A conversation with Brian Kettenring on October 16, 2014

Participants

- Brian Kettenring – Co-Executive Director, Center for Popular Democracy
- Alexander Berger – Senior Research Analyst, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: This set of notes was compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and gives an overview of the major points made by Brian Kettenring.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Brian Kettenring as part of its investigation of economic policy advocacy. Conversation topics included: the Center for Popular Democracy's work on economic policy issues, funding for community organizing, and advocacy strategies.

The Center for Popular Democracy

Recent merger

The Center for Popular Democracy (CPD) merged with the Leadership Center for the Common Good on January 1, 2014, and the combined 501(c)3 organization kept the CPD name. Mr. Kettenring, who has worked in community organizing for over 20 years, founded Common Good in 2010 to provide training and support for community organizations. Its work was similar to, but at a smaller scale than, CPD's current work.

Common Good's 2013 budget prior to the merger with CPD was about $3 million, and it had 13 staff. CPD also had a budget of about $3 million before the merger, and it had 22 staff. CPD's 2014 post-merger budget is about $8 million, and it has an affiliated 501(c)4 organization (Action for the Common Good) with an annual budget of about $2 million. It has grown substantially since the merger and employs about 50 staff.

Funding

CPD's budget includes roughly $2 million dollars in unrestricted funds. The rest of its funding is limited to specific issues. CPD would prefer to have more unrestricted funds, so it could undertake more experimentation without having to solicit specific funding. Its general-use funding currently supports core operations. Though most funding for community organizing is currently restricted to specific issues, CPD hopes some of its biggest funders will choose to provide general support in the near future. CPD would like to raise more unrestricted funding.

CPD's three biggest funders are:
- Wyss Foundation
- Ford Foundation

- Open Society Foundations

Together, these funders account for just over half of CPD's budget.

Other major funders include: the Marguerite Casey Foundation, the Rockefeller Family Fund, the Surdna Foundation, and the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock.

Departments

CPD's largest departments are:
- Campaigns, which mainly supports local and state campaigns but also aims to make a national impact.
- Policy, which disseminates reports that emphasize advocacy strategies in addition to policy analysis.
- Organizing, which strengthens community organizations' administrative and management practices, enabling them to engage citizens in improving policies and practices in their community.

The Fed Up Campaign

CPD will need to hire a new full-time campaign director to run this campaign. Mr. Kettenring is confident that CPD will be able to find a qualified candidate with significant campaign experience and policy expertise.

Partnerships

In 2014, CPD has raised $5.5 million for partner organizations. It works with strong organizations around the US, though like all national support organizations with local partners, its partners vary in effectiveness. Mr. Kettenring thinks CPD's partners are among the best in the field. CPD's combination of policy research, capacity building, and campaigning is rare. Much of the community-organizing field focuses exclusively on campaigning.

This year, CPD's partners played an important role in minimum wage and paid sick day campaigns in several states across the US. Ten states raised the minimum wage this year, though CPD can't necessarily claim credit for those partner organization successes.

Prior successes

Prior to the merger with CPD, Mr. Kettenring ran a national coalition called "Campaign for a Fair Settlement" that focused on promoting non-Congressional action to help struggling homeowners and align Wall Street incentives with economic security. From November 2011, to May 2013, the campaign pressured the White House and the Department of Justice

to act, leading to a roughly $13 billion Chase settlement, with $4 billion in relief for homeowners. Several settlements have brought billions of dollars to homeowners.

CPD's policy issues

CPD works on a variety of policy issues, which can be unified under some overlapping frames, such as:

- Building an economy with high-quality jobs –Joel Rogers wrote in the 1990s and 2000s about building a "high-road" economy. The high road involves regulating employers of those working in the worst conditions and incentivizing employers to improve conditions. Much of CPD's work aims to improve job quality for those in the worst jobs. Minimum wage advocacy over the past 25 years has pushed up the wages of earners on the very low end but has done little for 80% of workers. A higher wage-floor, such as $15/hour, might lead to pay increases for those further up the income spectrum. Next year CPD plans to advocate for a $13/hour minimum wage on the state level.
- Inequality – Concern about inequality has been a dominant political motivator since around 2011. CPD's work on minimum wage and paid sick days aims in part to reduce inequality. CPD attempts to build and sustain political interest in inequality, to promote understanding of inequality, and to develop understandable and practical policy solutions to inequality. Minimum wage policy is the signal issue for inequality, but it has its limits. This policy work can be built upon creatively.
- Gender – Paid sick days, paid family leave, and a fair workweek are often issues in sectors of the economy that have more female workers. CPD analyzes the role of gender in occupational segregation and pay disparities. CPD advocates for policies, including minimum wage, paid sick days, paid family leave, and a fair workweek, that are not always perceived as directly addressing gender equity but that actually do.
- Race – African American employment has been best when overall employment has been best. A thriving economy is particularly beneficial to communities of color. CPD's work to increase levels of employment is intended to reduce racial employment disparities.

Paid sick day campaigns

The issue of paid sick days nearly fell into obscurity a couple of years ago. It became a prominent issue around 2005, but as of 2009-2010 policies had been passed only in San Francisco and Washington, DC. At that pivotal time, several people strategically directed campaigns to places, such as New York and Connecticut, where they were most likely to succeed and build national momentum.

CPD has fought several battles for paid sick days, mostly in left-leaning states or localities. It won in Connecticut and New York City but lost in Philadelphia and Denver.

Congress is unlikely to act on any new policy initiatives, including this one, until many jurisdictions around the country have adopted it.

Combining minimum wage and paid sick day campaigns

Today, there is increasing alignment and collaboration between minimum wage and paid sick day funders (such as the Wyss Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Family Fund).

CPD has worked on both issues, and is currently aiming to combine them to advance both when they can. The success of the Seattle-based campaign for a $15 minimum wage has suggested that sometimes asking for more leads to greater success. The Seattle campaign has inspired the minimum wage movement to be bolder.

One rationale behind packaging the policies together is that asking for more at one time could accelerate change, but combining the policies also creates practical challenges. Introducing a package of policies as a single law could end in one passing while the others are negotiated away. Another option is to introduce them as ballot initiatives. This year in Oakland, for example, a ballot initiative combined a minimum wage increase and paid sick days. San Diego recently passed a combined minimum-wage-increase and paid-sick-days mandate. California's precedent could promote changes elsewhere.