

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: Building a Responsive Organization that Lasts

Authored by Suzanne Kahn

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) was founded in 1981 with a large grant of \$175,000 from the Field Foundation. Begun with the mission of responding to the deep cuts contained in the 1981 federal budget, CBPP quickly became one of the most respected left-leaning think tanks in Washington D.C. Within just a few years of its founding, elected officials and congressional staffers from both sides of the aisle had come to rely on the Center's analyses, and the Center had expanded its work from focusing on safety net programs (such as food stamps), to take on many other aspects of federal budget policy (e.g. taxes). By the mid 1980s, the organization was drawing support from some of the largest American foundations.

This report examines the founding of the Center and the organization's early years in order to better understand its success. Through the close study of the Center's early history, this report provides insight into how philanthropy can best respond to moments of perceived political crisis, carefully fill holes in movement infrastructure, and help build successful, long-lasting institutions.

As a major player in both the antipoverty policy activism of the late 20th-century and Washington D.C.'s think tank culture, the Center has been studied by many scholars; however, to date, the Center's founding has not been the subject of in-depth investigation. To fill this gap, I began by reviewing the existing literature on CBPP and identifying the factors other scholars have seen as the key to explaining CBPP's success. I then conducted interviews with a number of the key figures involved in the Center's founding and examined the archival records of the Field Foundation, the Center's initial funding source. I came to three main conclusions:

- The Center's stunning success cannot be explained independent of its founding and long-term director, Bob Greenstein. Everyone with whom I spoke credited Greenstein with understanding the new political moment that Reagan's election signified and building an organization to respond to it.
- The Center is fundamentally the product of the political moment in which it was founded. Its founding mandate to fill the hole in the liberal policy infrastructure that allowed the 1981 budget cuts to pass through Congress has guided its development ever since.¹

¹ For more on the Center's founding mandate see Bob Greenstein's application to the Field Foundation for increased funding in 1982: "The Foundation made a major investment last fall in supporting the establishment of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (Center). It did so when it became clear that there was no 'quick response' information system to analyze the effects on poor and working people of the Administration's new national policies. While the largest budget reductions in recent history were being enacted, the general public had little understanding of their implications." (Bob Greenstein, "Application: Applicant: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington D.C., Robert Greenstein, Director; Recommendation: Up to \$150,000; Previous support: 1982--\$190,000," 1982, Folder: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities—Defense Budget, Box 2T30, Folder 8307, Field Foundation Archives, Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

- The Center has built a culture of consistent self-evaluation that has directly contributed to its long-term success. This culture was present at the beginning and fostered by Greenstein, other leaders who emerged at CBPP, and the organization's philanthropic supporters.

The history discussed in this report suggests how philanthropists can approach responding to specific political crises even as they seek to create organizations that are flexible enough to become long-lasting institutions.

Literature Review

To date, CBPP has not been the sole focus of any major articles or books, but it appears in much of the literature about antipoverty activism in the late 20th-century as well as the literature on the growth of the think tank industry. For this report, I reviewed 15 scholarly books and articles that discussed CBPP. This was not a totally comprehensive review – I stopped pursuing new works at the point at which I felt I had reached diminishing returns with each new work simply repeating the arguments of those I had already read. The review, however, allowed me to divide scholars' explanations for CBPP's success into three broad categories based on the emphasis they place on various contextual factors and decisions:

- Interpretation I: The key to understanding CBPP is its connections to the War on Poverty. Scholars who believe this discuss CBPP in the context of other antipoverty organizations rather than in the context of other think tanks and policy shops.
- Interpretation II: The key to understanding CBPP is placing it in the historical/political moment in which it was founded. Scholars who believe this focus on the benefits and challenges of founding a liberal policy organization at a conservative political moment (the early 1980s, during the Reagan Revolution).
- Interpretation III: The key to understanding CBPP is examining its place among other D.C. think tanks. Scholars who believe this examine CBPP as one of many Washington D.C. think tanks and analyze what has made it successful and unique in the crowded field of policy-oriented organizations

These categories are useful for thinking about existing explanations for the Center's success and what might have been overlooked in previous investigations.

The scholar who has written the most about CBPP is political scientist Doug Imig. Imig's multiple works examining CBPP bridge all three of the above categories. His 1996 monograph, *Poverty and Power: The Political Representation of Poor Americans*, examines the work of antipoverty activists during the Reagan Era, a moment when state and federal budgets were slashed and the presidential administration embarked on a deliberate program of welfare state retrenchment. Imig looks at a range of antipoverty organizations – some founded before the New Deal, most founded during the 1970s, and CBPP, founded in the 1980s. Because Imig is interested in antipoverty organizations broadly speaking, he writes clearly about CBPP's roots in

the War on Poverty. Others who approach CBPP through its roots in the War on Poverty are journalist Nicholas Lemann and historian Alice O'Connor.²

CBPP's initial funding came from the Field Foundation. At the time, Field's executive director was Dick Boone, a former close associate of Robert Kennedy and a leader in the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). At the OEO, the agency established by President Lyndon Johnson to run his War on Poverty programs, Boone served as Associate Director for Planning of Community Action Projects. In this position he argued forcefully that poverty was the result of political disempowerment as well as economic challenges. In Lemann's words, "Boone believed that the cause of poverty was political as well as economic: when a community was poor, the reason was that it lacked power as well as money. Therefore, part of the cure for poverty was empowerment – training the residents of a poor neighborhood to organize themselves and learn to get things from the power structure."³ Informed by this analysis of the cause of poverty, Boone argued for making "maximum feasible participation" – the idea that poor people themselves should be as involved as possible in planning and executing the OEO's community programs – the guiding principle for programs run by the OEO.⁴

Boone's belief in a political explanation for poverty placed him at the liberal edge of OEO staff. In 1965, fed up with the Agency's conservatism, Boone left to found the Citizens' Crusade Against Poverty. This new organization, which received the majority of its support from the United Auto Workers, set itself up to watchdog the OEO.⁵ By 1965, then, Boone had established an interest in building institutions outside of the federal government that were designed to put pressure on policymakers, whether they were Democrats or Republicans, to be more responsive to the poor.

After directing the Citizen's Crusade Against Poverty and the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial (known today at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights), in 1977 Boone became the director of the Field Foundation.⁶ From there he was well positioned to fund projects that pursued the watchdog strategy he himself had pursued earlier in the decade. He was also able to fund organizations that explicitly responded to the rising tide of conservatism.⁷

This rising tide of conservatism is the focus of the second scholarly explanation for CBPP's success. O'Connor and Imig deploy this line of reasoning alongside the War on Poverty explanation. They see Reagan's 1981 budget as just as critical to the Center on Budget's

² Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 1991); Doug Imig, *Poverty and Power: The Political Representation of Poor Americans* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³ Nicholas Lemann, "The Unfinished War," *The Atlantic* (December 1988).

⁴ Lemann, *The Promised Land*; O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*.

⁵ O'Connor, 172; Lemann, 168.

⁶ Steven Boone, "Richard Wolfe Boone, 1927-2014," Memorial Websites (26 February 2014), <http://www.ilasting.com/richardboone.php>; Adam Clymer, "Richard Boone, Johnson Aide and Advocate on Poverty, Dies at 86," *The New York Times* (7 March 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/us/politics/richard-boone-johnson-aide-on-poverty-dies-at-86.html?ref=todayspaper&r=1>.

⁷ David Callahan, "Here's the Funder Who Created One of the Most Important Think Think Tanks in Washington," *Inside Philanthropy* (3 March 2014), <http://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2014/3/3/heres-the-funder-who-created-one-of-the-most-important-think.html>.

founding as its roots in the War on Poverty. Imig points out, “70 percent of the 35 billion dollars cut from the federal budget in 1981 was removed from programs for the poor.”⁸ He argues, “During the 1980s, the CBPP defined its mission and agenda on the premise that the federal government’s War on Poverty coalition could reconvene around a private group oriented against a clearly defined antagonist in the White House.”⁹ Imig does not ask why this private group took the form it did. Indeed, none of the scholars who frame CBPP as a response to the Reagan Administration asks why the Field Foundation responded to Reagan’s budget cuts by starting a think tank.

The fact that CBPP was founded during the Reagan Administration made the Center unique in the world of poverty research organizations. Most other American organizations focused on researching antipoverty policies were formed in the 1960s in response to the increased federal and foundation funding available for such research that resulted from the War on Poverty. Between 1965 and 1980 federal funding for poverty research rose from almost \$3 million to almost \$200 million.¹⁰ The federal government enlisted the new organizations that arose or grew to take advantage of this new funding stream – for example Mathematica, the Urban Institute, and the Institute for Research on Poverty – to assess how social programs affected the poor.¹¹

Reagan’s 1981 budget did not just cut funding to direct service antipoverty programs. It also cut funding for poverty research.¹² Dependent on federal contracts, the existing large antipoverty organizations struggled in the face of these cuts.¹³ In contrast to these War on Poverty organizations, CBPP’s founding in the 1980s made it reliant on – and able to take advantage of – a very different set of funding streams. Imig writes, “For the CBPP, the Reagan challenge actually created the possibility for organizational growth and political action. The group defined its agenda from scratch so that its mission and actions took shape in opposition to Reagan-era federal social-welfare initiatives.”¹⁴ This competitive advantage was especially critical in the 1980s when all antipoverty organizations were forced to turn to private funding as federal funds dried up.¹⁵

CBPP refused to seek any federal funds from the start. This freed the organization from the whims of the federal budget process. One CBPP representative told Imig, “We have never had government funding... We don’t feel it is something we want, given our fundamental criticisms of government policies. We have always relied entirely on foundation grants. As a result, we have never had to deal with the issue of having to replace funding.”¹⁶ Indeed, CBPP managed to

⁸ Doug Imig, *Poverty and Power: The Political Representation of Poor Americans* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 501.

⁹ Imig, *Poverty and Power*, 63.

¹⁰ O’Connor, 213.

¹¹ O’Connor, 4.

¹² O’Connor, 243.

¹³ O’Connor, 13.

¹⁴ Imig, *Poverty and Power*, 63.

¹⁵ Imig, *Poverty and Power*, 46.

¹⁶ Imig, *Poverty and Power*, 46. In fact, CBPP once experimented with a government contract. In the late 1980s the organization did a small project (\$1,500) for the D.C. government about taking working poor people off of the income tax rolls. The experience, however, ended poorly. The Center felt that the mayor’s office was misusing its research and ultimately criticized the mayor’s office for that, taking its criticisms to the chair of the D.C. City Council. (The Mayor ultimately backed down, and the District stopped imposing income tax on working-poor

expand rapidly throughout the 1980s – its income grew 60 percent annually throughout Reagan’s first term.¹⁷ In its first five years, CBPP’s total spending grew by more than 360 percent.¹⁸

Imig argues that CBPP’s rapid financial growth translated into increasing influence. The Center quickly established itself as a trusted voice of opposition to the Reagan agenda – providing Congressional testimony more than six times by 1985.¹⁹ In its testimony and publications as well as its fundraising pitches, CBPP embraced its oppositional role. It released its own economic analyses and analyses of poverty, income disparity, and how the Administration’s budget proposals would affect low-income households, in order to challenge the Administration’s control over information.²⁰

In the late 1980s, Washington came to understand CBPP as the liberal and less well-funded counterpart to the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank that helped bring Reagan to power. O’Connor relays one story in which the Heritage Foundation was described as writing policy briefings that could be read on the limousine ride between Capitol Hill and Washington’s National Airport while CBPP wrote briefings that could be read on the longer subway ride between the two buildings.²¹ O’Connor suggests that it was the choice to make CBPP a distinctively and avowedly liberal voice that could still be relied on to provide accurate analysis that made CBPP successful. Since the older poverty research organizations continued to “present as apolitical” and “let facts speak for themselves,” CBPP offered a distinctive service to liberal legislators and activists.²²

The scholars who have spent the most time investigating how CBPP distinguished itself from other think tanks are those who study Washington’s think tank culture. They fall into my third category of analysis. Examples of these kinds of work include James A. Smith’s *The Idea Brokers*, Diane Stone’s *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process*, and R. Kent Weaver’s “The Changing World of Think Tanks.” All of these works investigate the proliferation of think tanks in Washington in the years after 1970. According to Smith, of the almost 100 policy research groups that existed when he wrote in the 1990s, over two thirds had been established after 1970.²³ The year CBPP was founded five other thinks were founded as well.²⁴

families, as CBPP had recommended.) Nevertheless, because of the experience the Center decided not to take government contracts in the future.

¹⁷ Imig, *Poverty and Power*, 53.

¹⁸ Imig, *Poverty and Power*, 59.

¹⁹ Imig, *Poverty and Power*, 59.

²⁰ Doug Imig, “Resource Mobilization and Survival Tactics of Poverty Advocacy Groups,” *The Western Political Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (June 1992), 517.

²¹ O’Connor, 247.

²² O’Connor, 247.

²³ James A. Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 214. A more recent study by Andrew Rich showed that nationally 80.7% of think tanks that existed in the 1990s were formed after the 1970s (Andrew Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15).

²⁴ Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xvi.

Many scholars argue that in the increasingly crowded field of think tanks, CBPP distinguished itself by specializing in nutrition and welfare policy. In 1989 Weaver wrote, “The advantage of a narrow specialization is that it is easier to build a reputation of expertise quickly, and to become the natural source of advice or grantee for contract research. This process has allowed a very small organization, like the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to become a major player in the formulation of nutrition and welfare policies.” He continued, “Most of the Center’s expertise is in these fields, and it has built up a strong network of nutrition advocates at the state level who look to the Center for expertise and information on current policy initiatives.”²⁵ Smith and Stone too credit CBPP’s successful entry into the “ideas industry” on its choice to specialize early on, noting that this was a trait shared by many successful new think tanks in the 1980s.²⁶

In 2004, Andrew Rich published *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise*. In this work, Rich sought to analyze think tanks influence on public policy. To do so he surveyed congressional staffers and journalists about their perception of the most influential think tanks in 1997.²⁷ His survey placed CBPP in the top ten of all think tanks in Washington, shortly behind behemoths like Heritage, Brookings, the American Enterprise Institute, and Cato. One of the youngest organizations on Rich’s list, CBPP’s presence is remarkable. The organization’s fast and striking success demands a more thorough analysis than any researcher has offered to date.

No matter which of the three factors in CBPP’s founding scholars choose to emphasize – its War on Poverty roots, its unique role as a liberal organization founded in a moment of conservative retrenchment, or its specialization of focus – all scholars lay much of the credit for its success at the feet of the Center’s founding director, Robert Greenstein. Greenstein remains the executive director to this day so it is often hard to distinguish the Center from his leadership. But, even as they credit Greenstein’s leadership, scholars have not delved into precisely what made his leadership so successful.

Thus, the research done on and around CBPP to date leaves many questions open: For example, in the face of the Reagan Revolution, why did former poverty warriors turn to a think tank? In what ways was Greenstein’s leadership important to the Center’s success? How important and/or deliberate was the Center’s early specialization? CBPP quickly branched into working on issues other than food policy. How did Greenstein make decisions about what to work on? How much did operating in the crowded field of policy think tanks influence these decisions?

Analysis: A Culture of Self-Reflection from the Beginning

To dig into the questions raised by the secondary literature, I interviewed Bob Greenstein and other individuals deeply involved in the founding of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. I also conducted research in the archives of the Field Foundation, which closed after spending down its endowment in 1988.²⁸ My research suggests that the Center on Budget and Policy

²⁵ Weaver, “The Changing World of Think Tanks,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 22, no. 3 (September 1989), 563.

²⁶ Smith, 215; Stone, 21.

²⁷ Rich, 229.

²⁸ Field’s archives are at the Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin “A Guide to the Field Foundation Archives, Part 1,” <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utcah/00091/cah-00091.html>.

Priorities was truly an organization of its time. Although individuals I interviewed provided a number of different explanations for why, almost all agreed that an organization like the Center would not have been created a one or two decades earlier or later. My research also confirmed other scholars' assertion that Greenstein and Dick Boone were the keys to the successful founding of the Center. Thus, this report confirms those scholars who look to the Center leadership's unique mix of War on Poverty experience and 1980s sensibilities to explain its success.

My research calls into the question the theory that emphasizes the role specialization played in CBPP's success. I show that, in fact, from early on its history, CBPP ran projects that addressed a fairly broad range of substantive issues. It specialized less in a particular subject area than in the policy process itself. I argue its focus on the politicization of the budget processes, not its expertise in food policy, distinguished CBPP from the beginning. I also offer another, new explanation for the Center's success: the culture of self reflection and self-correction that was fostered within the organization from the beginning.

The Need Identified

A key fact about CBPP is that its founders, men deeply involved in the War on Poverty, did not think the existing antipoverty organizations that had grown out of the 1960s were sufficient to meet the challenges of the 1980s. As an organization devoted to a detailed, analytic approach to policy and especially policies related to poverty, the Center is not unique and was not when it was founded. Indeed the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the steady expansion of many such organizations, for example the Urban Institute, Mathematica, and the Institute for Research on Poverty.²⁹ Despite the existence of these analytic organizations and a vast number of grassroots advocacy organizations that sought to defend and expand antipoverty programs, Reagan's 1981 budget caught liberals flatfooted. The bill the Reagan Administration pushed through Congress included massive tax cuts – especially for people in upper income brackets – along with expansions in defense spending and significant reductions in spending on anti-poverty programs including Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, Food Stamps, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

Even as Reagan pushed these cuts through Congress, he assured the public that “the truly needy” would remain protected.³⁰ Reagan's claims about the cuts went largely uncontested and his budget passed.³¹ In the aftermath of the passage of these tax cuts, Dick Boone convened a number of meetings between academics, nonprofit leaders, and others involved with domestic policy to discuss what went wrong.³² Greenstein remembers the framing questions for these meeting as “Why did Reagan so easily get through such huge and highly regressive tax cuts alongside such big budget cuts disproportionately hitting people at the bottom? What didn't work

²⁹ Interview with Alice O'Connor, 7 November 2015.

³⁰ Bob Greenstein, “Application: Applicant: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington D.C., Robert Greenstein, Director; Recommendation: Up to \$150,000; Previous support: 1982--\$190,000,” Box 2T30, Folder 8307, Field Foundation Archives.

³¹ O'Connor, 243-246.

³² Dick Boone, “Letter from Dick Boone to Ed Lawrence,” 19 October 1982, Box 2T30, Folder 83-7, Field Foundation Archives.

as well as it could have? What is missing in the nonprofit sector that there wasn't more of an informed debate, more pushback? What should foundations do?"³³

Greenstein, who took part in a number of these convenings, remembers that the one answer that was clear at the outset was that part of Reagan's success enacting his agenda came from his mastery of the budget process. Reagan pioneered using the Congressional budget process to push through measures that he could not have passed through the traditional Congressional authorizing and appropriation committees. Taking advantage of changes that Congress made to the budget process in the 1970s, Reagan passed a Congressional Budget Resolution in the spring of 1981 that contained one of the first uses of budget reconciliation instructions (the same process that was used to pass the Affordable Care Act in 2010). The 1981 Budget Resolution reduced the expected budgets of the authorizing committees with jurisdiction over entitlement programs by \$53.2 billion.³⁴ The cut to programs that necessarily followed could not have survived a filibuster, but budget reconciliation bills cannot be filibustered and so Reagan's package passed despite significant opposition.

At the 1981 Field Foundation's brainstorming meetings, Boone, Greenstein, and others came to focus on the fact that the existing antipoverty advocacy organizations had not been prepared to push back against this kind of legislating through the budget process. They believed that the existing organizations had neither the communications nor the analytic capacity to respond to this new kind of assault. While these nonprofits had existing relationships with the authorizing committees in Congress, most did not understand how to lobby effectively within the newly politicized budget process. In particular, when the Reagan Administration released a defense of their budget cuts based on "often cherry picked" data, most antipoverty organizations had neither the analytic or communications capacity to push back effectively.³⁵

At the end of these wide-ranging conversations, Boone asked a close associate, Robert Stein, to write a report on the conclusions reached at the meetings. Stein's report had two main take-aways: first, a call for greater foundation investment in efforts to register low-income and minority voters; second, a call for a new non-profit organization focused "on the intersection between fiscal policy, budget policy, and poverty policy."³⁶ The Field Foundation committed to investing immediately in this second identified need. Stein explained:

Dick [Boone] had been in government and had founded a number of the Office of Economic Opportunity Programs focused on the plights of the poor. He was a government program architect and social entrepreneur, par excellence. He understood the power dynamics implicit in a serious, sustained congressional and executive assault on federal programs, especially those affecting our least advantaged populations. He knew from experience that rhetoric, polemics, and "advocacy" would not suffice. He wanted to invest in a new, trusted data driven organization committed to the integrity of data and rigorous analysis. There were plenty of groups that were partisan and, ideological. He

³³ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

³⁴ John William Ellwood, "Congress Cuts the Budget: The Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981," *Public Budgeting and Finance* 2, no. 1 (March 1982), p. 52-53 (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/doi/10.1111/1540-5850.00549/epdf>).

³⁵ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

³⁶ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

wanted – in the area of federal programs – a budget analysis capability that would transcend, in a sense, some of the partisan acrimony and try to base the arguments and the opposition to deep cuts on objective, quantifiable, metrics and analysis.³⁷

Boone believed that in addition to being a trustworthy source of data, the new organization had to have the capacity to respond rapidly to conservative policy proposals in the media. The new organization thus would not focus primarily on the analysis of existing programs, as many existing poverty research organizations did, but instead on analysis of policy proposals. And, it would provide these analyses to the media as a counterpoint to the Reagan Administration's own communications.

The Director Found

Once they had determined that a new organization was needed and what that organization should do, Boone and Stein approached Bob Greenstein. Stein recalls that as they began to discuss providing seed funding for the new organization they had conceived, he and Boone never considered anyone but Greenstein for the position of executive director.³⁸ Boone and Stein had worked with Greenstein over the course of 1981 on a short-term project funded by the Field Foundation: the Project on Food Assistance and Poverty, an early attempt to respond to Reagan's attack on antipoverty programs.³⁹ The Project's success became the model for the new organization that Boone and Stein soon asked Greenstein to lead.

When Reagan was elected, Greenstein was serving as the head administrator of the Food and Nutrition Service Agency within the Department of Agriculture.⁴⁰ In that role Greenstein and his predecessor had built an internal Office of Policy, Planning and Development that produced highly analytic, internal evaluations of the programs offered by the Agency. These evaluations proved critical to Greenstein's fending off of a number of Congressional attacks on the food security programs his Agency ran.⁴¹ Not only did Greenstein successfully prevent these attacks from succeeding but also, during his time at the Agency, he expanded the food stamp, school breakfast, and WIC programs.⁴²

As a political appointee, Greenstein knew that Reagan's election meant his days in the Department of Agriculture were numbered. In his final days in office, as Greenstein rushed to shore up as many of the food security programs as possible, his supporters began to think about how he could play role defending these programs once he was outside of government.⁴³ One of Greenstein's long-term mentors was John Kramer, a lawyer and food security expert who was serving as the president of the Field Foundation's board. Greenstein recalls that three days after the election, Kramer called him and proposed that if he were interested "the Field Foundation would be willing to give you a grant to start a new nonprofit to try to work to safeguard the anti-

³⁷ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

³⁸ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

³⁹ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁴⁰ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015; Bob Greenstein Bio, *Huffington Post* (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bob-greenstein/>), visited 31 January 2016.

⁴¹ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁴² Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁴³ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

hunger programs when Reagan comes in.”⁴⁴ Greenstein did express interest, but also warned Kramer that in his current position he could not spend his time laying the groundwork – i.e. fundraising – for the new organization. Kramer promised to take care of it.⁴⁵

At Kramer’s urging, Stein, who was acting as a representative of the Field Foundation, and Greenstein then sat down for a meeting. Stein recalls, “I kind of interviewed him about what he thought would be the best use of his time in the winter and spring of 1981 when he left the Department.”⁴⁶ Greenstein remembers that he proposed a new organization modeled on the Office of Policy, Planning, and Evaluation that he had built and relied on at Food and Nutrition Services. After this brainstorming session, Stein crafted a proposal for a non-profit project that the Field Foundation board quickly approved. Eight days after Reagan’s inauguration and three days after Greenstein left the Department of Agricultural, he was hired to begin a new Project on Food Assistance and Poverty for the Field Foundation.⁴⁷

Remarkably quickly, the Project on Food Assistance and Poverty – which consisted of only Greenstein and two staff members – had a real impact on public policy. Before Reagan’s first budget proposal came out his budget director, David Stockman, issued a preview of the ambitious cuts to come. This preview, known as “the Black Book,” horrified Greenstein. He immediately reached out to Senator Bob Dole, with whom he had a good relationship from his days at the Department of Agriculture. After Greenstein told Dole his concerns, he recalls, “Dole asked me to give him, by the next day, 1-2 page analyses of what I thought were the most damaging cuts for poor people in the Black Book. I did that and Dole read them, asked a few questions, went downtown, and the next day Dole called me and told me he had met with Stockman and gotten half of the cuts to food stamps contained in the Black Book removed.”⁴⁸ The success of this first activity proved to Greenstein that detailed, reliable analysis could still trump party and ideology. The Project on Food Assistance and Poverty continued its work along these initial lines.

Despite the Project on Food Assistance and Poverty’s successes, Stein remembers the early 1980s as “a time for liberals that was very scary.”⁴⁹ As 1981 progressed the Reagan administration did win enormous budget cuts to many social safety net programs including Medicaid, Legal Aid, and Supplemental Security Income. It was these cuts that led the Field Foundation to host the series of brainstorming meetings at which the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities was conceived.

In these discussions, Greenstein’s Project on Food Assistance and Poverty stood out as one of the few antipoverty organizations that was successfully pushing back against Reagan’s policies. Stein and Boone believed this was because of Greenstein’s grasp of the budget process. In contrast, many of the longer standing domestic policy research organizations seemed unable to respond to Reagan’s proposals on an effective timeline. For example, at the time, the Urban Institute and the Brookings Institution both focused on producing long studies on policies that

⁴⁴ Kramer as quoted in interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁴⁵ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁴⁶ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

⁴⁷ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁴⁸ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁴⁹ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

had already been enacted. They were not turning out timely analyses of proposals that had emerged and that, without pushback, would be quickly enacted through budget process.⁵⁰

It was Greenstein's success with the Project on Food Assistance and Poverty and his role in the ongoing conversations taking place about how liberals should respond to the Reagan Administration that led Boone and Stein to trust him with their new idea.⁵¹ Boone and Stein gave Greenstein wide latitude in determining how he wanted to actualize their vision. It was his choice whether to take Field Foundation funding and bring it to an existing organization to build out its policy analysis and communications capacity or to begin something new. "They really left it to me to flesh this out and build it," says Greenstein, "with the understanding that as I did I would be talking a lot to Boone. I ran various things by him to get his advice, but it was more like they said, 'here's the broad concept, we're going to give you the grant and trust you to turn it into a new institution.'"⁵²

The Keys to Early Success: Bipartisan Credibility

Stein and Greenstein's recollections of the antecedents to the Center highlight some of the unique qualities that Greenstein brought to the table as he conceptualized and built the new organization – qualities that the many people I spoke to link directly to the Center's long-term success. In particular, Greenstein's time-tested belief in the power of data-driven analysis rather than polemics to win votes, his deep commitment to antipoverty programs, and – perhaps most uniquely – his credibility among both Democrats and Republicans.

Stein believes that Greenstein understood from the beginning that "you were never going to win over extremists who for ideological reasons wanted to kill everything in sight. But," he continued:

If you could partner with thoughtful people prone to evidence-based analysis, you could protect a lot of stuff that otherwise would be in danger. So, Bob's relationship over the years with people like Bob Dole ... and [John] Danforth – sort of the moderate to conservative, as opposed to far right, Senators and the same in the House – was absolutely instrumental in the success of the Center.⁵³

Indeed, Greenstein remembered that from the Center's very earliest days some of its most important partners on the Hill were Republicans. For the first two years, he believes, "the single member who sought our help the most and with whom we worked the most was Bob Dole."⁵⁴

In addition to Dole, CBPP worked closely with a number of other Republican Senators and Congressmen in its early days. These Republican partners included Rudy Boschwitz (R-MN), Dick Lugar (R-IN), Thad Cochran (R-MS), David Durenberger (R-MN), and Mike Castle (R-DE). Greenstein had relationships with some of these Members of Congress and/or senior members of their staffs prior to the founding of the Center. In addition, he continued to build

⁵⁰ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015; Rich 48, 67-68.

⁵¹ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

⁵² Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁵³ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

⁵⁴ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

relationships across party lines in the Center's early years.⁵⁵ In our interview Greenstein noted that the Center still tries to work across party lines, but it has become harder. He agrees with Stein's analysis that in the organization's early years this bipartisan work was, in Greenstein's words, "absolutely pivotal to a number of successes we had on both offense and defense."⁵⁶

Greenstein believes that this willingness to work across the aisle immediately set CBPP apart from the Heritage Foundation (to which it has been compared since its founding).⁵⁷ Stein agrees. He argues, "The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is not in place to merely serve friends and allies. It is there to provide a factual basis upon which people who are not necessarily friendly but who believe in evidence-based analysis can meet. That's what makes it so unique."⁵⁸ Greenstein adds that Heritage and CBPP have always distributed their resources in very different ways. Said Greenstein, "I remember at one point discovering that on the issues areas we worked in, we had as many policy analysts as Heritage did – this is maybe in the early 1990s or something like that – yet the organization on the whole, ours, was a tiny fraction of the size of theirs. Well the difference was – I don't know if this is still true – they had many more people in their communications and [public relations] shop than they had policy analysts and we were precisely the opposite."⁵⁹ The Center has always stood on the quality of its analysis rather than its public relations expertise, though it has worked to substantially strengthen its communications capabilities and expand its communications staff over the past decade.

The Keys to Early Success: Funding

Although the Center distinguishes itself from the Heritage Foundation in many ways, it is undeniable that Heritage and other avowedly right-wing think tanks influenced the Center's founding. Long before antipoverty activists had the capacity to respond to budget politics, these think tanks were mapping out a strategy to defund the Left.⁶⁰ Stein recalls that when Heritage released its *Mandate for Leadership* report, which essentially outlined a strategy for Reagan's first term in office, there was true sense of "crisis" on the Left.⁶¹ Stein argues that it was this sense of crisis that made it possible to raise startup funds for the Center.

Stein contends that antipoverty activists might have founded an organization similar to CBPP a decade earlier, but the funding simply was not there.⁶² Prior to Reagan's election, he says, "there was not flexible money to do budget and tax policy work on behalf of low and moderate income cohorts. You know, nobody would fund it. Had there been resources, this kind of objective, disciplined, rigorous, analytic capability absolutely could have been founded before that and could be founded today."⁶³

⁵⁵ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 5 October 2015.

⁵⁶ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 5 October 2015.

⁵⁷ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁵⁸ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

⁵⁹ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁶⁰ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

⁶¹ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015; Molly Ball, "The Fall of the Heritage Foundation and the Death of Republican Ideas," *The Atlantic*, 25 September 2013 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/09/the-fall-of-the-heritage-foundation-and-the-death-of-republican-ideas/279955/>).

⁶² Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

⁶³ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

Stein's account is interesting because historians do not usually construe the 1980s as a moment of increased funding for the American Left. Yet, historian Alice O'Connor backs up Stein's point. She believes that the Center could not have been founded a decade earlier because of its focus on the federal budget.

It's not that there was more money available to liberal organizations in the 1980s, but there was more interest in funding the specific kind of work the Center was proposing to do. Says O'Connor, "The thing about the Center that was unique was its focus on the budget and policy through the budget. As I see it, it was founded very much in response to the very aggressive way that the Reagan Administration was using fiscal policy to essentially undermine the welfare state."⁶⁴ O'Connor points out that although Greenstein can take credit for this insight, in the early 1980s foundations also funded other organizations who sought to respond to the Reagan Administration's budget-focused political strategy. For example, she recalls an organization founded in 1983 called OMB Watch (now the Center for Effective Government), which like the Center received funding from the Ford Foundation in its early years.⁶⁵ O'Connor describes OMB Watch's mission as responding to the fact that the "anti-government right had come to power" and was "using the mechanisms of statecraft – including the under-the-radar mechanisms of statecraft – to undermine the state."⁶⁶

Although many funders were interested in these kinds of budget- and process-focused projects as a response to the politics developing under Reagan, the Field Foundation's investment in CBPP laid the groundwork for larger foundations' – for example the Ford Foundation – subsequent investments. In addition to conceiving of the idea for CBPP and providing seed funding, Boone helped the Center expand its funding base. "I didn't know the funding world myself," says Greenstein, "and Dick was terrific at introducing me to people and opening doors."⁶⁷ During the Center's first year, Boone introduced Greenstein to leaders of the Revson Foundation, the Norman Foundation, the Public Welfare Foundation, and, eventually, the Ford Foundation.⁶⁸ Stein explains, "Boone was brilliant at this: seeing an opportunity, finding the right people, giving it the early seed money and expansion money, and then bringing major foundation in who could sustain it."⁶⁹

Boone was explicit about this model in his correspondence with the Center. In a 1982 letter informing Greenstein that Field had approved a \$150,000 grant to support the Center's second year of work, Boone also warned him that next year's contribution would be "substantially lower." He wrote, that the Field Foundation Board expected the Center to broaden "your own funding base" and get "support from other foundations" over the course of the next year.⁷⁰ To aid in this effort, Boone sent letter to his contacts at foundations around the country lauding the

⁶⁴ Interview with Alice O'Connor, 7 November 2015.

⁶⁵ Interview with Alice O'Connor, 7 November 2015; Center for Effective Government (<http://www.foreffectivegov.org>), visited 31 January 2016.

⁶⁶ Interview with Alice O'Connor, 7 November 2015.

⁶⁷ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁶⁸ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 5 October 2015.

⁶⁹ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

⁷⁰ Dick Boone, "Letter to Bob Greenstein," 16 November 1982, Box 2T30, Folder 83-7, Field Foundation Archives.

Center's work in its first year.⁷¹ With the help of the Field Foundation, by the mid 1980s, CBPP's operating budget had risen from the initial \$175,000 Field Foundation grant to over half a million dollars per annum.⁷²

O'Connor further explains why the Field Foundation played a crucial role in the developing organization. Field, she says, was willing to take more risks than some of the bigger foundations. For example, she said, the Ford Foundation, "at the time, it was very wary of being labeled overly liberal or biased in any way. So the Field Foundation was important because the Ford Foundation was going to wait for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities to get established and to prove itself before stepping in and giving it some slightly bigger bucks."⁷³ As O'Connor explains:

A place like Ford, before it takes a bet like that, wants an organization to prove that it can play a role within the broad parameter of the mainstream political conversation. And, when I say the mainstream political conversation, I don't mean relentlessly centrist. The Ford Foundation was definitely funding organizations – for example Civil Rights organizations – that, at the time, that the Right was successfully working to label Left Wing. Ford was not going to back away from those organizations. But it always had to be able to protect itself, to say, 'the agenda we're embracing is an agenda of civil rights, that's not a Left Wing cause. Antipoverty is about an important commitment that we make as a society.'⁷⁴

The Field Foundation gave organizations like CBPP the time to prove themselves and then helped them build connections with larger foundations that would grow and sustain their programming.

The Keys to Early Success: Measured Expansion

The Center's staff grew along with its funds, but at a distinctly measured pace. Says Greenstein, "I've never been comfortable with overly rapid growth. And so we gradually grew. I think that 10 years in we had 12-15 staff; today we have 100." Naturally, the Center's growth changed both how it functioned and the substantive issues on which it was able to work. Its slow growth allowed Greenstein and his colleagues to approach these changes with great care.

For example, Greenstein explains that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Center's staff did not just change in size but also in kind. In his early years running the Center, Greenstein tended to hire young, bright, "promising" people while personally overseeing the bulk of the policy work. This dynamic, he says, often made the Center seem like "Bob and his assistants." As the organization grew, however, Greenstein began to change his approach. "Overtime I began to realize, I had really gotten it backwards," he said. "Once I began to hire terrific, more senior people and turn over the direction of various areas of policy work to them, it snowballed... the Center became a much more potent and effective organization when it moved to a model where

⁷¹ Dick Boone, "Letter to Bernard Anderson, The Rockefeller Foundation," 2 July 1982, Box 2S414, Folder: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Field Foundation Archives (Note: Copies of the same letter were sent to representatives of numerous foundations by Dick Boone.)

⁷² Imig, *Poverty and Power*, 50.

⁷³ Interview with Alice O'Connor, 7 November 2015.

⁷⁴ Interview with Alice O'Connor, 7 November 2015.

there are terrific people who run the food area, the health area, etc.”⁷⁵ Greenstein noted that today, while the Center is asked to testify on Capitol Hill and is cited in the media much more than in its earlier years, the share of the testimonies, media interviews, and media citations that are Greenstein’s is – at less than 10 percent – lower than at any point in the Center’s past. This has been a continuing evolution at the Center, in which the Center’s senior leaders, policy experts, and strategists have become increasingly pivotal parts of the organization’s work and of its public face over time.⁷⁶

The addition of more expert, senior people with varied interests helped the Center to continue to expand its substantive reach. Early on the organization focused on Greenstein’s areas of expertise – antipoverty policies and in particular food policy. It did so while fulfilling its mission to provide analytical support to a wide range of antipoverty activist organizations. In its first year alone the Center worked closely with the Children’s Defense Fund, the League of Women Voters, the Coalition on Block Grants, the U.S. Catholic Conference, and the Interreligious Emergency Campaign for Economic Justice, among others.⁷⁷ As Greenstein recalls, the Center became, in essence, the research staff for the coalition of organizations that was protesting further cuts in the social safety net proposed by Reagan.

Fairly quickly, the Center began to take on other issues as well, e.g. taxes. The Center’s expansion into the area of tax policy was driven in part by Boone. About a year and a half after CBPP’s founding, Boone offered Greenstein a small supplement to his budget if he began working on tax policy. Around the same time, a staffer on the Hill called and asked Greenstein to testify at hearing on the tax burdens of the working poor. Although Greenstein said he was not sure the Center had the capacity to do so, the staffer nevertheless sent him a collection of data on the topic. The numbers he saw convinced Greenstein that the tax code was seriously hurting the working poor. He testified in front of a congressional committee about his conclusions, and the Center soon became the leading advocate for expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) – successfully helping turn the EITC from a relatively small program to the second largest cash assistance program targeted at low-income families.⁷⁸

In 1983, the Center also came to house the Defense Budget Project. The Defense Budget Project took the ideas behind the founding of CBPP and applied them specifically to the Defense Budget. In his initial proposal for funding, Gordon Adams, the Defense Budget Project’s founding director wrote, “What is missing is a focused, rapid, regular source of information, data and analysis on the defense budget, whose product is intentionally moved through organizational, media and policy-making channels to play a credible and constant role in the national debate.”⁷⁹ Adam’s language directly echoed Stein and Boone’s analysis that had led to the founding of the Center.

⁷⁵ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁷⁶ Communication with Bob Greenstein, 23 February 2016.

⁷⁷ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 5 October 2015.

⁷⁸ Interviews with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015 and 5 October 2015; “Taxation and the Family: What is the Earned Income Tax Credit?” Tax Policy Center: A Joint Project of the Urban Institute and the Brookings Institute (<http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/key-elements/family/eitc.cfm>), visited 31 January 2016.

⁷⁹ Gordon Adams, “The Defense Budget Project: Project Proposal,” February 1983, Box 2T9: Folder: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities – Defense Budget, Field Foundation Archives.

The Defense Budget Project eventually left the Center to become its own organization, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.⁸⁰ The Center again fostered a new project that eventually spun off into its own separate organizations in the late 1990s. In 1997, the Ford Foundation convinced CBPP to begin working with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who were trying to have a similar effect in their home countries that the Center had had in the U.S. This work became the Center's International Budget Project, which recently spun off into its own nonprofit.

The Center's role as the incubator of other organizations and its willingness to take on new projects suggests that scholars like Weaver who argue that the Center's success in the crowded think tank world should be credited to its specialization in food policy have misinterpreted the history. In fact, the Center's record of careful and thoughtful growth has allowed it to move beyond its initial areas of specialization while continuing to be successful. Its willingness to spin off pieces of the organization that have developed their own identities speaks to a level of internal self-reflectiveness that has played a far greater role in the Center's success than its subject matter specialization.

The Keys to Early Success: A Culture of Self-Reflection

The history of the Center's growth makes clear one of the key ingredients to its success that has nevertheless been overlooked by previous accounts: its organizational culture of self reflection and its willingness to change practices when needed. This culture was apparent in my interviews with Greenstein. When he reflected on the Center's history, Greenstein frequently pointed to moments of external audits and the reports of hired consultants as critical turning points in the Center's development. At other times, he spoke about how his own reading of articles on management changed his approach or how a particular experience informed the Center's decisions going forward. This culture of self reflection and critique was supported by the Center's funders, which allowed the organization to truly benefit from its willingness to assess its work honestly.

The major turning point in the Center's history highlights how external critiques and funders' support for their suggestions have come together to help the Center grow. In 1990 the Rockefeller Foundation hired a consultant to evaluate the work of a number of their grantees including the Center. Greenstein sums up the evaluation as saying, "Most of the Center's work is on national policy and in that they are unparalleled.... however, in the last few years, they have started to do a little work on state policy and their state tax policy work is not nearly as impactful." It concluded, "The Center should either cease its state work or if it wants to pursue its state work they should go an hire a new person to rethink and build it."⁸¹ This was a tough critique, but, in Greenstein's words, the Center took the advice "to heart."⁸²

The Center hired a new director of state policy, Iris Lav, who quickly came to a similar conclusion as the consultant. Greenstein remembers Lav walking into his office three months

⁸⁰ "About Us," The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (<http://csbaonline.org/about/>), visited 31 January 2016; Gordon Adams, "Bio," The Wilson Center (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/person/gordon-adams>), visited 31 January 2016.

⁸¹ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁸² Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

into the job and saying, “Our whole approach to state policy does not make sense.”⁸³ Lav proposed that the Center stop trying to do policy analysis for individual states out of its D.C. office. Instead it would build a network of state policy centers that the Center would support with technical assistance, but which would do state policy analysis closer to the action. Greenstein was impressed and took Lav to meet Ford Foundation officer Michael Lipsky to discuss her idea. Says Greenstein, “At the end of the hour they had the joint vision for what became our state network.” Lipsky recruited other foundation funders, and Lav, he, and a few other foundation partners built the network.⁸⁴ Coordinating and supporting state policy work, particularly through organizations that form the State Priorities Partnership (i.e., the Center’s network) now comprises about half of the Center’s work.⁸⁵

Another turning point Greenstein remembers also occurred because of the advice of external consultants. In the early 2000s, the Center hired a strategic communications firm to do an audit of its media and communications work. Greenstein remembers the resulting report as “brutal. It basically said, ‘The Center’s policy work is unparalleled. The Center’s impact on Washington policy is exceptional. And the Center’s media and communications work is not in the same league and it ought to be.’”⁸⁶ The paper advised a totally different concept of communications. Implementing the recommendations required major organizational changes.

Just as the Ford Foundation supported the reinvention of the Center’s state policy work, funders stepped in to help the Center overhaul its communications department. When a particularly interested funder asked to see the report on the Center’s communications work, Greenstein remembers thinking, “Oh my god. They’re going to read this audit and defund us.” But, instead they read it and offered to supply additional funding to help the Center implement the recommendations in the report, if they were serious about trying to do so.⁸⁷ This sort of positive support from funders helped cultivate the Center’s culture of self-reflection.

Even without the active encouragement of funders and external auditors, Greenstein consistently reconsidered how the Center operated. For example, when we spoke Greenstein recalled reading a paper by Karl Mathiesen about the role of nonprofit boards as they related to the founding of nonprofits. He remembered that the paper led him to change how the Center’s board worked. Greenstein handpicked his founding board, which did not play a large role in the daily operations of CBPP in the early years. Boone, who maintained a seat on the CBPP board, played a critical role helping Greenstein fundraise and providing substantive guidance as the organization began to expand its mission. But, Greenstein drove the organization and its development.⁸⁸ Greenstein remembers that after reading Mathiesen’s paper, he realized that his growing organization needed a stronger and more active board. He and his senior team set about building it. Similarly, Greenstein told me that in the last ten years he and his team have worked to try to diversify the Center’s funding base. He explained that for years people told him he needed to move away from relying solely on support from foundations. Displaying the same reflectiveness he had on so

⁸³ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁸⁴ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁸⁵ “Our State Policy Work,” The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (<http://www.cbpp.org/about/our-state-policy-work>), visited 31 January 2016.

⁸⁶ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 5 October 2015.

⁸⁷ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 5 October 2015.

⁸⁸ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015; Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

many other topics, Greenstein said, “I am to this day not as comfortable asking an individual for money. I’m more at ease in dealing with foundations. I think I’ve improved a lot from where I was five or ten years ago, but I feel like I am very much still learning things on the individual donor side.”⁸⁹

The Center’s culture of careful, self-reflective growth and development was present from the beginning. The fact that the organization grew out of a set of meetings in which members of the beleaguered Left considered what holes needed to be filled in their movement set this tone at the organization’s outset. Greenstein’s own approach to management kept that culture alive. He was aided in this effort both by the active support of his funders and by their willingness to entrust Greenstein with general operating support. One of the key lessons about philanthropy that Stein remembers learning from Boone is, “Nothing constrains or makes less efficient a think tank or an advocacy group or an analytic institution than project funding. It’s a killer,” he said. “You can do good project work, but you cannot be an innovative, entrepreneurial institution if the only money you have is project money.”⁹⁰ Greenstein’s ability to grow and alter his organization, and build a strong team of senior leaders over the last 30 years speaks to the importance of this lesson. His productive relationship with funders and the trust they put in him has allowed the Center to become one of the most effective think tanks in Washington D.C.

Conclusion

CBPP is fundamentally the result of a particular moment in time: the questions it asks and the programs it runs stem from both its founders’ roots in the War on Poverty and their concerns about the threat the Reagan Administration posed to the programs they had built while in government. But, the Center has avoided getting stuck in that moment either substantively or organizationally. In large part that has been due to the leadership of Greenstein and the trust his funders, from Dick Boone onward, have placed in him and the organization.

Rob Stein ended our conversation by telling me his fundamental belief about the funding process:

At the end of the day here’s what actually is happening: a group of donors or a foundation is finding a person they respect and trust, and giving them the money they need to go build an institution. The whole funding dynamic should never really be a lot more complicated than that. Who is the horse that you are betting on? What is their pedigree? What sets them apart? What is their skill set? Give them the money, get out of the way, let them build it, monitor them, make sure they are performing – that their performance meets their promise – but let them figure it out.⁹¹

Greenstein and Boone’s relationship epitomized this relationship from the beginning. Boone identified an institutional hole in the progressive movement, found someone who he knew had

⁸⁹ Interview with Bob Greenstein, 18 September 2015.

⁹⁰ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

⁹¹ Interview with Rob Stein, 30 September 2015.

already begun to fill that hole, and gave him the early funding and guidance to build a highly effective organization.

Greenstein, in turn, carefully built an institution that has gone well beyond what Boone first imagined. In the last thirty years, the Center has built an enduring infrastructure. It has helped foster new organizations built on its successful model at both the state and international levels. And, it has played a key role in almost every progressive policy victory of the last 30 years in fiscal and social-program policy, from the successful fight to prevent the privatization of Social Security to the Affordable Care Act. The Center demonstrates what great success can follow if funders do the initial legwork to make a smart bet and then give the people they bet on the space and support to build their organization to last.

Directions for Further Research

Because the Center grew so slowly and carefully, fully understanding the role of philanthropy in its long-term success would require further research into moments of significant expansion and change for the organization. Future research might dig into the creation of the State Priorities Partnership (the network was formerly called the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative) and the Ford Foundation's role in that initiative. The creation of the International Budget Project might serve as a useful point of comparison in such an investigation. Another interesting moment to study would be the philanthropic investment in overhauling the Center's communications strategy. I would also suggest considering the Center's relationship to the Democracy Alliance, the philanthropic organization that Rob Stein launched about a decade ago, which helped significantly expand the CBPP's individual-donor funding base in the 2000s.