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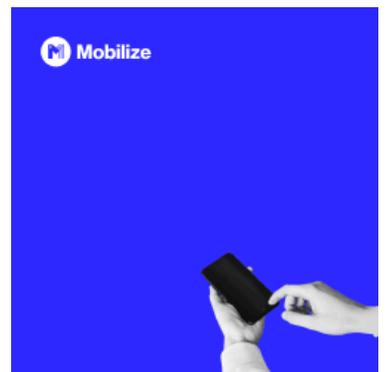
In California, These Donors Are Playing the Long Game to Build Power and Advance Change

Bill Pitkin, Guest Contributor



A PROTEST MARCH IN SAN DIEGO. SHUTTERSTOCK

As we've reported previously, left-leaning nonprofit organizations have become more politically involved through advocacy and lobbying, as well as civic engagement,



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sometimes by establishing 501(c)(4) affiliates. Foundations are increasingly coming together to back these efforts through [funder collaboratives](#), while major donors are working together to coordinate both philanthropic and political funding. The Democracy Alliance is the best known liberal donor table, and more recent examples include [Way to Win/Way to Rise](#), which coordinates both 501(c)(3) philanthropic funding for movement building and donations for a c4 and political action committee working in 10 key states across the nation.

Organizing Individual Donors for Power Building

A group that has been operating largely under the radar, the California Donor Table (CDT), is in one of the most reliably progressive states in the country. It was established in 2005 (initially as the Progressive Era Project; it was renamed in 2016) by a handful of donors who knew each other from the Democracy Alliance and were inspired by a donor pool in Colorado that had helped shift power and elections toward a more progressive agenda. Quinn Delaney, one of the original anchor donors, says, “From the beginning, we were focused on racial equity and on the empowerment of communities of color.”

As outlined recently in CDT’s [“Together We Win”](#) report, its longevity and deep work in regions throughout the state have paid off in shifting state and local elected bodies toward a more progressive agenda. Ludovic Blain was hired in 2009 as the first staff person for the donor table, bringing deep experience on issues like environmental justice, voting rights and campaign finance reform.

Blain, now executive director, attributes the success of CDT to the long-term perspective of its donors: “A lot of people who focus on building power try to do it quickly, and that might mean going with who is already voting; these folks have been committed in the long term to do what it actually takes to build power.”

The donor table has expanded well beyond the five original donors to around 30 individual donors today, plus another 30 or so who aren’t members but align donations. About three-quarters of the donors are from the Bay Area; the goal over the next few years is to expand the donor base to another 20 donors primarily from southern California for more balance between the two parts of the state.

Karen Grove, who has been active in philanthropy on reproductive health and other issues personally, is one of the newer donors. She was introduced to CDT by Delaney, who had given her advice on aligning her philanthropic and political giving. Through CDT, Grove learned about the intersections of her interests with racial and social justice, and, she says, “met a group of people and group of organizations that shared my values and had a really smart analysis of politics in California and were working together to build progressive infrastructure to see that vision come to be.”

California Donor Table has at times had organizations like foundations and labor unions as donors, but those formal relationships have been “short-lived,” according to Blain; the CDT has found its “sweet spot” in organizing individual donors for progressive change. CDT coordinates with institutional philanthropy on civic

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engagement efforts and was part of the [California Civic Participation Funders](#) collaborative to increase civic participation among underrepresented groups.

CDT's first investments totaled around \$750,000 in 2006; since that time, it has provided around \$30 million. Last year, it gave out around \$2 million, and this year's goal is \$4 million. Legally a project of Tides/Tides Advocacy, a little less than half of CDT's funding supports political activities by c4 organizations, while the balance supports nonpartisan voter education and civic engagement.

A Regional Approach

CDT started its work focusing on four counties in the southern part of the state that were relatively conservative politically but with a rapidly changing demographic makeup: San Diego, Orange, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties. Over time, it expanded to Los Angeles, as well as seven counties in the Bay Area and six in the Central Valley.

Funding key "regional tables in each of these areas, CDT provides general operating support that groups use for civic engagement activities like voter education, organizing candidate debates, and developing policy agendas. As Grove puts it, CDT believes that "the way to build power in these communities is through unrestricted funding for many years."

In addition to engaging and organizing residents around elections, an important part of CDT's power-building approach is building the capacity of its regional grantee partners to work with newly elected officials by supporting their transition and governing. Rejecting the "accountability" frame that is popular in traditional policy advocacy, CDT believes that true community power comes from "governing with" policymakers.

In the Inland Empire region (Riverside and San Bernardino counties), CDT has provided regular funding and connections for Inland Empowerment, which formed in 2012 around "get out the vote" work and now includes 10 key partner organizations. According to Executive Director Michael Gomez Daly, "CDT has been a huge ally in bringing in other funders and coalescing funder strategies and the investment in region-wide coalitions." CDT directly provides about 10% of Inland Empowerment's annual budget, but helps bring in additional aligned funding from foundations such as California Wellness, James Irvine, and the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund.

Orange County has traditionally been a politically conservative stronghold in California. Around the time the Orange County Civic Engagement Table (OCCET) was founded in 2012, there was a realization that "there was a significant demographic shift in Orange County; there was therefore a political opportunity and organizing opportunity to shift the narrative of what the county was about," says Jonathan Paik, OCCET executive director. OCCET is made up of an alliance of organizations representing Asian Pacific Islander, Latino, labor and environmental groups. As in the Inland Empire, CDT's support here includes direct funding, but

perhaps even more important are the donations it attracts from other funders and the advice and technical assistance it brings. One area where that was helpful was in designing two municipal measures in Anaheim that moved the city council from “at-large” to geographic districts, which provide better representation for communities of color. Since those measures were passed in 2014, 23 other cities in Orange County have moved from at-large to city council districts.

Who Governs?

California Donor Table has flown largely under the radar, but is looking to expand its reach and influence by attracting more member donors and expanding partnerships with other funders looking to build capacity and power within regions. Ludovic Blain says that there is still a lot of work to do in order for CDT and partners to shift the state toward a more progressive agenda, and this will have national implications. He says, “We need to do that for Californians and to show the rest of the country a way out of our federal governance at this point.”

In the regional work, leaders are looking to build on recent victories to expand their influence and power over the long term. Paik says, “We recognize that it’s not enough to change the election rules, as well as to change representation with regard to identity, but it actually takes a lot to learn how to govern.” His goal is that, in addition to increasing voting among communities of color, OCCET provides the leadership training so that its members take on important positions in local government themselves.

For Inland Empowerment, a recent partnership they’ve co-led on census outreach has led to a partnership called [IE Rise](#), which launched in June with 60 member organizations to create a “roadmap for an inclusive and sustainable economy” for the region. Inland Empowerment is serving as the backbone for the coalition, in partnership with the local community foundation and university.

In this environment, when the movement for racial justice and police reform are front and center, the work of CDT is particularly relevant. District attorneys and sheriffs are elected in California, providing opportunities for the regional organizations to influence criminal justice reform, and CDT was the first California organization to promote a [No Police Money Candidate Pledge](#) for elected officials throughout the state.

CDT not only provides a good example of how individual donors can be organized to coordinate political and philanthropic funding; it also shows donors with wealth how they can best support communities of color. For Karen Grove, this has had the added benefit of informing her philanthropy as chair of the Grove Foundation. She says that the most important lesson she has learned as a CDT donor is “to fund the people most impacted by the problem so that they can be the architects and implementers of the solutions and then the keepers of the solutions.”

Bill Pitkin is a social justice advocate and leader who has worked in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors for more than 25 years. Currently, he advises nonprofit

organizations and foundations on strategy and social change.

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