

Progressive Philanthropy

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As readers of *Social Policy* know, many citizen engagement organizations have accomplished amazing things on a shoestring, but the moneyed interests we are up against have the scales tilted in their favor, and it is only going to get worse with the recent *Citizens United* decision by the Supreme Court.

How can we increase dramatically the budgets of organizations that are the cornerstone of our democracy? For better or worse, the vast majority of organizing and advocacy groups get about seventy to eighty percent of their revenue from foundations and other institutional grant makers. That figure has not changed much over the past few decades, despite righteous efforts to encourage organizations not to rely too heavily on foundations. Some groups have succeeded in developing other robust fundraising systems - most commonly membership dues and individual donations - but even for those organizations that have seen success in these areas, grants usually are an important part of the revenue stream.

To shore up the budgets of social change organizations, institutional grant makers will need to shift how they allocate their dollars. There are allies inside many of America's foundations who understand the value of organizing and advocacy and who want to steer more money to these strategies, but they often have difficulty making the case to others about the value of adding these types of efforts to their existing portfolios. So in 2008 the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) began a multi-year effort to document how diverse people and communities across our nation have received incredible benefits from community organizing, policy advocacy, and civic engagement. Each study documented policy wins over a five-year period, and the results have been astonishing.

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In New Mexico, we found that fourteen groups secured \$2.6 billion in monetized benefits, while spending just \$16.6 million on their advocacy and organizing efforts.

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In North Carolina, the fifteen groups in the study produced \$1.8 billion worth of benefits, with a total advocacy budget of \$20.4 million.

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In Minnesota, the fifteen-group sample achieved \$2.3 billion in monetized benefits, on a combined advocacy budget of only \$16.5 million.

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In L.A. County, our sample of fifteen groups garnered for their communities \$6.8 billion worth of benefits with an advocacy budget of \$75.5 million

I think the message is starting to get through. When foundations invest in community organizing and advocacy, it results in real, tangible benefits. The bang for the buck is unmatched by any other strategies a foundation might choose to fund. The return on investment (ROI) is simply incredible, and the ROI only counts those wins that could be monetized. We also documented the many substantial wins - often on civil or human rights issues - that simply could not be counted in dollars and cents.

We will continue to bring this message to our nation's grant makers so that they can be effective partners of nonprofits that protect and advocate with those who are assumed to be powerless, amplify the voices of disenfranchised communities when others have sought to silence them, and address effectively many of our nation's toughest social problems.

[View the article on socialpolicy.org here](#) .

Social Policy also published an excerpt from NCRP's *Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing and Civic Engagement in L.A. County*

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[Read the excerpt here](#)
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