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Black Activist Starts Group That Aims To Elect Progressive Prosecutors

Shaun King says district attorneys “are the gatekeepers of America’s justice system.”



By Daniel Marans

[Shaun King](#), a prominent black rights activist and writer, announced Thursday that he is co-founding a political action committee to help elect “reform-minded prosecutors” at the county and city levels.

The [Real Justice PAC](#) plans to spend upward of \$1 million to support campaigns by progressives running for district attorney offices this year.

The efforts should benefit from King’s enormous social media following, as well as the expertise of several veterans of Vermont Sen. [Bernie Sanders’](#) 2016 presidential campaign who are the group’s other co-founders.

King views the initiative as an essential new stage in anti-racism and criminal justice reform movements in the era of President [Donald Trump](#).

“No position in America, no single individual has a bigger impact on the criminal justice system — including police brutality, but the whole crisis of mass incarceration in general — than your local district attorney,” King said. “They are the gatekeepers of America’s justice system.”



KAREN DUCEY/GETTY IMAGES

Shaun King speaks at a rally on March 8, 2017, in Seattle.

The PAC hopes to eventually also focus on electing sheriffs and judges who, among other things, would support reducing the number of people imprisoned for nonviolent offenses.

The questionnaire the PAC distributes to candidates it may endorse will ask where they stand on issues such the practice of cash bail, which often deprives low-income suspects of their freedom; the use of diversion programs for drug-related crimes; and the pursuit of the death penalty, which progressives oppose.

The group also will gauge how a district attorney candidate's track record on various criminal justice issues compares with that of the current officeholder.

"That's a smarter way and a safer way for us to make an assessment," King said. "Many people are running under the guise of being Democrats in these DA races and that has next to no value."

Another priority for the PAC is electing more women and people of color to prosecutorial posts.

The country's 2,400 district attorneys are notoriously non-diverse. As of 2015, [95 percent of them were white](#), 83 percent were men, and just 1 percent were women of color.

King likened the complexion and maleness of the group to the population at "any golf course in America."

"I'm not saying white is evil and black is righteous," said King, acknowledging there are examples of draconian black prosecutors and compassionate white prosecutors. "But it's troubling when a system that primarily targets people of color has almost exclusively white men, and conservative white men at that, at the helm."

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—Shaun King

The addition of King marks something of a reboot for the PAC, which existed in a more modest form in 2017. Becky Bond, who masterminded the Sanders campaign's digital organizing operation, conceived of the group as a way to apply the ["big organizing"](#) technique she honed in 2016 to prosecutorial elections that ordinarily receive little national attention.

Last year, Bond's group helped elect [Larry Krasner](#) as district attorney of Philadelphia, and re-elect [Stephanie Morales](#) as the commonwealth's attorney for Portsmouth, Virginia.

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In its reconstituted form, the PAC has already endorsed its first two candidates, both of whom are challenging incumbent district attorneys in Texas' March 6 Democratic primary. [Elizabeth Frizell](#), a state district judge, is running to unseat Faith Johnson in Dallas County. [Joe Gonzales](#), a defense attorney, is hoping to replace Nico Lahood in Bexar County, which includes San Antonio.

District attorney races remain an untapped opportunity for progressive activists to leverage relatively modest resources for major policy wins, according to King.

That's because the lack of awareness of the office's power, even in some of the most progressive parts of the country, had allowed deeply conservative or otherwise problematic DAs to serve for decades. For example, in Manhattan, Cyrus Vance Jr. [ran uncontested](#) for a third term as DA in the Democratic primary in September. When it later emerged that Vance had declined to pursue possible criminal cases against film mogul [Harvey Weinstein](#) and [Ivanka and Donald Trump Jr.](#), it was too late for another candidate to appear on the ballot for the general election.

Even a minor uptick in turnout for DA races could produce significant results, King maintained.

"If we can activate exciting new candidates who stand for reform, we can make changes from coast to coast," he said.

The launch of the PAC occurs at a unique moment in the evolution of both the contemporary black civil rights movement and the national discussion about criminal justice reform.

The new black rights movement grew organically in recent years in response to controversial police killings of black men and women, the vast majority of whom were unarmed.

The July 2014 [death of Eric Garner](#) on Staten Island after police put a chokehold on him was King's wake-up call. The killing, which resulted in no indictments despite video footage of the cops ignoring Garner's pleas for his life, ultimately inspired King to leave his job at an environmental organization in Los Angeles and devote himself full time to combating police brutality and racial bias in the criminal justice system.

The movement for black lives has suffered a number of other frustrating setbacks, including the acquittal of, or failure to prosecute, police officers involved in the killings of black men in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore; and Minneapolis.

Meanwhile, the election of Trump and his appointment of Jeff Sessions as attorney general have dashed hopes for bipartisan federal legislation to liberalize sentencing and decriminalize drug use. Sessions' Department of Justice has also signaled that it will be providing less oversight of local policing practices.

For King, that makes it the perfect moment for activists who engaged in street protests and acts of civil disobedience to put at least a portion of their energy into the so-called inside game of helping elect progressive politicians.

"If we are perpetually on the outside, our message might be right, but it won't have the effectiveness that it deserves," he said. "We can mobilize in some really amazing ways locally and just get these races in the front of the mind for people so that they understand it's everything."

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