

Center for Popular Democracy: What Donors Need to Know

The Center for Popular Democracy was launched in 2012 with the goal of promoting social and political change by providing financial, legal, and technical assistance to growing social justice organizations. CPD's budget and footprint have grown at a huge pace in the past decade, with annual revenues regularly exceeding \$30 million, a staff of more than 100 people, and affiliated groups across the country. CPD's mission has also evolved, with an expanded (c)(4) arm, Center for Popular Democracy Action (CPDA), and increased focus on grassroots organizing.

The group's leadership changed hands in late 2021, with longtime organizers and nonprofit leaders Damareo Cooper and Analilia Mejia taking over as co-executive directors. CPD has helped to build and maintain dozens of vital grassroots organizations and advocacy groups throughout the country, while aiming to push Democrats at the state, local, and federal level to pass progressive legislation on issues like policing, immigration, housing and democracy expansion.

The following brief answers questions for prospective donors about CPD's vision, strategy, and organizational health. The answers below are drawn from independent research and reporting, including discussions with other progressive leaders and outside experts focused. This report also cites information from interviews from 2021 with then CPD leaders who have since taken on new roles. At the time of publication, CPD was unable to make Cooper and Mejia available for interviews.

As we write below, CPD's broader mission and commitment to supporting grassroots organizations is a **high priority**. However, evaluating CPD's impact and success is challenging, and we were unable to determine how much credit the organization actually deserves for many of its own stated achievements. That being said, CPD is a competently run organization that draws its own staff and leadership from organizations doing important work on the ground, and it's vital for progressives to invest in this sort of work. Blue Tent **recommends** donors give to the Center for Popular Democracy.

Is it a top leader in its space—or have the potential to be?

Yes. CPD's annual revenues regularly exceed \$30 million, making it a major player in national grassroots organizing and related work purely from a financial standpoint. More importantly,

however, the organization supports affiliated groups in hundreds of cities and dozens of states, giving it a massive footprint at both the grassroots and national level. CPD has also founded or supports some of the most exciting and effective groups in the country in this regard, including Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA), Texas Organizing Project, and New Georgia Project. CPD provides support in the form of technical and legal assistance, but perhaps most importantly is a major funding intermediary, regranteeing millions to help build and expand other progressive organizations.

CPDA has likewise devoted much of its work to state and local organizing around the country, campaigning for policy changes regarding policing, housing, immigration enforcement, and other issues. CPDA also worked at the national level to oppose the Trump administration, and is now working to advocate for big legislative goals under the Biden administration.

Does it have a persuasive theory of change and a realistic strategy?

CPD's major focus is on building social movements from the ground up by supporting the work of grassroots organizations. These groups advocate for change at the state and local level while also organizing constituents and coordinating nationally to build support for larger, structural policy changes. A central part of CPD's strategy to support such work is extensive regranteeing to affiliate organizations at the national and grassroots level, including organizations in some 200 cities and 33 states. According to the organization's tax documents from 2019, CPD regranted more than \$10 million that year to some 60 organizations.

While CPD is a 501(c)(3), its 501(c)(4) group CPDA engages in more overtly political work and campaigns, including extensive canvassing programs and funding for other groups engaged in organizing and electoral politics. CPD's work also includes publishing reports, including criticism of companies that endangered their workers during the pandemic, the importance of the Federal Reserve to ordinary people, stakes surrounding the Supreme Court, and the case for stopping evictions, among many others.

Blue Tent strongly recommends that donors invest in bottom-up, long-term work to build power in low-income communities. CPD stands as one of the most important national organizations that support such efforts. However, based on CPD's publicly available documents on strategy and programs, it is difficult to fully determine how it is working to achieve its mission. Likewise, having more publicly available and specific goals also helps the organization keep itself

accountable and acknowledge failure, which is vital to evolving and learning for success in the long run.

Is there strong evidence of its impact?

CPD's impact statement from 2021 cites a wide range of policy victories, including portions of the American Rescue Plan allocating funds for worker relief, health care services, and BIPOC owned small businesses. CPD also cites state and local wins on issues ranging from police reform (policies include chokehold bans, the termination of police contracts with school districts, and laws making allegations of misconduct public) to worker protections (policies include minimum wage hikes, paid family leave, and guaranteed severance) to democracy (policies include automatic voter registration, expanded early voting, and increased staffing at the polls). CPD also lists accomplishments connected to immigration (like ending cooperation between local law enforcement and ICE), housing (eviction moratoria, increased renter protections) and other issues.

The pandemic is a useful example of CPD's impact, as the organization moved to grant around \$700,000 to more than two dozen organizations for COVID relief, including basic necessities for community members like cash and food. The grants also helped affiliates invest in digital tools needed to adapt to remote work. In 2020, CPD Action and CPD affiliates devoted energy and resources to crucial states like Arizona, Georgia, Florida, and Michigan to flip senate seats and take back the White House. CPD was also investing in grassroots groups in these states in the years leading up to 2020, contributing to places like Georgia, Arizona, and Michigan flipping from red to blue. Its stated goals in these states revolved around increasing turnout, especially among Black and Latino voters on the Democratic side. While Democrats technically lost ground among both groups in 2020 in terms of vote share, there was nonetheless higher turnout from Democratic voters from both groups as compared to 2016.

As we've often discussed in other reports on organizations engaged in long term thinking and building progressive infrastructure, evaluating success or impact can be a tricky business, especially for an organization that is further upstream in terms of funding and devoted to capacity building and collaboration with other groups. Traditional metrics of output and input are less important, but many organizations with comparable budgets and staffing to CPD can cite a wide range of sophisticated statistical and holistic metrics to chart their progress. CPD may use similar methods, but they were not publicly available nor shared with Blue Tent at the time of this writing.

Does it have a plan to achieve future impact?

As a group invested in grassroots organizing, social movements, and structural political change, much of CPD's work in general is focused on future impact. Its regranting has supported the growth of important grassroots groups in key states like Texas, Arizona, Michigan, and Georgia, among others. Continued investment in these groups and states will focus on keeping progressive momentum, that in partisan political terms will hopefully keep states like Michigan and Georgia leaning Democratic, while pushing back on the Republican grip on states like Florida, Texas and Ohio.

At the national level, CPD has repeatedly expressed its desire to hold the Biden administration accountable and push for more ambitious legislation for racial and social justice. So far, these plans clearly have not panned out, with the administration failing to enact most of its more wide reaching proposals and consistently backing down from challenges by more conservative Democrats. This is not solely the responsibility of CPD or any one organization, but progressive groups have by and large been out maneuvered by centrist Democrats on the vast majority of the Biden administration's policy and personnel decisions that actually matter. The organization is still transitioning its newly appointed leadership team, and CPD's plans and goals for 2024 or beyond are as of yet unclear.

Does it have strong leadership and governance?

CPD and CPDA have operated with a shared leadership model for several years, with as many as four co-executive directors at one time. Last year, DaMareo Cooper and Analilia Mejia were hired to share that role, shrinking the organization's top office to two people.

Cooper is a longtime leader of groups focused on grassroots organizing, including state level groups like Ohio Organizing Collaborative and Stand Up Ohio. He recently directed the national organizing program at Black PAC, an organization recommended by Blue Tent. Mejia spent her early career working for a number of labor unions, and spent five years as state director for the New Jersey affiliate of the Working Families Party. In 2020, Mejia served as national political director for Bernie Sanders, and later joined the Biden campaign to do progressive outreach.

According to the organization's tax filings, CPD and CPDA have operated under a co-executive director model since as early as 2014, when those duties were shared by former organizers Andrew Friedman (who helped found the organization in 2012), Ana Maria Archila, and Brian Kettenring.

Jennifer Epps-Addison, another seasoned organizer, joined as a fourth co-executive director and network president in 2017, serving with Friedman, Archila, and Kettenring until the end of 2021. Archila and Epps-Addison have stayed on as transition advisors as Cooper and Mejia take over their previous roles. Archila and Friedman have also served on CPD and CPDA's boards of directors.

Is it diverse and culturally competent?

According to its 2021 impact statement, CPD affiliates are spread in more than 200 cities and 33 states, with 70% of affiliates led by women and 70% led by people of color. Both CPD and CPDA's leadership teams are diverse and majority female, and according to the group's 2021 year in review, 61% of the CPD and CPDA staff identify as people of color, while 69% of the staff identify as women or nonbinary. CPD and CPDA staff are unionized with NewsGuild-Communication Workers of America Local 32035.

Is its financial house in order?

Like many progressive groups, CPD's yearly revenues exploded after 2016, jumping from a healthy \$15.1 million that year to more than \$37 million in 2017 and \$36.9 million in 2018, then dropped to just under \$29 million in 2019. CPDA likewise saw its revenues skyrocket in recent years, more than tripling from over \$3 million in 2016 to \$9.2 million in 2018, with a comparable drop-off to \$6.8 million in 2019. (With 2018 being an election year, the funding spike followed by a short drop-off in 2019 is to be expected).

CPD has seen major donations from a wide array of blue chip funders, including the Ford Foundation, Open Society, Open Philanthropy, and Kellogg. Since 2015, CPD has also received a number of multimillion dollar donations from one or more individuals operating through Fidelity Charitable gift fund, including a \$10.7 million gift in 2018 and an \$8.1 million gift in 2017. These donations appeared to cease after 2018, which coincided with a revenue drop off and financial deficit the following year. According to Foundation Directory Online, CPD has received comparable donations from the Ford Foundation and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in recent years, meaning that a substantial portion of the group's funding is concentrated in relatively few hands. This is less a concern for foundation funding, which is more likely to be multi-year, but raises some questions about financial sustainability nonetheless.

This reliance on large individual donors and foundations has not gone unnoticed by CPD leadership, with former co-executive director Jennifer Epps-Addison telling Blue Tent in 2021, “The people most impacted need to be the funders of their own liberation.” In 2020, CPD hosted a three-day fundraising drive to bring in more than \$100,000 from small donors.

Does it collaborate well with other organizations and have strong partnerships?

CPD works with and funds hundreds of affiliates and considers collaboration and partnerships to be a cornerstone of its work. CPD has also integrated leaders from state and local affiliate groups into its leadership team and board of directors, giving the group a direct stake in the success and goals of organizations that it funds.

Does it have the support of key funders?

Yes. As mentioned above, major backers of CPD include the Ford Foundation, Open Philanthropy, Open Society, Kellogg and the Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund, among others. As mentioned above, CPD and CPDA have also been working to build a more robust base of small donors who have actual skin in the game.

Conclusion

In recent years, CPD’s revenues, staff, and overall footprint have grown substantially. The organization’s integration of affiliate leaders onto its boards and continued elevation of seasoned organizers into leadership roles shows that the group is also staying true to its working class and grassroots mission despite its massive growth. However, CPD’s goals and strategies are a bit unfocused compared to some comparable groups, and its evidence of impact or case for future impact is somewhat shaky. The organization’s growth has also been fueled in large part by a handful of massive gifts from an anonymous individual donor or donors, gifts that appear to have ceased after 2018. This raises some questions about CPD’s financial sustainability, though the organization has also received large grants from steadier funders like the Ford and Robert Wood Johnson Foundations in recent years, and is actively working to diversify its revenue sources.

We’ve written often of the difficulty of evaluating this longer term, transformation driven work, and how that complexity can scare off investment from mid to high level donors who are devoted to overly narrow metrics for success. In sum, we believe strongly that now is not the time to be hesitant in giving to competent organizations focused on important work, especially those who have helped found and work with some of the most vital grassroots groups in the country. CPD’s

work prioritizing grassroots organizing aimed at strengthening democracy and achieving economic justice is a **high priority** for progressives, and Blue Tent **recommends** donors invest in the Center for Popular Democracy.

You may also want to check out:

- [Working Families Party: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [POGO: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Center for Progressive Reform: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [People's Parity Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)

