

## Fairness Project

### What Donors Need to Know

In less than a decade of existence, no organization has been more impactful in advancing progressive goals on a shoestring budget than the [Fairness Project](#). Launched as 501(c)(4) in 2014 with the help of the powerhouse SEIU United Healthcare Workers union, FP has grown over the years into the country's foremost incubator, funder, and convener of progressive ballot initiatives. Of the two dozen ballot measures the group has supported, including initiatives for Medicaid expansion, a higher minimum wage, and paid leave among others, over 90% have won at the polls.

Understanding the power of marketing progressive policies without a partisan affiliation, FP has supported successful, potentially game-changing ballot measures in even the reddest of red states. As the following brief explains, those campaigns have allowed progressive change to circumvent resistant legislatures or governors opposed to such policies, bringing about change that would have been otherwise unthinkable.

Based on Blue Tent's reporting—including independent research, review of financial information, and interviews with FP's leadership and coalition partners—Blue Tent **strongly recommends** Fairness Project, rating its work on state and local issues as a **high priority** in building the necessary infrastructure for progressive change.

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

Yes. Fairness Project is the leading national progressive organization supporting ballot measures from inception to implementation. The organization's budget is modest—typically between \$4 and \$6 million annually—but few other progressive groups regularly invest the same amount of energy and resources purely into state and municipal ballot initiatives. Since its founding, Fairness Project has been a key backer of 24 individual ballot measures across 16 states, playing a leading role behind the scenes of each campaign. FP has also distinguished itself in gaining the trust and respect of numerous local-level groups, whose members and leadership are often skeptical of parachuting national political organizations.

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

Yes. FP's most basic strategy is simple: progressive economic ideas like Medicaid expansion, higher wages, and regulation of payday loans have a broad appeal among voters when disconnected from

candidates or partisan labels. In the 23 states that allow ballot measures initiated by citizens (as well as municipalities that allow such measures), FP invests in and supports campaigns run by local groups to pass policies via referendum, typically providing crucial early funding for polling, legal work, and signature gathering, as well as funds and expertise throughout the campaign and into implementation.

Along with circumventing partisan divides, FP's approach is groundbreaking at another level: Ballot initiatives lead to fast and straightforward changes, as opposed to the more distant, fractious work of electing a legislative majority that then must draft legislation and convince enough of their members to pass it. The straight line between voting for a ballot measure and seeing it enacted in a short period can also have knock-on effects for politics in a state as a whole, providing positive feedback to voters which encourages them to continue voting and engaging politically. Taken together, the success of strong ballot initiatives is a win in both the short and long game of progressive politics.

That said, even resounding wins at the ballot box have come with complications, as conservative governors and legislatures often attempt to undermine successful referenda. Medicaid expansion in Maine, for instance, was delayed by more than a year, as Republican Gov. Paul LePage refused to act on the measure. In Idaho, the Republican legislature added a work requirement to the state's Medicaid expansion, and GOP lawmakers in Florida amended the state's 2018 voting rights restoration initiative to add barriers to ex-felons regaining the franchise.

But recalcitrant legislatures and governors are also limited in their ability to claw back many of these major victories. Repealing or cutting programs that provide direct material benefits to wide swaths of people is a political minefield, as is any action that could be interpreted as subverting the direct will of voters.

### **Is there strong evidence of its impact?**

Yes. Since its founding in 2014, FP has won 23 of 24 ballot measures, including in red, blue and purple states. These ballot measures have delivered health care access, higher wages, and paid leave for millions of people, often within a year or less of their passage. Thousands more will benefit from increased protection from predatory lenders and greater accountability for police departments.

FP has been praised by its on-the-ground partners both publicly and in conversations with Blue Tent, who credit the group for helping get campaigns up and running with early investments in polling, drafting the initiative and collecting signatures. FP also provides support and guidance to the coalitions supporting the campaign, including as a convener between otherwise disparate groups, as well as a fundraising resource during the election. (Part of the reason for FP's small budget is that funders often give directly to campaigns rather than funnel the money through FP.)

### **Does it have a plan to achieve future impact?**

Yes. FP is continuing to pursue more ballot initiatives, some for programs they've supported in several other states, and some for newer ideas, like public safety reforms. FP Director Kelly Hall told Blue Tent that the organization is also ramping up its portfolio of municipal ballot measures in an effort to make an impact in places that do not allow for statewide citizen-initiated measures, which includes most of the south and northeast. Because FP's previous success has come from taking cues from local and state groups on what people want, they are not sticking with a specific plan for which set of policies they will pursue next.

A major challenge facing FP is increasing attacks on the ballot measure process by conservative legislatures. States such as Florida, Idaho, Mississippi and others have sought changes to their procedures to make such efforts more difficult, or to outlaw the sort of support that FP provides. Hall told Blue Tent that she is trying to "sound the alarm" on these attacks on the ballot measure process, with FP engaged in various strategies to defeat such policies or challenge them in court. However, Hall believes that many of these changes—such as increasing signature requirements or raising the threshold for passing ballot measures to 60 percent—will primarily increase costs rather than outright prevent the success of future campaigns.

### **Does it have strong leadership and governance?**

Yes. FP's current executive director is Kelly Hall, who served as the group's director of policy and partnerships until taking the top job this past summer. During her five years at FP, Hall has been active with many different parts of the organization's work, and has traveled the country extensively working with local partners at the state and local level, giving her a deep understanding of her organization's role in numerous complex campaigns and coalitions.

Steve Trossman, a long-time union leader at SEIU United Healthcare Workers, serves as president of FP's board of directors. The board also includes Hall; Naomi Aberly, a philanthropist and the

former board chair for Planned Parenthood for America; and Ronald Newman, the national political director at the ACLU.

**Is it diverse and culturally competent?**

Yes. According to FP, people of color make up 40% of its staff, while people identifying as LGBTQ make up 30% of the staff. In discussions with Blue Tent, FP also emphasized the staff's geographic diversity, which is especially important to FP as an organization that works on the ground in a wide variety of states and municipalities. Furthermore, while FP's chosen ballot initiatives typically focus on working class economic issues, measures like raising the minimum wage, expanding Medicaid access, and reforming payday lending practices disproportionately help communities of color.

Moving forward, FP is looking to pursue further ballot measures on issues closely connected to racial justice, like policing and public safety. FP is also seeking to expand its portfolio of municipal level work, as statewide, citizen initiated ballot measures are not available to voters in many of the most diverse or disproportionately nonwhite states.

**Is its financial house in order?**

Yes. In its short existence, FP's annual revenues have reached as high as \$7.7 million, with FP telling Blue Tent it expects its budget for 2022 to be around \$8 million. About a third of FP's funding comes from organized labor—specifically SEIU-UHW, the California healthcare union that also provided around \$5 million in seed funding. Another third comes from a few major foundations and funders, including Open Society, Black PAC, and 1630 Fund, with the final third coming from individual donations of all sizes (one consistent funder has been the soap company Dr. Bronner's).

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

Yes. In interviews with Blue Tent, current and former FP leaders made it clear that the organization's success hinges almost entirely on its ability to work with a wide variety of partners and coalitions at the state and local level. David Benson, the government relations director of the American Cancer Society's Cancer Action Network in South Dakota and North Dakota, told Blue Tent that FP has brought crucial knowledge and support to South Dakota's 2022 Medicaid expansion ballot measure. As Benson explained, a big part of FP's success in building coalitions

and winning ballot measures is not just experience, but humility in approaching each new campaign.

“They come to the table wanting to learn more, wanting to learn the lay of the land, wanting to understand the partners,” Benson told Blue Tent. “They’re not coming to the table with all the answers.”

Molly Fleming, a grassroots organizer with Missouri Organizing and Voter Engagement Collaborative (MOVE), similarly described FP as an invaluable partner on multiple ballot campaigns, albeit one that understood the importance of state and local leadership. Moreover, Fleming told Blue Tent that the group was a convener of some otherwise tenuous coalitions necessary for victory in red or purple states. During Missouri’s 2020 Medicaid expansion campaign, for instance, Fleming credited FP with building trust between more conservative, business-oriented groups—including the state’s hospital association—and progressive grassroots organizations like MOVE.

### **What would more funding mean for the organization?**

While FP’s impact compared to their current revenues is impressive, the group is limited in its reach in part due to its small budget. FP believes that a number of big potential wins are being left on the table due to a lack of funds and outside support. Were FP to see its budget grow, the group would be able to support more campaigns simultaneously, including statewide referenda in midterm and presidential election years, as well as municipal measures that are often voted on in off years. More funds would also mean more money to poll and develop ideas for future initiatives or strategies, as well as offsetting the increasing costs of fighting attacks on the ballot measure process by anti-democratic governors and legislatures.

### **Conclusion**

Few political organizations of any kind can credibly claim the clear-cut record of impact as FP. Likewise, few national groups are engaged in work that both directly benefit people in the short term and build a base for broader progressive change. At a time when political victories on the left are rare and typically short lived, FP has shown a knack for shepherding major policy changes from inception to implementation.

For these reasons, Blue Tent considers FP's work a **high priority** and **strongly recommends** any and all progressive donors to give to the Fairness Project.

### You may also want to check out:

- [The Fairness Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Sister District Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [Emily's List/Women Vote!: What Donors Need to Know](#)
- [People's Parity Project: What Donors Need to Know](#)

