

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

What Donors Need to Know

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a low-key but tremendously effective think tank based in Washington, D.C. While not well known outside the beltway, it is one of the country's most effective progressive nonprofits working to strengthen federal and state assistance to poor families.

CBPP's founder, Robert Greenstein, was inspired by his Harvard professor, the child psychiatrist Robert Coles, who visited Mississippi in the 1960s with Robert Kennedy and wrote about poverty for the progressive publications of the day. After college, Greenstein moved to Washington, D.C. to take a job with the federal food stamp program. He soon discovered that helping the poor could be achieved by mastering the intricacies of federal tax law and policies. With that goal in mind, he founded the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in 1981.

Over its 40-year history, CBPP has focused on creating, protecting and expanding government programs that will lift as many people as possible out of poverty, combining in-depth economic research with sophisticated lobbying of federal and state policymakers of both parties. CBPP seeks to generate research and policy ideas of the highest integrity, its watchwords being “facts, fairness, and fiscal responsibility.”

The following brief will answer questions for prospective donors about CBPP's vision, strategy, and organizational health. The answers below are drawn from independent research and reporting, including an in-depth interview with Greenstein. Based on CBPP's strong track record and the urgency of improving aid to working families during the ongoing pandemic, Blue Tent finds the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to be a **high priority, strongly recommended** organization for progressive donors. ([Read about our methodology.](#))

Is it a top leader in its space?

Yes. CBPP is widely recognized as the go-to expert on federal programs and tax policies that affect the status of poor people in America. With more than 100 policy experts and researchers on staff, has a capacity to analyze these issues that is unmatched by any national think tank. It is also legendary for its ability to move quickly, producing timely high-quality research to influence fast-

moving legislative and policy debates inside Washington. Its experts frequently are called upon to testify at congressional hearings, and its work has been cited by the Congressional Research Service.

CBPP's leadership on state policy issues, where it focuses about half of its work, is equally notable. Starting in the mid-1990s, CBPP incubated and expanded the State Priorities Partnership, "a network of more than 40 independent, nonprofit research and policy organizations" throughout the states. The center's State Fiscal Project's staff coordinates this network, providing assistance to nonprofits and government officials across the country, working to improve the many anti-poverty and direct service programs that began running through the states in the 1980s and 1990s. In recent years, for example, CBPP has assisted states in implementation of the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid expansion.

CBPP's authoritative research, capacity for rapid reaction, and leadership on a range of issues affecting low-income Americans have earned it enormous respect from federal and state elected leaders, legislative staff, and policy experts—including from both parties.

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

Yes. CBPP advances change by presenting policymakers with compelling, fact-based evidence explanations of how government can improve the lives of poor people. By emphasizing benefits to working poor families, as well as fiscal responsibility, its reports and proposals for reform often gain bipartisan support.

CBPP also maintains an energetic presence at the White House and on Capitol Hill, frequently lobbying policymakers and testifying at Congressional hearings. In 2020, it spent **\$440,000** lobbying Congress and the White House, according to CBPP for Responsive Politics.

In addition, CBPP seeks to influence public policy by serving as a source to the media; its experts are cited frequently by reporters and its studies inform the commentary of columnists, bloggers, and TV pundits.

While Greenstein was initially worried that CBPP would struggle in the informal online media landscape, his communications team convinced him that CBPP could in fact thrive. CBPP, for example, is able to tweet initial concerns or praise about pending legislative proposals before releasing its final analysis, while its website is frequently updated with new white papers, which

explain issues currently under consideration by policymakers. Much to the contrary of Greenstein's fears, CBPP's work became even more prominent thanks to the web, with wonky but highly popular bloggers like Matt Yglesias and Ezra Klein frequently [citing](#) and [praising](#) CBPP's work.

CBPP's tone also has set it apart from other progressive nonprofits. Although it has supported increasing the minimum wage, raising corporate tax rates, and eliminating corporate tax loopholes, its strategy does not generally include vilifying individual corporations or attacking its opponents. Its "just-the-facts" approach has helped it gain standing and respect in Washington, and with influential members of the media. As Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne [put it](#): "The [Center's] facts are bulletproof. It never hides ideologically inconvenient findings."

Is there strong evidence of its impact?

Yes. The safety net programs CBPP helped develop, expand and protect have had a major effect on the well-being of poor people in the U.S.

While the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) predates CBPP's founding, the organization has continually advocated for the program's expansion throughout the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, often gaining bipartisan support as the EITC both assists the poor and encourages work. The Tax Policy Center, a joint program of the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute, calls the EITC "the single most effective means tested federal antipoverty program for working-age households," while CBPP's own research found that the program "lifted about 5.6 million people out of poverty, including about 3 million children" in 2018 alone.

According to a detailed analysis by CBPP's research team, antipoverty programs cut the poverty rate nearly 50 percent between 1967 and 2019. CBPP was the think tank that took the lead in championing these programs, and helped bring about these reductions over the course of its 40-year history.

CBPP has also long supported the Child Tax Credit, patiently advancing its painstaking research to help the program get enacted by Congress in 1997. While the CTC has largely benefited families wealthy enough to pay federal income taxes, CBPP has long contended that the CTC should reach more poor families. CBPP helped win a partial victory on that front in March 2021, when Congress

approved the American Rescue Plan. The legislation's beefed-up CTC includes families with the lowest incomes and delivers billions of dollars in monthly assistance to [27 million poor children](#) who would not otherwise have qualified. While the credit is only temporary, CBPP is urging Congress to make this benefit permanent, a measure that would particularly help Black and Latino children.

CBPP also played a pivotal role in the passage of the Affordable Care Act, helping design some of the coverage proposals, and the offsets to pay for it. After the ACA was passed, CBPP also worked with the Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Agriculture to [integrate the application processes](#) for SNAP and Medicaid at the state level, leading hundreds of thousands of recipients to get approval for both programs simultaneously.

More recently, the Biden Administration took action on CBPP's [insistence](#) that food stamp benefits needed an update to reflect the lived experience of recipients. Thanks to an August 2021 federal rule change, food stamp benefits for families will increase by about [25 percent](#), the largest increase the program has had since its inception.

Launched in 1993, CBPP's [State Priorities Partnership](#) assists public policy advocates in 41 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. The goal of the Partnership is to share CBPP's expertise and to encourage collaboration among state policy reformers working in 43 independent nonpartisan think tanks.

At the state level, CBPP's advocacy and support for state groups helped push state policymakers to:

[Adopt](#) their own version of the EITC in 29 states;

[Expand](#) Medicaid benefits to more people

Revise tax policies to create "[anti-racist](#)" [taxation](#), falling more heavily on the wealthiest citizens

Create a [\\$2.1 billion fund](#) in New York State to help immigrants ineligible for other sources of pandemic assistance.



According to CBPP, over the last five years, partnership groups have worked to raise or protect over **\$54 billion** in state revenues, with state Earned Income Tax Credits providing over \$4 billion a year in annual supports to 11 million working families.

Does it have a plan to achieve future impact?

Yes. CBPP is putting significant resources into its state work, and the state think tanks it funds have expansive social justice initiatives that go far beyond CBPP's core federal work on fiscal and budget issues.

Since its founding, CBPP's research often measured the impact of certain policies and programs on people of color, but that sensitivity to the intersection of race and poverty has increased in the past two years, Greenstein told Blue Tent. CBPP's attention to equity has been heightened by its collaboration with state-based groups that are racially diverse, giving CBPP a more pronounced grassroots and racial justice dimension.

Also high on CBPP's priority list in the coming years is the future of Medicare. CBPP is urging Congress to **ensure Medicare's solvency**, offering a detailed strategy to reallocate funds, reduce costs and raise revenues in a way that would avoid draconian cuts to the program in the future.

The major challenge facing CBPP in the future is how it will navigate an increasingly polarized politics. CBPP's bipartisan appeal may shrink as the right hardens its opposition to government aid and tax increases, while many groups on the left are dead-set on ambitious programs like Medicare for All, regardless of their fiscal impact. CBPP may see its influence wane should the trend of increased polarization continue.

On the other hand, CBPP's approach may prove more useful now than ever. With party leaders fighting to a stalemate over bigger, more controversial issues in Congress, CBPP can help improve aid programs by encouraging changes to federal rules, such as Biden's recent expansion of food benefits. Its focus on working families and fiscal responsibility will also continue to appeal to the small contingent of moderates in the Senate, a group of lawmakers who have gained outsized power in the closely divided upper chamber.

Does it have strong leadership and governance?

Yes. Greenstein stepped down from CBPP leadership at the end of 2020, but retains the title

president emeritus. Its new president, Sharon Parrott, has worked for CBPP on and off for nearly 30 years. Parrott also previously served in the Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Health and Human Services. Looking to the future, Parrott said that she is not planning to change course at CBPP.

“We believe strongly that high-quality research and analysis can sit side by side with strategic advocacy that helps drive a policy agenda that helps make the nation more just,” Parrott [said](#) in a video celebrating CBPP’s 40th anniversary.

CBPP’s 12-member board includes some of Washington’s leading intellectual and governmental leaders, including Henry Aaron, former director of the Brookings Institution’s economic studies program; Robert Reischauer, former director, Congressional Budget Office; Melanne Verveer, the executive director of Georgetown University’s Institute for Women, Peace and Security who also served in both the Obama and Clinton administrations; and Kenneth Apfel, former Clinton administration Social Security Commissioner.

Is it diverse and culturally competent?

Forty-six percent of CBPP’s staff identify as non-white or LatinX/Hispanic, according to a CBPP spokesperson. Five out of 12 members of CBPP’s board identify as non-white or Latinx/Hispanic. In 2018, CBPP’s employees [joined a union](#) to negotiate better salaries and benefits. While CBPP had lobbied for paid family leave, its own workers had a far from generous family leave policy – just two weeks of paid leave. CBPP agreed to offer better benefits terms, including \$50,000 base pay, 12 weeks paid family leave, and an agreement to give most workers cost-of-living raises over three years.

Is its financial house in order?

According to its most recent tax filings, CBPP received more than \$50 million in contributions and grants in 2019 and employed more than 200 staffers. It [reports](#) that more than 90 percent of its revenues go to program work. CBPP receives grants and donations from a diverse array of sources, including major and smaller foundations. More details on funding sources are included below.

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

Yes. CBPP has a long track record of productive collaborations with other organizations. Beyond

its close work with the groups that are part of the State Priorities Partnership, CBPP often coordinates its activities with think tanks and advocacy organizations in Washington. It is on the [board](#) of the Coalition Human Needs, whose members include major labor, civil rights, and religious groups, along with advocates for children, women, the elderly and people with disabilities.

CBPP has also sought to avoid duplicating the work of other organizations. CBPP's policy, Greenstein said, has been to expand its issue agenda only if its help was needed and its expertise could make a difference.

For example, persuaded that Medicaid was in peril due to the ascendancy of Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) in 1995, and that its expertise was needed, CBPP helped nonprofit colleagues [make the case](#) that turning Medicaid assistance to states into block grants would be disastrous for the poor and needy.

That's how CBPP came to make health policy a part of its agenda, Greenstein said. CBPP also provided the [intellectual heft](#) to help groups advocate for the Affordable Care Act.

Many nonprofit leaders have praised CBPP over the years for the important role it plays in policy debates. Marielena Hinacapie, executive director of the National Immigration Law Center, called it "a powerhouse in Washington for the impact they have had on low-income immigrant communities and low-income communities in general in the country." Dorian Warren, president, Center for Community Change, said: "It is the place we all go to, no matter your political affiliation, for the true facts on what is affecting low-income families in America and how to solve the problem of poverty." Longtime anti-poverty activist Sister Simone Campbell [said](#): "The Center gave us the facts and figures and we were able to tell the stories of the folks that we knew" and combine them with the data from the Center "to create this powerful narrative."

Does it have the support of key funders?

Yes. Its major financial supporters have included mainstream foundations such as Ford, Rockefeller, Annie E. Casey and Kellogg, along with less well-known liberal funders JPB and the Sandler Foundation. Billionaire backed foundations have also given to CBPP, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, and Arnold Ventures.

CBPP's outreach to the states has also impressed funders. "If you want to have impact in the states, and you're looking for how best to do that, there's just nothing better than the State Priorities Partnership," said Steve Daetz, Sandler Foundation executive vice president.

As Kiki Jamieson, president of The Fund for New Jersey, observed, "If you're really committed to ending poverty and inequality, if you're committed to public education, expanding health care, to reforming criminal justice, then you should be involved in the State Priorities Partnership."

CBPP also takes donations from corporate foundations, but only if its board approves. "We rejected offers of millions of dollars because we were concerned that the corporation ... or corporate foundation ... would try to influence the positions we took on various issues," Greenstein told Blue Tent.

One funder CBPP did not turn away was the Walmart Foundation, which gave CBPP money to support its food assistance work. CBPP accepted the money, but only after the giant retailer agreed that it would not be identified as a funder of any of its reports, would not have the right to review its work in advance or influence it, or review any of its positions on any issue CBPP worked on.

While Greenstein acknowledged that [some Walmart workers](#) receive food stamp benefits, he doubted that was behind the company's donation. "Walmart sells food," he said, so that more people getting food stamps means more sales for the retail giant.

Conclusion

CBPP has a long track record of positive impact, with notable achievements stretching from its founding in 1981 to as recently as this year. While CBPP's just the facts approach is something of a throwback in today's highly partisan political landscape, the organization's priorities will find an enthusiastic audience with the moderate policymakers of the Biden administration and closely divided Senate. Moreover, CBPP's experienced leadership and continued expansion into state level programming put the organization in a strong position for the long term.

Given CBPP's focus on vital economic issues impacting large numbers of Americans, as well as its consistent effectiveness and high praise from peers and funders, Blue Tent finds the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to be a **high priority, strongly recommended** organization for progressive donors.

You may also want to check out:

- [Center for Progressive Reform: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [People's Parity Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Demand Justice: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Public Citizen: What Donors Need to Know](#)

