

# The Fight of a Lifetime: 30 Key Players in Progressive Philanthropy — Inside Philanthropy

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Philanthropy is famous (or notorious) for avoiding the appearance of political involvement, even when there are plenty of fully legal means for 501(c)(3) funders to take a side. But in this era of stark polarization, more funders and philanthropy-serving organizations *are* taking a side. Ideas associated with the progressive movement are gaining greater credence across the foundation world, fueling the growth of a wide range of activist and policy groups that see themselves as battling for a more equitable and sustainable future.

The mainstreaming of social justice and calls for the leadership of the marginalized are welcome developments for lefties who've long criticized the sector for its complacency. But even as progressive language proliferates, relatively few of America's many thousands of private foundations and major donors are walking that talk. [To paraphrase NCRP vice president Timi Gerson](#), dollars don't always follow discourse.

Here, we take a look at some places in the philanthrosphere where progressive dollars do follow discourse. These funders and philanthropy-serving organizations are forthright about their ideals, resourcing movement organizers and nonprofits engaged in left-leaning advocacy. They speak plainly about the need for equity of all types and for the empowerment of disenfranchised people. We've left out some major funders of progressive causes, like MacArthur or Kresge, that still largely position themselves as apolitical problem solvers. For the sake of length, this list also omits most progressive outfits that limit their work to specific issues and geographies.

These national funders and funding organizations each have something important to tell us about progressive philanthropy as we debate, as a nation, which core values should carry us forward.

## Legacy Foundations

**Ford Foundation:** Legacy funders make a good showing on this list. So why not start with the granddaddy of them all? Even if it's slipping on the list of largest U.S. grantmakers, Ford is still the mothership of social justice philanthropy. The contours of its ideology have shifted with the decades, but Ford has long applied an equity lens to diverse elements of its funding, from community development and workers' rights to environmental justice. Under Darren Walker's tenure, Ford has embraced many of progressive philanthropy's key operational tenets, like [general support and capacity building](#), as well as [investing for impact](#). The foundation's bid to combat inequality "in all its forms" has seen Ford [lean into strategies typical of the new progressive movement in philanthropy](#), including movement-building and "narrative change."

**Kellogg Foundation:** Another longtime liberal power player, the W.K. Kellogg

Foundation is somewhat unique among top foundations in that it places racial equity front and center in its work. Kellogg has been a consistent supporter of local organizations that serve and advocate for communities of color, taking an intersectional approach that prioritizes equitable opportunity for kids and working families. It's also one of [only a few national funders](#) supporting the new labor movement, backing groups like the National Domestic Workers Alliance that operate on the front lines of progressive organizing for economic, racial and gender justice. Following many years of racial justice funding, Kellogg has also embarked on a [Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation](#) initiative, directly addressing the history and effects of racism in the U.S.

**Surdna Foundation:** Like Ford, the Surdna Foundation is a longstanding legacy funder that spent the better part of the 20th century evolving toward its current progressive identity. That process came to a head last year [when several dozen descendants of John E. Andrus questioned the leftward course](#) plotted by incoming president Don Chen. Chen is a Ford Foundation alumnus whose career as a smart growth and social justice advocate [befits Surdna's current funding profile](#). This is one legacy funder that has dug in on progressivism despite controversy, applying lenses of racial justice, equity and sustainability across its program areas. Along with Ford and Kellogg, Surdna also supports the new labor movement.

**Nathan Cummings Foundation:** Just like Surdna, this longstanding institution has endured [jostling between staff and board over its strategic direction](#). But its progressive bona fides are in no doubt with current programs encompassing inequality, climate change, and racial and economic justice. It's also a labor funder. Under President Sharon Alpert, and in the wake of 2016, NCF upped its payout rate and [pledged to scrutinize "how we do our philanthropy."](#) Alpert also led the charge to move all the foundation's assets into alignment with its mission. At the beginning of this year, Alpert announced [her intention to step down](#).

**Marguerite Casey Foundation:** Marguerite Casey isn't nearly as old as Ford or Surdna, but it traces its endowment to the family behind an American institution: the United Parcel Service. MCF was progressive from the start. Under longtime CEO Luz Vega-Marquis (who's retiring later this year [amid controversy over her leadership style](#)), the foundation has prized bottom-up movement building and general support to organizations on the front lines of poverty. MCF's determination to ["weave networks" of activist nonprofits](#) rather than fund a staid set of issues is thoroughly progressive. But can a funder nurture a culture of trust among grantees when its own internal culture is, allegedly, one of fear?

**Solidago Foundation:** Founded in 1996 on the fortune of a radio and television investor, this scrappy social justice outfit is deeply rooted in the progressive organizing tradition. Its wider project is to build "independent political power" grounded in underprivileged communities and unreliant on dominant institutions. To do so, it's backing community organizing in the fields of environmental justice, workers' rights and economic inclusion. As we've reported, [Solidago is eager to cultivate progressive strategies throughout the funding community](#) and to embrace, rather than resist, the "beautiful chaos of social change."

**General Service Foundation:** This legacy funder dates back to 1946, when Clifton and Margaret Musser founded an institution that could (and should) shift as the times changed. Today's General Service Foundation is a social justice stalwart, funding intersectional equity, movement building, labor and progressive narrative change. In the aftermath of Trump's victory, Executive Director Dimple Abichandani [argued for more coordination on the left](#)—an elusive goal. The foundation is making an effort to align its grantmaking with the upcoming 2020 elections, including by making larger grants, disbursing those funds sooner in the year so organizations can deploy the money early, and sustaining that support through election season.

**Wallace Global Fund:** Henry A. Wallace is best known as the 33rd vice president of the United States, serving under Franklin D. Roosevelt. But he also founded what would become Pioneer Hi-Bred International, a major hybrid seed company

(and GMO producer). Several decades after Wallace's death in 1965, son Robert spun the Wallace Global Fund off of a larger foundation established by his father. The fund's giving "is inspired by the progressive vision" of the elder Wallace, whose New Deal liberalism reflected his era's fight against fascism and a need to combat "corporatocracy." The fund gives around \$14 million a year to advance progressive causes like corporate regulation, environmental protection, women's rights and campaign finance reform. Movement building is a priority. Fittingly, the Wallace Global Fund [is one of only a few foundation backers of the Green New Deal](#).

**Arca Foundation:** Formerly the Nancy Susan Reynolds Foundation, Arca is a solid if modest funder of progressive causes. Equity and social justice has always been a part of Arca's DNA. The current era has seen it thoroughly embrace racial and economic justice as well as movement building, with a pledge to prioritize state and local work in the Midwest and South through 2021. Engaging the historically underrepresented is one big goal there. This represents a course change from [Arca's previous focus on corporate power](#) and the "financialization" of American life.

**New World Foundation:** The New World Foundation traces its origins back to the old progressive movement through its founder, McCormick heiress and activist Anita McCormick Blaine. Today, it's a public charity that channels money from leftist donors to build progressive power on the ground. Its issues of focus include climate change, youth empowerment and labor organizing. Hillary Clinton chaired the New World Foundation's board in the late 1980s, when it was already committed to "bottom-up" movement building.

### Living Donors

**George Soros:** The progressivism of George Soros' domestic philanthropy is a well-known story. Open Society Foundations' money can be found behind a whole host of left-leaning action here in the U.S., and Soros' propensity to pair his philanthropy with prodigious political donations has earned him the ire of the right. What makes OSF interesting ([among many other things](#)) is its status as perhaps the highest-profile progressive philanthropy headed by a living donor. While plenty of living donors with even deeper pockets—think Chan and Zuckerberg—regularly fund progressive c3 work, they tend to couch their overall giving in apolitical terms. OSF doesn't beat around the bush.

**Barbara Picower:** Though it doesn't brand itself as "progressive" (or, indeed, brand itself much at all), the \$4 billion JPB Foundation [is heavily leaning into bottom-up movement funding](#). Picower keeps a tight rein on the foundation she established following the death of her husband Jeffrey, an investor who benefited royally from Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme. JPB gave in the ballpark of \$260 million last year, and is heavily resources progressive organizing shops like the Center for Community Change and movement-oriented think tanks like the Center for Popular Democracy and the People's Action Institute. JPB also joined other liberal heavyweights to stand up a \$250 million fund to support organizing by women.

**Tom Steyer:** Steyer's influence as a climate-focused political donor, philanthropist and candidate for high office cannot be denied. But does he embrace the progressive movement as a whole? Prior to Trump's presidency, perhaps not so much. But the events of 2016 set the hedge fund climate crusader on a track not uncommon among the liberal super-rich: full-throated opposition to the new president. In the sense that the anti-Trump "resistance" mostly tracks with contemporary progressivism, Steyer's pledge to [oppose Trump on all fronts](#) is a progressive move. Steyer's massive political spending is a boon to Democrats each cycle. And he's in good progressive company with George Soros as one of the few known mega-givers involved in the Democracy Alliance.

**The Sandler family:** Herb and Marion Sandler may no longer be with us, but their influence lives on through the grantmaking of the Sandler Foundation and the progressive causes and strategies it backs. The foundation, which has given away

close to \$1 billion dollars, [is a quiet exemplar of key power-building strategies](#) like general support, policy advocacy and stronger state-level organizing networks. Herb and Marion [studied the right's savvy long-term approach](#) as they helped stand up leftist policy shops like the Center for American Progress and the Center for Responsible Lending, as well as journalism outfits like ProPublica. We can expect children Susan and Jim to carry on in a similar vein as the Sandler Foundation spends down its assets—still close to \$1 billion in 2017.

**The Buffett family:** Peter and Jennifer Buffett's NoVo Foundation is only one tributary of [the wider river of Buffett philanthropy](#). But even that makes it a force to reckon with. NoVo is best known for its focus on women's rights and security around the globe, and it pursues that mission with a thoroughly progressive set of strategies. Bottom-up social justice is the goal of its Radical Hope Fund, [a \\$34 million commitment to 19 social change organizations in the U.S. and abroad](#). NoVo regularly supports LGBTQ and trans rights, pro-choice organizations, workers rights and progressive policy shops. Even larger than NoVo is the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation, named after Warren's late wife and headed by daughter Susie. It's a titan, moving over \$600 million out the door in 2018. Quietly, the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation has become the largest private funder of family planning in the U.S. and abroad. Susie Buffett also heads the Sherwood Foundation, a social justice funder active in Omaha.

**The Simons family:** Like the Buffetts, the Simons family has a prodigious fortune to draw upon: Hedge fund guru Jim Simons is worth over \$21 billion. Although Jim is a big-time Democratic political donor, his own Simons Foundation is all about science and research. That's not entirely the case for daughter and son-in-law Liz Simons and Mark Heising, whose Heising-Simons Foundation combines science support with sizable giving to causes like climate policy, immigration reform and justice reform. Much of that takes the form of general support to movement organizations, collaborative giving vehicles and racial justice outfits. Then there's son Nat and daughter-in-law Laura Baxter-Simons, who run the Sea Change Foundation. The couple have [given more](#) than any other living donors for climate and clean energy work. Finally, there's daughter Audrey Cappell, whose Foundation for a Just Society funds women's and LGBTQ rights around the world, and puts a premium on movements and bottom-up networks.

**Nicolas and Susan Pritzker:** Founded on the fortune of Nicholas and Susan Pritzker, the Libra Foundation was a fixture in progressive grantmaking well before 2016. But the political events of that year prompted big changes at this social justice funder. "What became crystal clear to me in the aftermath of 2016 was how really badly broken many of the mechanisms of our political system had become, and how many people were being left out of the process or were opting out," Susan [told us last year](#). Libra funds [a domestic human rights agenda](#) that includes ground-level movement building, racial justice, and attention to philanthropic power dynamics. This characteristically lean funder spent the past several years staffing up and building out its programs, all the while [staying "curious"](#) about what it'll take to build long-term power.

**Farhad Ebrahimi:** His resources may pale in comparison to some of the other names on this list, but Ebrahimi's Chorus Foundation deserves mention for several reasons. First, [it's progressive to the point of edginess](#) in how it pursues its climate justice mission, leveraging long-term general support, community-focused grantmaking and impact investments. It's also spending down to focus all its resources on making change in the moment. While Chorus does prioritize broadly environmental causes in specific locales, the spirit of its giving revolves around "building new power" in communities. What could be more progressive? Ebrahimi is a good example of the kind of new-guard lefty donors the movement will increasingly depend upon as the generational wealth transfer rolls on.

**Steve Silberstein:** Remember card catalogs? This low-key giver helped make them obsolete, developing digital alternatives through his company Innovative

Interfaces. Silberstein is a staunch progressive who engages in substantial left-leaning philanthropy alongside his political contributions. The Stephen M. Silberstein Foundation [has supported a wide array of liberal policy shops](#) like the Center for American Progress, the Economic Policy Institute, the Brennan Center for Justice, and Media Matters. The foundation gave around \$5.2 million in 2017. Silberstein's interest in combating inequality is complemented by environmental giving to places like the Sierra Club and NDRC, and by support to left-leaning media outfits like Brave New Films, Democracy Now and ProPublica. He is or has been a member of the Democracy Alliance and frequently supports Tides.

**Patricia Bauman:** Another prominent political donor, Bauman heads a progressive grantmaking operation that disburses around \$6 million a year. The Bauman Foundation pursues economic justice and “the values of a true democratic society” by supporting progressive advocacy nonprofits and channeling money through left-leaning intermediaries like Tides, NEO Philanthropy and the New Venture Fund. Bauman has been active in the governance of several major funders advocacy groups on the left, including the Democracy Alliance, the Brennan Center, NEO Philanthropy and the NRDC. As we've reported, the Bauman Foundation [is also a key player in progressive philanthropy's effort](#) to ensure a fair count in the 2020 Census.

**Vin Ryan:** The Schooner Capital founder funds plenty of apolitical causes—like hospitals and higher ed—through his Schooner Foundation. But progressive advocacy is a frequent theme. Grantees include typical progressive groups like the Brennan Center and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, as well as progressive media like the Foundation for National Progress, publisher of *Mother Jones*. Ryan's grantmaking through the Schooner Foundation totals around \$9 million yearly.

**Hans Wyss:** Environmental conservation is this billionaire's first philanthropic passion and [makes up the bulk of the Wyss Foundation's work](#). Wyss is a low-key grantmaker working with a sizable pocketbook. His net worth currently hovers around \$6 billion, and there's already over \$2 billion in the Wyss Foundation's endowment. We can expect this Giving Pledger to keep up the flow of gifts to environmental organizations with various donations on the side to progressive policy outfits like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities or left-leaning intermediaries like the New Venture Fund.

## Intermediaries and Advisors

**Proteus Fund:** Progressive field-building lies at the heart of what this funding intermediary does. Proteus got its start alongside the collaborative giving models that have grown so crucial to philanthropy on the left, and it maintains [a “high-touch” model that prizes deep engagement with partners and clients](#). Proteus is home to donor collaboratives like the democracy-oriented Piper Fund, the RISE Together Fund, founded to empower Muslim, Arab and South Asian communities, and the Rights, Faith and Democracy Collaborative, focused on LGBTQ and reproductive rights. Proteus is a firm backer of efforts to shift narratives in a progressive direction, including through its offshoot and grantee ReThink Media.

**Borealis Philanthropy:** This intermediary's mission statement is fairly straight-laced. It “works as a partner to philanthropy, helping grantmakers expand their reach and impact.” But look a bit deeper, and Borealis' progressive bona fides become clear—black leadership, trans rights, pro-immigrant litigation and disability inclusion are just a few causes its funds champion. Borealis was established in 2014 to provide a home for progressive grantmaking collaboratives that operate quite independently of one another. Most of them follow the progressive grantmaking playbook: capacity, movement building and a deep commitment to equity in every sense.

**NEO Philanthropy:** In [a deep dive several years back](#), we explored how this funding intermediary tackles the thorny problem of progressive disunity and liberal

technocratic stagnation. The intervening period has seen a surge of movement building on the left to oppose President Trump, but NEO's raison d'être remains: building bridges between elite money and the activist grassroots. Heading into 2020, several collaborative funds at NEO operate at crucial points in the political landscape. They include the State Infrastructure Fund (SIF), [founded to ensure voting rights and drive grassroots voter engagement in the states](#), and the Four Freedoms Fund, focused on the immigrant rights movement.

**New Venture Fund:** This fiscal sponsorship vehicle isn't an exact fit for this list, since its branding and project roster aren't exclusively progressive. But much of its \$300 million-plus portfolio does fit that description, a fact that hasn't been lost on conservative watchdogs. In its role as a progressive funding vehicle, NVF channels large sums to leftist advocacy groups working on causes like progressive tax reform and Latino civic engagement. It's also a major funder of progressive-oriented voter engagement outfits like the Voter Registration Project and When We All Vote. NVF was created and is managed by Arabella Advisors, [one of the nation's leading donor advisory firms](#) and an influential player in the world of progressive funding.

**Tides:** Tides operates as a key clearinghouse for progressive money, managing over a half-billion dollars in assets across its affiliated organizations in 2018. It's been politically progressive since its inception in 1976 as the brainchild of liberal activist Drummond Pike. Tides offers its clients a wide range of philanthropic services centered on DAF sponsorship. Its focus on DAFs makes Tides a target of conservative suspicion about "dark money" in the same way DonorsTrust discomfits the left. Tides incubates progressive advocacy organizations through the c3 Tides Center and also manages a c4 lobbying arm, the Advocacy Fund.

**Democracy Alliance:** It's no 501(c)(3), but the Democracy Alliance is a crucial power player in progressive movement funding. The DA got its start in 2005 to build up a liberal movement and policy infrastructure to match the right. It's made up of a large number of undisclosed donors who direct money to progressive advocacy organizations and to four funds operating on the state level to secure progressive wins. The DA's commitment to political leadership by a "new American majority" of people of color, women, youth and LGBTQ people reflects both a pragmatic need to turn demographics into destiny and an aspiration to make America a fairer place. President Gara LaMarche says that on the eve of this year's elections, the DA has gotten even more attention from donors previously uninvolved in politics and legacy foundations that don't identify as progressive.

## Venture Philanthropy

**New Media Ventures:** Venture capitalism and progressive organizing aren't oil and water, but neither do they often mix. New Media Ventures [is one place where they do](#). Founded in 2010, NMV posits that venture philanthropy (where funders support nonprofits and social enterprises [in the same way venture capitalists invest in startups](#)) can be a viable strategy on the left. Venture philanthropy hasn't exactly taken the philanthrosphere by storm, but NMV is steadily ramping up. The themes that show up in its current portfolio are unabashedly progressive: narrative change, movement building, voter engagement, and the like. And true to its strategic roots in venture capital, NMV is one player in the constellation of funders backing progressive tech tools and platforms.

**Propel Capital:** Propel didn't start off with a progressive mission, but these days, it is unabashed in its support for progressive movement building and advocacy. The election of Donald Trump played a role in that evolution, but Propel's founders maintain that the venture funder's new politics-adjacent role is ["very much in line with who we are."](#) Through its Propel Democracy portfolio, Propel supports political startups on the left, including post-2016 powerhouses like Swing Left, Sister District and Way to Win. Propel's journey into progressivism showcases how tenets of effective private sector venture investment—like general support, sustained engagement and a more comprehensive notion of "incubation"—have been taken

up by left funders eager to break away from incrementalism and back transformative social change.

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While it's hard to generalize about such a diverse field, there are a few potential takeaways, here. For one thing, legacy funders often operate as thought leaders in the world of no-holds-barred progressive philanthropy, even when their actual grantmaking might be small. With a few exceptions—like some names above—today's super-rich usually downplay the politics of their giving. That's true, even if their grantee lists and 990s are full of progressive organizations, as is the case with folks like Priscilla Chan and Mark Zuckerberg and Pierre and Pam Omidyar.

That's likely a consequence of class consciousness and ongoing ties to business. It's easier overall for legacy foundation execs to back strategies that cede institutional power to the grassroots than it is for living donors to turn class traitor. Hence the continuing power of donor intent as a totem in conservative philanthropy. In this story, foundations like Ford and Surdna have been hijacked by professional left philanthropoids.

Of course, conservative watchdogs also have a point when they talk about “dark money” on the left—just as progressives have a point when they say the same about places like DonorsTrust or the National Christian Foundation. The river of unaccountable c3 money flowing through DAFs and other intermediaries to political causes all comes from donors who'd rather operate anonymously. That means there are probably a lot more living donors who should be on lists like this but get to fly under the radar. And there are others, like the mega-donors behind the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, whose influence upon liberal politics and advocacy hides behind a dense screen of DAFs and LLCs.

My colleague Tate Williams recently [made a provocative case](#) that philanthropy should measure its effectiveness by how well it shifts power away from those who have accumulated too much. He notes just how rare this kind of thinking is: “There's a large contingent in philanthropy that believes wealth does, in fact, entitle them to more power.” In that sense, today's top progressive funders are an interesting study in contrasts. Here, we have billionaires and storied institutions wielding immense financial clout in the name of an ideological project, still mostly unrealized, that asks them to give that power up.

*Related:*

- [Generosity and Impact Aren't Enough. Let's Judge Philanthropy on How Well it Shifts Power](#)
- [From Talk to Action: Behind a Call for Funders to Back Social Movements](#)
- [High-Touch: How a Progressive Intermediary is Evolving With the Times](#)
- [Beyond the \(c\)\(3\): Donors Change Tactics, Driving a New Era of Politicized Giving](#)