buying donor lists. He's spent \$75,000 to manage social media and \$364,000 to send text messages.

The campaign has spent about \$1.6 million on traditional television ad buys.

Meanwhile, Flowers spent about \$10,000 on paid canvassing over the same period. He's had \$262,000 in payroll and payroll expenses and \$176,000 in salaries. About \$17,000 of that salary has been for Flowers himself, though he is not the best-paid person on his staff.

Party leaders in the 14th District have mixed views on the value the campaign is bringing home.

The Flowers campaign office is in Rome, Georgia, part of Floyd County and a purply-blue dot in the ruby-red region. LaTonya Burrell is Floyd County Democratic Party's county chair and a 38-year-old catering entrepreneur.

She's met Flowers more than once. She likes him. She notes that it's not just Flowers showing up, but Warnock and Abrams as well, in ways that are more than simple barnstorming pass-throughs. Will the Flowers campaign change the political dynamics of her town?

"The most honest answer is that only time will tell," she said. "It falls on me as county chair to do my work to show up for my county and my party and my community. ... It starts with establishing trust. We clearly have these pocket Democrats that are hiding. That's where we have to establish the trust, that they can be supported and guided into the process of an election."

Places like Ringgold, a railroad town at the foot of White Oak Mountain, have been an afterthought since local Democratic leaders switched parties en masse 20 years ago. The largest employer in the county is a carpet mill. The second largest is Walmart.

I spoke to Greg Bentley, the party leader in Catoosa County, as he was biking through Chickamauga Battlefield near home in Fort Oglethorpe. Bentley's quick to note that the

statewide elections of 2020 were decided by northwest Georgia. Greene cried foul after Joe Biden won the presidential election and effectively told her people to stay home for the runoffs. County groups like his own mobilized, and that was the difference, he said. But none of that actually changed anyone's mind.

"This is not a wealthy county," Bentley said. "A good chunk of our working-class population is basically just on survival, or working in factories, and they live paycheck to paycheck, month to month, and they don't see anything in the political system. They say, 'They're all alike. Why should I bother?'"

The Flowers campaign is getting to some of those people, Bentley said. And his county party is growing, and holding events, when there was *nothing* four years ago. "I would see people at the grocery store who were Democrats, and they'd come over whisper and talk about issues and say, 'I can't say a thing in my Sunday school class, they'll throw me out.'" On the other hand, Democrats have to have people watching their campaign signs or they'll be stolen, he said.

A billboard outside of Dalton near I-75 reads, "Every tongue will confess Jesus is Lord, even the Democrats."

Debby Peppers, chair of the Whitfield County Democratic Party, mentioned it as she was describing the political environment. Dalton, like Rome, is a solid blue dot in a red

sea. It's what remains of northwest Georgia's industrial base. And it is surrounded by Trump voters.

"Honestly, they've done such a good job of demonizing Democrats ... to the point that they don't see that Democrats can do any good," she said. "So these people are not voting for Marjorie Taylor Greene. And our problem is, there's a lot of more moderate Republicans here who don't like her, but they can't seem to get their crap together well enough to get a candidate who's more moderate out there."

Peppers hopes the [recent abortion ruling](#) will be the [last straw](#) and [draw people](#) over the [line](#). But reversing a generation of vilification means knowing that the city of Lafayette is pronounced la-FET, and that if you get it wrong, people notice.

"We've struggled building up a good base here in the county, as far as, you know, people coming out to our monthly meetings and things like that," said Boyle, the Walker County Democrats leader. "If he's not able to win at least I think he makes a good show and then, maybe that'll put a little spark in." A \$10 million spark — and counting.